

New Scientist 25 October 2003

Life without lions

The estimates of over 100,000 lions in the past were not based on data. Rather, they represented a range of guesses that reflected confidence 30 or 40 years ago that lions were then abundant in much of eastern and central Africa.

The African lion has declined drastically over the past century, but is not yet on the brink of extinction. However, the surviving population is much smaller than most people realise. Some very large protected or managed areas account for the great bulk of the population. Most of the remainder are scattered in small isolated parks, and those populations may not be large enough to be genetically viable in the long term.

Furthermore, given the potential for political instability in much of Africa, even the largest reserves and parks may change status abruptly. To secure the lion's future, African governments and conservation groups must initiate science-based predator management plans linking protected and unprotected areas.

Incidentally, the current figure of 23,000 lions comes from a survey organised by Hans Bauer of Leiden University, in the Netherlands. He asked scientists across Africa who are members of the African Lion Working Group to give a rough estimate of how many lions they thought were in each country or reserve. It is not an accurate figure but a summation of everyone's best guesses.

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