

‘Besmet’: How Lions are being poisoned and poached in the Kruger National Park

‘Besmet’ was one of the local hard-hitting documentaries shown at the kykNET Silwerskermfees in Cape Town this past week.



WILD LIONS: 88 000 wild lions have been killed over the last couple of years. Picture: kykNET

One of the animals that tourists are most excited about seeing when visiting the [Kruger National Park](#) is the lion. The majestic ‘king of the jungle’ has always been a symbol of strength, power and ferocity, but sadly these traits are exactly what is putting the species in grave danger.

While all eyes are on [rhino poaching](#), trying to find solutions to protect this endangered species, another one of Africa's Big Five is slowly being wiped from the continent in the cruelest ways imaginable.

[South Africa](#) is one of the last natural homes of the iconic African lion, but the number of majestic cats is drastically decreasing due to an enemy against which they have no defence – human greed.

According to a 2022 report by [Africa Geographic](#), there has been a 75% decline in Africa's predators in just five decades.

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Why are lions being poached?

Lions, or certain parts of them, have been used by traditional healers for centuries for various rituals including protecting one from evil spirits, for power and healing.

Speaking to [The Citizen](#) at the kykNET Silwerskermfees in Cape Town, director, and screenwriter of [Besmet](#), Pieter Steyn explained just what a big problem lion poaching has become in the Kruger National Park, especially in the northern parts.

In the documentary they speak to a traditional healer from one of the muti-markets in Johannesburg to get an insight into the world of traditional medicine. Pieter explains that there are two big muti-markets in the City of Gold where you can find literally anything from a lion nail to a hippopotamus tooth, a hyena skull and even a whale tooth.

Focusing on the lion, the traditional healer explains that lion fat is rubbed around people's ankles to protect them from evil spirits. Other parts of the lion that is used for traditional medicine include the teeth, claws, and skin – and all these parts have different 'healing powers' and are used for various traditions in varying cultures.

While it is a century-old practice in [Africa](#) to use lions for traditional medicine, the cruelty of how these animals are being killed and the rate at which these majestic cats are being wiped out has conservationists very worried.

In the Kruger, lions are killed by being poisoned or caught in 'bush meat' snares. Both are very cruel deaths and the lion suffers for hours until it dies. Once dead, the poachers come with their pangas chopping off the lion's paws and head. They then disembowel the lion to get to the fat.

The lions, however, are not the only species affected by the poison. One of the most common ways poachers poison lions is by leaving a poisoned buck or donkey in the veld. After eating the poisoned meat the lion suffers for hours, vomiting and walking around in agony. Hyenas and other vultures who come to the carcass to feed also die. A poisoned carcass left in the veld affects everything around it in a 4km radius. The most common poison currently being used is carbamates – a type of pesticide used in farming.

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Where do the poachers come from?

Steyn says most poachers are locals, but there are also poachers who ride in on donkeys from Zimbabwe and Mozambique. This way, the rangers can't track them and they then kill the donkey and throw the poison over the carcass to get a lion.

Steyn says poachers sometimes stay in the bush for weeks, scouting out the area for rangers before they make their kill.

Balance needed

Steyn says while these century-old traditions are valid, there needs to be a balance between protecting lions and using them for traditional medicine. Currently in Africa there are only about 22 000 lions left. A couple of years ago, Africa still had about 100 000 lions roaming in the wild.

The biggest problem of lion poaching is human greed. A lion tooth or nail will set you back about R1 500 while a lion skin can cost anything between R30 000 to R40 000.

Just one short month after filming of *Besmet* wrapped, 13 more lions were poached in the Kruger National Park.

Besmet will air on kykNET later this year, after which it will be available on Showmax and DStv Stream Catch-up.