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AFRICA'S SAVANNAH ECOSYSTEMS — AND THEIR LIONS — DECLINING AT ALARMING RATE

Lion Population Estimates as Low as 32,000, Habitat Reduced by 75%

Tanzania, East Africa (Dec. 4, 2012)—Researchers coordinated by a team at the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University have determined that Africa's once-thriving savannahs are in trouble, due to massive land-use conversion and burgeoning human population growth. The decline has had a significant impact on the lions that make their home in these savannahs; their numbers have dropped to as low as 32,000, down from nearly 100,000 just 50 years ago, according to a paper published online in this week's journal "Biodiversity and Conservation." The research is the most comprehensive assessment of lion numbers to date.

African savannahs are defined as those areas that receive between 300 and 1500 mm (approximately 11 to 59 inches) of rain annually. "These savannahs conjure up visions of vast open plains," said Laly Lichtenfeld, a co-author of the paper who is Executive Director of the African People & Wildlife Fund and a Visiting Fellow with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. "The reality is that from an original area a third larger than the continental United States, only 25% remains." In comparison, 30% of the world's original rain forests remain.

Lions in West Africa are at highest level of risk, the researchers found. "The lions in West Africa have suffered the greatest declines," said Andrew Jacobson, a co-author from Duke. "Giving these lions

something of a fighting chance will require substantial increases in effort. The next 10 years are decisive for this region, not just for lions but for biodiversity, since lions are indicators of ecosystem health."

The paper's senior author, Jason Riggio of Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment assembled a team of fellow graduate students to examine very high-resolution satellite imagery of Africa from Google Earth to produce a map of where lions might still exist. "Based on our fieldwork, we knew that most of the information out there from low-resolution satellite-based studies was wrong," said Riggio. "Existing global maps are quite coarse and show large areas of African woodlands as being intact. Only by utilizing very high-resolution imagery, were we able to identify many of these areas as being riddled with small fields and extensive, if small, human settlements that make it impossible for lions to survive."

The next phase of research was a systematic evaluation of all existing data on lion populations in Africa. To complete the task, co-author Stuart Pimm who holds the Doris Duke Chair of Conservation at Duke University assembled an international team of co-authors who were familiar with existing reports on lion populations and who had contributed to the process of making those reports. Data also were pulled from various "user communities," including assessments that were funded by hunting organizations. Data from the "user community" proved to be broadly similar with those of other researchers. Prior to this research, various estimates of lion populations in Africa ranged from 20,000 to 40,000.

Once the data were compiled and analyzed, the team created a detailed map that outlined areas of low human impact, more favorable to lion populations. The analysis identified only 67 isolated areas across the continent where lions might survive. They identified 10 strongholds where lions have an excellent chance of survival, many of them within national parks. None of the strongholds is located in West Africa, where countries have doubled their human population in the last 20 to 30 years. According to the research, fewer than 500 lions remain in this area, scattered across eight isolated sites.

"This research is a major step in helping prioritize funding strategies for saving big cats," said Luke Dollar. Dollar is a co-author of the paper and the grants program director of National Geographic's Big Cats Initiative (BCI) that provided partial funding for this work. "Of the estimated 32,000-35,000 lions, more than 5,000 of them are located in small, isolated populations, putting their survival in doubt. The research will help us better identify areas in which we can make a difference."

BCI was founded in 2009 as a long-term effort to halt the decline of big cats in the wild through assessment efforts, on-the-ground conservation projects, education and a global public-awareness campaign. This research is part of the assessment effort to better target funding to on-the-ground conservation projects most likely to make a difference.

One such project supported by BCI, the African People & Wildlife Fund, the Regina Bauer Frankenberg Foundation, the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund and other partners and led by co-author Dr. Laly Lichtenfeld and her Tanzanian team is the Maasailand Lion Conservation Program. This is a holistic and collaborative effort to conserve lions in Tanzania's Maasai Steppe. Partnering with local communities, the program integrates lion research, lion-livestock conflict prevention and the protection of lions, their habitat and prey via the support of local teams of "Warriors for Wildlife." Working from the organization's rural environmental center, Noloholo, Lichtenfeld's team also provides education about big cats and natural resource management to Maasai youth and adults. Long-term efforts of the program include the establishment of communal protected areas that provide ecological and/or financial benefits to local people while protecting critical lion territories.

Part of the BCI grant is used to install the African People and Wildlife Fund's "Living Walls." These walls directly decrease the number of lions killed annually in the Maasai Steppe in areas adjacent to Tarangire National Park. They are unique, using a combination of chain link fencing and fast growing trees as fence posts; culturally appropriate and environmentally sustainable lion-resistant enclosures. To date, nearly 200 such protected enclosures have been built in the Maasai Steppe. "These efforts are contributing to a more positive future for people and lions in this globally important ecosystem. It's working and so we have hope," said Laly Lichtenfeld.

The African People & Wildlife Fund

The African People & Wildlife Fund is a U.S. nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of wildlife and important natural habitats in Africa through a community-based approach. APW helps rural communities develop their skills and abilities to protect natural resources in a manner that maximizes their benefits from these landscapes while also preserving ecological integrity. Emphasizing the critical importance of community-led initiatives, the organization provides information, training and service level support to its constituencies to strengthen local institutions and community-driven actions for natural resource management and wildlife conservation. The African People & Wildlife Fund's regional headquarters, the Noloholo Environmental Center, is located on the Maasai Steppe of northern Tanzania, just east of Tarangire National Park. For more information, visit www.afrpw.org.