



What's Your Cause?

Hanging On

It's hard to imagine, but Africa's big cats are fighting to survive. A new initiative launched by documentary filmmakers **Beverly** and **Dereck Joubert** may offer the best chance to save them.

BY LYNN SHERR PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEVERLY JOUBERT





In the past fifty years the number of leopards in the wild has plummeted from 700,000 to 50,000.

The visitors from paradise deliver a hellish warning: within a decade there may be no lions, leopards or cheetahs roaming the African wild. “Mass extinctions,” predicts Dereck Joubert,

fifty-four. “Unless we do something,” adds his wife, Beverly, fifty-three. “Taking action right now is imperative.” Their passionate alarm reflects a lifetime among Africa’s most iconic creatures. “When Beverly and I were born, there were roughly 450,000 lions in the wild; today there are 20,000,” Dereck says. “That represents a decline of something like 95 percent.” “There were 700,000 leopards,” Beverly continues. “Now they are down to 50,000.” “And tigers,” Dereck says, citing the crisis already evident in Asia, “have gone from 35,000 to fewer than 3,000. There are fewer than 900 wild Bengal tigers left in India. Some reserves don’t have tigers at all.”

Born in South Africa and based in Botswana, these high-school sweethearts are among the planet’s pre-eminent wildlife documentarians; they’re multiple-award-winning filmmakers and authors who are as exotic and elegant as their subjects. They spend their days and nights mostly in the bush, capturing impossibly intimate moments as Dereck cozies the video camera right up to a lion’s face and Beverly records the roar. She also snaps one-of-a-kind photographs (prints are for sale on their Web site, wildlifeconservationfilms.com). But having thrived in Africa’s broiling-to-frigid extremes for nearly thirty years—in canvas tents, five specially rigged Land Cruisers, a single-engine Cessna and, in Beverly’s case, some 100 safari shirts—they are now desperate to save their stars from annihilation. I found out why when the Jouberts and I sat down to talk during their recent trip to New York, where, they confessed, the noise of the urban jungle made them terribly homesick for the silence of their homeland.

Are you saying my grandchildren will not be able to see big cats in the wild?

DJ: Exactly. And the real problem, as we know from E.O. Wilson and other scientists, is that the closer we get to that extinction period, the faster it happens. You create islands of biodiversity, and as they start shrinking and isolating themselves, the genetic quality of the animals within them gets weaker and weaker, more vulnerable, and you see curves in animal populations that drop off suddenly.

BJ: And the question is, will people then come to Africa? A huge



Beverly and Dereck Joubert (opposite, top) and a gallery of images they've captured over the years from their base in Botswana. Clockwise from this page: A leopard retreats to a tree after a kill; a spot-on view from behind; safe on high; a mother-daughter stroll.





A herd of buffalo
in Botswana's
Selinda Reserve and
(below) a pair of lions
from Botswana's
Duba Plains.



amount of Africa's economy is from tourism.

DJ: If you said, "You can come to Africa, you can stay in a beautiful luxury lodge, in the best place in the savanna ecosystems, but you're not going to see any cats," I'm sure that we would see a massive drop in interest. I'm estimating that it translates into about \$80 billion a year.

Who's to blame?

DJ: Us. We're now seven billion people. Every time we add a billion people to the roster, all the big cats and all the predators in the world halve in number. It's safari hunters, who shoot about 500 lions a year legally. It's Masai herders: if a lion kills their cow, they go out and often kill not just one lion but a few, because nobody's sure which lion it is. It's ego- and libido-building: using lion bone or tiger bone for medicinal purposes, which does nothing at all. And it's the poachers' new weapon of choice: Furađan, a pesticide so toxic, a quarter teaspoon will kill a human or a lion in seconds. It's banned in the U.S. and Europe, but people in East Africa are using it.

Why is the survival of the big cats so critical?

DJ: They are the driving force of African ecosystems. A very good example of this is where we live, on an island in the middle of Botswana's Okavango Delta. It's got lions and buffalo and very little else. If we took the lions out, by hunting or whatever, it would be very good for the buffalo for a very short time. But then they would stop moving around the island, and without limiting factors, the smaller predators [hyenas] would knock out all the medium prey, and we would basically create a monoculture of wildlife. And as the buffalo stop moving, they would start picking up their own diseases, and eventually they would collapse. This has been replicated over and over through all of Africa.

In other words, if you remove the top of the food chain, you wreck the rest?

DJ: Yes. Everything gets out of kilter. Prey animals are these alert, vital, sensitive herds of zebras, antelope, giraffes. And it's the predators that keep them alert, vital and sensitive. The whole driving force behind the predators in savanna ecosystems is change. That's what keeps the ecosystems alive. Stability kills them.

BJ: And without this constant change, there will be overgrazing and soil erosion when the rains come, and the forests won't be able to regenerate.

Why are lions the key?

DJ: They need a certain amount of land, and if we protect lions, and by default that land, that means survival of the elephants, cheetahs, antelope, giraffes...

You've started the Big Cats Initiative, partnering with the National Geographic Society (nationalgeographic.com/animals/big-cats), for which you and Beverly are "explorers in residence." What are the goals?

DJ: BCI is an emergency fund set up to take action. We estimate

"We took over 320,000 acres that used to be hunted," says Beverly. "We instantly stopped the hunting. Four years later, we have 9,000 elephants, and they are completely calm, instead of running in at dusk and dawn to drink on the run."

that to make a substantial difference—to see the steep decline in lion populations reversed—it will take \$50 million.

BJ: And it's up to the private sector. Money in government has to be spent on poverty, on AIDS, on other issues.

Where does the money go?

DJ: First, predator compensation. We believe that you can't even have a dialogue about the intrinsic value of lions with a Masai herdsman if his cows were eaten by a lion last night.

BJ: We pay full market value, between \$250 and \$450, depending on the size of the cow.

DJ: We would love for the Masai, as they have taken on the role of custodians of cattle, to take up the leadership of lions. Because they've had this long tradition of interacting with lions. And they look after wildlife. We have to get to a place where all communities make that transition and say, "You know, if we keep these things alive, there's going to be a revenue stream for us forever. If we keep shooting them, we can get one bump out of them and then it's over." It's an entire range of programs: buying land—

BJ: Protecting wilderness areas, creating corridors, relocating animals.

You've recently started a travel company, Great Plains Conservation (see "Great Camps for Seeing Great Cats," page 99). Is tourism good or bad for wildlife?

DJ: It's definitely a good thing. There may be a carbon footprint attached to this, but the bigger worry is ignorance. People living in isolation don't think bigger, they think smaller. Well-traveled people think bigger.

BJ: But it needs to be responsible tourism. And that's what we're doing through Great Plains. By leasing vast tracts of vulnerable land, we instantly change what is hurting the area. For instance, in Botswana, we took over 320,000 acres of land that used to be hunted. We instantly stopped the hunting. And today, four years later, we have 9,000 elephants in the area, and they are completely calm, instead of running in at dusk and dawn to drink on the run.

Can you imagine a world without big cats?

DJ: For me, that's the hell. That would rip something out of the heart and soul of Africa. That world would be a sad world.



Smile for the camera?
Not this time. The
Jouberts photographed
this female leopard,
Tortillis, many times, in
moods ranging from
friendly to ferocious.



Great Camps for Seeing Great Cats

THE BEST inspiration for saving Africa's animals is viewing them for yourself, believe Dereck and Beverly Joubert. To that end, in 2006 they cofounded **Great Plains Conservation** (greatplainsconservation.com), and today the travel company runs, among other offerings, five safari camps in three African countries. *Rates given are per person, per night, double occupancy. For start-to-finish safari planning, contact travel outfitter Explore at explore.africa.net or Micato Safaris at micato.com.*

SELINDA CAMP

Location: Selinda Reserve, 320,000 acres, in northeastern Botswana.

Accommodations: Nine permanent tents.

The Details: One of only two camps in the park (the other is Zarafa, below), Selinda sits on a shady island overlooking a waterway that connects to the Okavango Delta. The tented lodgings, rebuilt in 2007, have private verandas and en suite baths with tubs and showers. *From \$610. selindareserve.com.*

ZARAFKA CAMP

Location: Selinda Reserve.

Accommodations: Four permanent tents.

The Details: Opened in June 2008, Zarafa borders the Zibadianja Lagoon and represents the poshest of GPC's camps. Decorated in 1920s safari style, the suite-sized tents have leather sofas, Persian rugs, indoor fireplaces, separate lounge areas, indoor and outdoor showers and private plunge pools. *From \$1,025. selindareserve.com.*

LUKULA SELOUS CAMP

Location: Selous Game Reserve, 300,000 acres, in southern Tanzania.

Accommodations: Four seasonal tents.

The Details: A former hunting preserve that GPC took over in 2006, Lukula is among the most private of African safari experiences, accessible only by twice-weekly flights from Dar es Salaam. Tents are more basic than at other GPC lodgings—they're outfitted with stylish campaign furniture, not antiques—but given their location, hundreds of miles from any other camp, they're quite exceptional. *From \$750. lukulaselous.com.*

MARA PLAINS

Location: Olare Orok Conservancy, 30,000 acres, in southwestern Kenya.

Accommodations: Seven permanent tents.

The Details: Mara Plains offers the chance to view the Masai Mara's magnificent animals in relative peace while staying on-site in superior tented lodgings. Built in 2008, it is the closest camp within the conservancy to the adjoining Masai Mara National Reserve. *From \$400. maraplains.com.*

OL DONYO WUAS

Location: Mbirikani Game Ranch, 275,000 acres, in southeastern Kenya.

Accommodations: Ten cottages.

The Details: Opened in 1988 by Richard Bonham and his sister, Patricia, Ol Donyo Wuas was entirely torn down and rebuilt in 2008 when it joined the Great Plains portfolio. Today it offers "a classic East African safari experience," says Dereck, plus other activities that include horseback riding and mountain biking. Set at the edge of a golden savanna, the ten new cottages (eight with plunge pools) have indoor and outdoor showers, expansive lounging areas and verandas with full views of Mount Kilimanjaro. *From \$400. oldonyowuas.com.* ❖