In response to an urgent request for help with a lion problem in August 2018, the N/a’an ku sê Foundation, in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), relocated two adult females and three approximately fourteen-day-old cubs (two females and one male) from the Tsiiseb Conservancy to the fenced Zannier Reserve east of Windhoek. The communities living in Tsiiseb reported unacceptably high livestock losses, and therefore threatened to destroy these lions if no alternative was provided by MEFT. Rather than destroying the lions, MEFT permitted N/a’an ku sê to remove the pride from the conflict situation and place them in a temporary holding facility on the Zannier Reserve. They were kept in this facility for seven weeks to help them adapt to the new environment prior to their release on the 8,000-hectare reserve.

After their release, this pride of five lions has hunted for itself without any human intervention. Monitored regularly by the N/a’an ku sê research team, possible kill sites are identified twice weekly by the cluster of GPS points produced by their collars when they spend a long time in one location. The research team then uses skeletal and fur remains at kill sites to identify the prey species. We found that the pride preferred hartebeest during 2018 and in the beginning of 2019. Due to drought, most of the hartebeest on the reserve died in 2019. The lions therefore shifted towards hunting gemsbok more frequently (nearly 40% of their kills) than other species. Occasionally they also hunted ostrich, warthog and kudu, among others.

The pride took its first kill on 22 July 2020. The team noticed that one of the female cubs was missing. After a search of the property, her remains were found the next day. The cause of death was a severe injury, which we suspect happened while the lions were hunting a gemsbok. This has left two adult females, one sub-adult female, and one sub-adult male on Zannier Reserve. The sub-adult male will be placed in another reserve before he reaches sexual maturity, thus preventing him from breeding with his relatives and making way for the introduction of an unrelated male. Any other conflict-saved lions that N/a’an ku sê receives in future will be similarly managed to prevent mating among close relatives. We will thus ensure that the genetic integrity of these lions is maintained.

In an ideal world, one would like to see the desert lions of Namibia coexist with the local communities, and every measure should be taken to achieve this goal. Part of that plan nonetheless includes assisting farmers in desperate situations by removing specific lions from conflict situations. We must therefore answer the question: is a dead lion the best option, or is it better to translocate lions whenever possible, thus allowing them to live another 5-10 years in freedom and safety?

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