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Cecil the Lion one Year on: An Interview with Cecil's Researcher

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[Joanna Eede](#)

A year ago, a male lion called Cecil was killed in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe, by an American trophy hunter. Cecil's death caused uproar around the world and shone a much-needed light on the decline and vulnerability of the African lion population; today, there may be no more than 20,000 remaining in the wild.

To mark the year since Cecil's death, I interviewed Brent Stapelkamp, a lion researcher who had followed Cecil for many years.

How did Cecil's death affect his pride, and how has the pride developed over the past year?

Brent: Infanticide following the death of the pride male is a major threat to lion cubs, and something we see every time a pride male is hunted.

Because Jericho (a partner in Cecil's coalition) was still around, we thought that he would protect Cecil's cubs as his own – although we couldn't be sure, especially as he was not related to them. As the year developed, however, we saw that although the pride was never physically close to Jericho, they stayed within his territory and under his protection.

Fairly soon after Cecil's death, a cub and a lioness went missing. Their disappearance left two lionesses and six cubs, which was how the pride remained for many months. And then one day we heard that the lioness and, amazingly, the cub, had returned!

As far as I know all the cubs are females. As they are now coming of age, they will be in far less danger from any new males who might arrive in the area, who will now view them as potential mates, instead of inducing oestrus in the lionesses by killing their cubs.

Why is trophy hunting detrimental to lion populations?

Brent: Trophy hunting goes against the evolutionary order of things, which simply means the “survival of the fittest”. Lions are aggressively territorial, so they’ll fight; the strongest (which means fittest, in biological terms) wins and sires cubs.

When a trophy hunter selects the largest male he can find, he removes the strongest male who will, by nature, have been the pride male. The new, probably weaker, male now kills all the strong male cubs and replaces them with his weaker genes. So lions are lost in actual terms – and their genetic potential is also lost.

A secondary effect that is now being seen is that when a pride male is removed, his females take the cubs to a place where they cannot be killed by new males. This usually means removing them into an area where lions fear to tread – amongst people.

The lions kill livestock and are invariably killed in return, so trophy hunting is actually a driver of human/lion conflict, which is the largest direct source of lion mortality in Africa today.

Can hunting ever be useful for conservation?

Brent: The argument that hunting can be good for conservation, with many benefits, is an old one. When scrutinised, however, I feel the arguments don’t hold water in a modern African context.

The strongest arguments are that hunting provides a land management use in areas that are not suitable for photographic safaris, and has anti-poaching benefits. But I feel that the world is finding it less and less acceptable to kill animals in order save them.

Admittedly there are many thousands of square kilometers of African wildlife habitat that perhaps have only remained as such in the face of growing human pressure precisely because they bring in an income from hunting. But to say that this argument justifies hunting is – to me anyway – a cop out.

I believe that as creative human beings we can come up with ways to maintain those areas as wildlife habitats and generate income streams that don't result in dead animals.

Trophy hunting is an egocentric pastime. Very few of the benefits from trophy hunting ever reach the people who live cheek by jowl with these animals, or go towards conservation efforts. I think the justification for trophy hunting therefore vanishes; it just looks like a rich man's exploitation of a finite resource.

Do you applaud the fact that certain countries have amended their trophy-hunting laws and certain airlines won't transport trophies? What more can they be doing?

Brent: I do applaud it. It sends out a very strong message: that the majority of people don't accept this as a "sport". I see a lot of potential in using the global momentum generated and the passion the world has shown for Cecil's story, to change the conservation landscape.

If the world loves lions, and by that I largely mean the western world, then they have to help pay for them. Africa cannot be expected to front the bill for animals that, for the most part, Africans can't afford to see. Often their only impression of them is one that is based on the conflict that lions have with their livestock.

I want the world to realize the unique value that lions have contributed to our human evolution, cultures and economies, and define them as the first World Heritage Species. Give lions that label and use their “sex appeal” to generate the funds needed to replace hunting as the defining use of thousands of square kilometres of land.

If you save lions, you simultaneously save both prey species and landscapes – which makes it the most efficient means of conservation.

To your mind, what are the main reasons for the steep decline in the wild lion population in Africa?

Brent: The biggest reason for the decline in the lion population across Africa is the encroachment into protected areas and loss of their prey. Then conflict with humans over livestock, and trophy hunting.

What conservation measures do you believe are critical for the survival of lions?

Brent: We need to engender a sense of pride in Africans about lions, because they are the only ones left with a species that was once almost as widespread as us (globally).

To do that it is essential to see the benefits from living with lions – and not just pay the bill!

We also need more exposure to lions! In a way that sounds counter-intuitive, but the old “fortress” mentality in conservation only serves to exclude people from wildlife, which means it then becomes a breeding ground for myth, fear and resentment. “Blur the lines” I’d say, which means getting rid of the fortress mentality and allow more decision-making by, and access to the resources for, the people who live there.

What do you remember most about Cecil?

Brent: I remember his confidence more than anything else. There was no other lion that was as comfortable around vehicles.

Can you describe your affinity for lions and the wilderness, and what it is about lions that fascinates you?

Brent: I am an absolute “cat man” in that I deeply understand cats and their body language. Lions are really the ultimate cat and when you add in their social side, you truly have something special.

I love the fact that in this day and age, with all our technological advances, we still have our oldest companion – the lion – sharing spaces with us!

I will continue to work hard to make sure that this continues to be true.

Joanna Eede, former editorial consultant to Survival International, has a particular interest in the relationship between nature and humans, especially tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including Portrait of England (Think Publishing, 2006) and We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran Sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest, and the Hadza hunter-gatherers of Tanzania. She is researching a book about Tibet's nomads.



MEET THE AUTHOR

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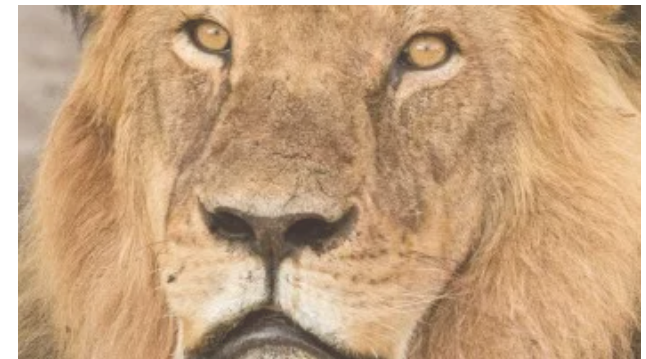
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Dolf • 2 years ago

I believe Brent has changed his tune. Right after Cecil's death I recall him being a proponent of controlled hunting. He said something like if the lands aren't maintained for hunting then they will be destroyed and used for farming. I'm glad he has now taken a hard stance against trophy hunting. I recall being angered by his statements after I had donated to CRU.

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Beautiful cat!

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