

Why are pastoralists poisoning lions in west Namibia?

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Sian Sullivan



Imagine that years of drought have forced you to graze your cattle on sparse grass in the open desert, far from permanent settlements. The nearest small shop is 25 miles away, a journey normally made by donkey. Now imagine your one donkey is being mauled to death by a pride of lions, only yards from the flimsy tent that is your shelter.



This was the scene I encountered in November 2015, while travelling through IGiribes Plains in Purros Conservancy in north-west Namibia's Kunene Region. I was with two elderly Khoe-speaking people – Michael lAmigu Ganaseb and Christophine Daumû Tauros – documenting historical cultural landscapes in the course of oral history research forming part of the *Future Pasts* project. lAmigu and Daumû had grown up in the desert landscapes west of Purros village and south towards the Hoanib River. Our small party stopped at a remote cattle-post (#1 on map below) close to Christophine's grand-father's grave (#2 on map). Drought was causing Herero-speaking herders to disperse here with their livestock to wherever they could find a few remnant tufts of perennial grasses.



Sheltered only by a made-in-China tent, the lone Herero herdsman here was angry. The previous night a group of lions had killed his donkey. He had poisoned the donkey's flesh in retaliation for this attack. We related this incident to the dedicated founder of the Desert Lion Conservation Project, Dr Philip Stander, whose tracking of lion movements suggested that a group of brothers named the 'Musketeers' – stars of the 2015 National Geographic film *Vanishing Kings: Lions of the Namib* – may have been responsible. On this occasion the Musketeers did not revisit the poisoned carcass.

A few days later I travelled to the Atlantic coast through the lower reaches of the Hoanib, recording memories of places and events previously inhabited by Michael's brother Noag, and their cousin Franz llHöeb. They had grown up in the lower reaches of the Hoanib River. Their families had lived from harvesting and processing the fruit of carefully managed *!nara* plants (the endemic cucurbit *Acanthosicyos horridus*), hunting gemsbok and other animals, gathering a diverse range of foods and keeping some goats. Restrictions due to diamond mining on the coast and later the establishment of the Skeleton Coast National Park meant they could no longer return to places they thought of as home.



Near their former dwelling place of ǀOeb and close to Wilderness Safaris' Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp in the lower reaches of the Hoanib River (see map), we encountered a majestic group of five adult male desert-adapted lions. Later we learned that these lions were The Musketeers.



How people and lions lived together

This encounter with lions stimulated a conversation with Franz and Noag. They claimed that in the past people did not have problems with 'wild animals' – they would simply ask them to move, so that the people could be on their way. Lions

(*xamti*) are a key and formidable predator, encounters with whom may result in the loss of human life, or the life of herded livestock. Clearly sometimes these requests would not work: dramatic historical lion attacks in the area have also shaped peoples' relationships with lions. In 1941 the former Nama 'kaptein' of Sesfontein, Nathanael Husa !Uixamab, who succeeded his father Levi !Nabeb !Uixamab in 1918, died after being mauled by a lion at a place called ≠Au-daos south-west of Sesfontein (#3 on map). Some time previously !Gabikhoeb, a man from the !!Hoëb family in Sesfontein, was killed by a lion as he slept at a cave south-west of Sesfontein where he was collecting honey (#4 on map). In the early 1980s a lion snatched and killed a baby from a house in Sesfontein.

Nonetheless, Damara / ≠Nūkhoen and !!Ubun people dwelling in north-west Namibia describe how in the past they would seek out lions in order to scavenge meat from their kills. Thus:

now in the past when we heard the lions crying in the night like last night, now we said, it's a big dog [*kai arib*] making that sound, let's go that side and find the meat there [1].

Or:

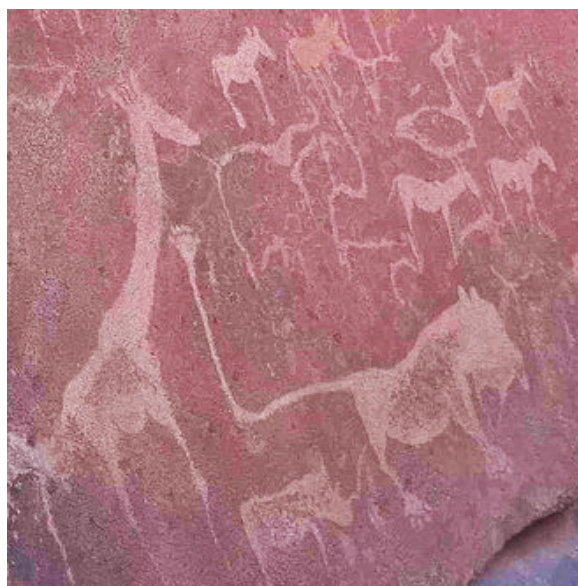
when the lions come and drink water, we talk to them to ask them to start growling because tomorrow we are going to collect honey (*danib*) and we want to know where you are [2].

The Damara / ≠Nūkhoen ritual practice of *tsē-khom*, in which both known ancestors and anonymous spirits of the dead are asked to protect people as they move through areas where lions also live, continues to be practiced by elderly Khoe-speaking peoples of the area.



At the time of recording these experiences I had not read Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's book *The Old Way*. In this text she similarly documents how Julwa (Jul'hoan) men in Nyae Nyae (north-east Namibia) would nonchalantly rob lions of meat, explaining that clearly 'the lions had not wanted an encounter with the men, so they had kept out of the way' (p. 88). I subsequently learned of her amazement at the correspondences in hers and my descriptions of peoples' encounters with lions, and of her gratitude that her observations had been confirmed of how people had felt about lions in the past, albeit in a different Namibian landscape.

Lions figure in Khoe and San realities as animals imbued with agency and intentionality. As Eduardo Kohn describes for Runa interactions with jaguars, and Marc Brightman and co-authors review for cultural interactions with bears and jaguars in Siberian and Amazonian contexts respectively, for Khoe-speaking peoples in this west Namibian context lions are conceived as being able to see, recognise and represent the people they encounter and interact with. The proximity of lions to humans is indicated by calling to lions as 'big brother', 'big head', or as a 'big dog' – names that denote respect and proximity, as also observed by Elisabeth Marshall Thomas (p. 170). Lions are considered to 'look like a dog – it's only the hair and mane that are different'[3], as well as being in close social proximity to humans. In non-ordinary states of consciousness associated with healing, KhoeSan reality also embraces the perceptual possibility of mutability between lions and humans. Indeed, the possibility of mutability as a means of cleverly responding to events and encounters could be said to be a highly valued skill in KhoeSan contexts, as expressed, for example, in ≠Nūkhoen stories associated with the ancestor-trickster-hero Haiseb [4]. This mutability is potentially suggested by rock art inscriptions of therianthropes – chimerical figures that are part human and part animal – including a famous rock engraving of a lion with a human hand emerging from its tail, found at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Twyfelfontein in west Namibia[5].



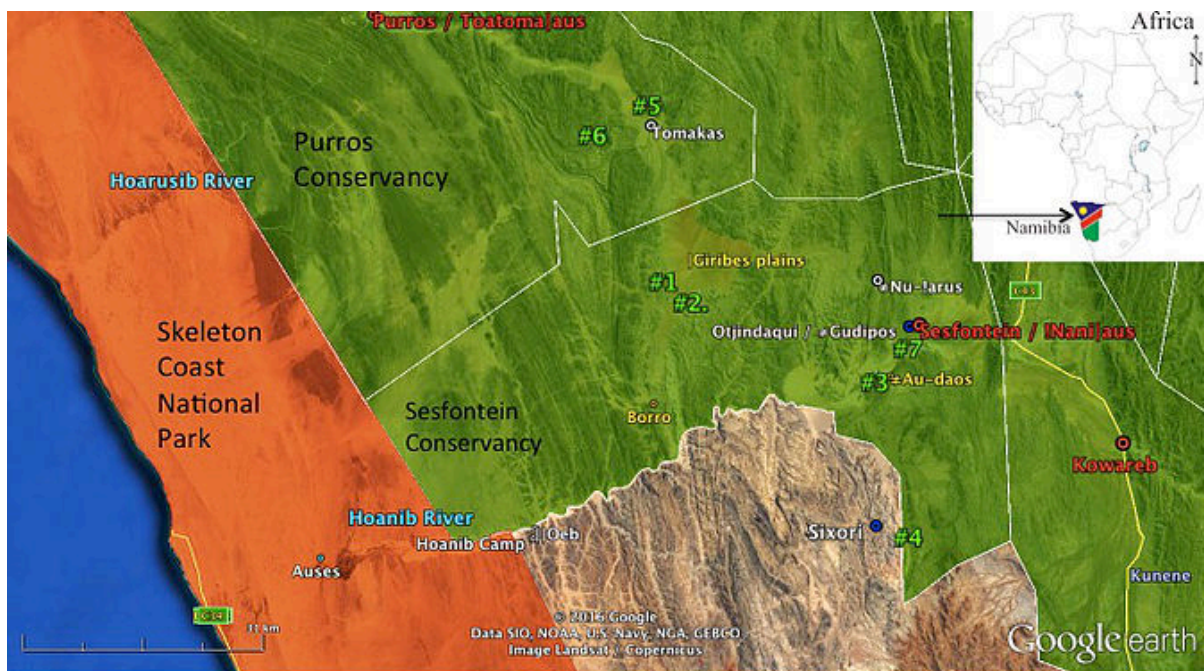
Whimsical perhaps, but these narratives illustrate historical and cultural variety in local experiences of lions in west Namibia that are resonant with observations for elsewhere in Namibia[6]. Indeed it is salutary to remember that living amongst a high diversity of large mammal kinds, including predators that may treat humans as prey, has been the norm until recently for the KhoeSan peoples spread throughout southern Africa. This is an experience that has been constrained within living memory by restrictions on settlement and mobility caused by protected area designations combined with other historical pressures and shifts in administrative boundaries. Although much conservation literature emphasises problems for people generated by ‘wild animals’, especially under the rubric of human-wildlife conflicts, another perspective is also possible. This is that when people have lived and acted with relative autonomy, i.e. prior to the constraints effected by various recent colonising forces, they have also tended to appreciate – to like – living with a diversity of nonhumans. Thus:

... we stayed together with all the animals. Even the lions and leopard, elephants, rhino.. A lot of animals were here and we stayed together with the animals. ... sometimes the lions bite the goats, but sometimes he just come and drink at the spring and then go again. And sometimes he killed the zebra and the oryx here and when he eat and then he leaves to fetch the water then the people also go and take the meat from his kill [much laughter].[7]

Part of what engenders this appreciation is a sense that humans and other animals share kinship: not so much because of their biological and morphological similarities, as in natural history and evolutionary perspectives (although these are important), but because, like humans animals are animated by a soul that passes from them when they die, and that confers to individuals a sense of self. It is this soul – for ≠Nūkhoen, 'gagas' – that gives humans and animals their unique smell or ‘wind’, confers their abilities to move as well as to assert agency and intentionality, and informs the qualities of action and behaviour from which humans also learn how to act appropriately. This shared soul is bound with a sense of both the primal time closeness between humans and other animals, as well as a residual experience of communicative closeness shared between humans and ‘nonhuman’ animals. This closeness makes it commonplace to assert, for example, that the ostrich in a well-known story of the primal time became the *xoma-aob* – the healer – who taught the people how to suck (*xoma*) sicknesses from the people (‘he wasn’t like a healer, he *was* a healer’ [8]). Or to relate that in the past, the people did not experience problems with ‘wild animals’: when encountered, people simply spoke to them asking them nicely to move so that the people could be on their way. Indeed, many elderly Damara / ≠Nūkhoen and !Uubun people of west Namibia consider that it is the motorised vehicles and cameras associated with tourism that cause animals such as lions and elephants to become ‘naughty’ with regard to people.

Today, Human-Lion Conflict seems inevitable

Less than a year after photographing 'The Musketeers' in the Hoanib River three of these lions were killed in Purros Conservancy after eating meat poisoned by pastoralists in the area (#5 on map). The radio collars that tracked their movements were burnt. These lions had been troubling people and their livestock near the settlement of Tomakas for some time. Tragically, only days earlier Namibia's Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) had approved the translocation of these three lions and their remaining brother (in June 2016, the first Musketeer to be killed had died from a bullet wound near a temporary cattle-post west of Tomakas, #6 on map). Arrangements were in place to transport them southwards to the !Uniab River delta[9]. Here a National Park designation meant they would have no chance of encountering pastoralists and their livestock. But as the three lions returned from unreachable mountainous areas north of Tomakas, they encountered a cattle-post, where they slaughtered a donkey whose poisoned flesh later killed them (on 9 August 2016). Criminal charges were sought by the MET against those responsible for illegally killing a protected species.



Numbered sites: 1. Grave of Christophine Daumû Tauros' grandfather; 2. Herero cattle-post encountered 14 November 2015; 3. Approx. location of where King Husa of Sesfontein was mauled by a lion in 1941; 4. Honey cave where |Gabikhoeb was killed by a lion in ca. late 1930s; 5. Approximate location of the poisoning of three of the lions known as 'The Musketeers' on 9 August 2016; 6. Approximate location of the shooting of one of the lions known as 'The Musketeers' around 11 June 2016; 7. Lioness killed in #Gudipos Otjindagwe in retaliation for loss of a bull on 26 June 2016.

Although one of the worst incidents, this is only the latest in a series of recent Human-Lion Conflict (HLC) events in or near the Purros Conservancy that have resulted in the retaliatory killing of lions. In mid-November 2015 a lioness was killed after attacking livestock that moved into the hills to the south of the |Giribes

plains. In July and August 2014 two male lions were killed near Tomakas, the second of which had returned to the area after being relocated elsewhere. In July 2011 three lions were poisoned 15 kilometres north of Purros village. They were part of a group who in 2001 had moved close to the vicinity of the village, their first taste of livestock here being the prized stud bull of the settlement's Headman. In June 2016, a lioness was shot dead after a bull was killed by a pride of lions near the settlement of ≠Gudipos / Otjindagwe in the neighbouring Sesfontein Conservancy (#7 on map). Villagers claim they followed the correct procedure of reporting the lions to the MET within 24 hours of observation, and that the zoning policy of the Conservancy states that lions should not be present in settlements. Nonetheless, MET officials have opened a case of killing a protected species and police officers confiscated two firearms used by farmers for the protection of their livestock. For those with a long memory in the area, this act echoes the systematic colonial disarming of Herero/Himba herders by the first Native Commissioner of Owamboland - Major Charles N. Manning - who travelled to Kaokoland for this purpose in 1919 in the course of consolidating former indigenous rangelands as 'Game Reserve no. 2'.

These incidents reflect the expansion, since the mid-1990s, of lion populations and their distribution in Kunene Region. Livestock deaths due to carnivore attack have a significant cost. For Kunene Region in 2005, reported livestock losses of 1,437 animals were estimated as having an aggregate economic value of US\$286,520, borne disproportionately by affected individuals. Compensation, when received, does not necessarily cover the cost of replacing a lost cow or bull. As such, increasing lion numbers remain a cause for celebration by tour guides but of dismay for local people.



Combined with the high conservation and tourism value of the desert-adapted fauna of north-west Namibia, these circumstances have meant that Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC) has received significant conservation investment in north-west Namibia. Community Game Guards were established at Purros settlement in the early 1980s, beginning a celebrated model of Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) supported by donors including USAID, WWF and DfID.

In 1996 the MET devolved partial ownership of wildlife, and concessionary rights over commercial tourism and trophy hunting incomes, to people on communal land. Since then Namibians living in the country's remaining communal areas have been able to legally derive incomes from wildlife in delineated territories managed as 'conservancies'. The vision is that income from tourism and trophy-hunting, if available to local people, will increase the value of indigenous fauna and flora as economically-productive resources, so as to counter the costs to other livelihood activities of sharing land with wildlife.

The conservation success of conservancy establishment, combined with favourable climatic conditions since the mid-1990s, has encouraged increasing lion populations. The Desert Lion Conservation Project and others have worked hard to manage the human-lion interface. Projects include a compensation scheme for Purros herders, resourced by Wilderness Safaris and other tourism operators who benefit from increasing lion populations in the area; the creation of a community 'lion task force' and 'lion rangers' who monitor lion movements and advise herders when to move away; the construction of lion proof kraals (cattle pens); and the use of bright lights, ultra-sound and fireworks to discourage lions from approaching settlements. Lion eco-tourism with Kunene Conservancy Safaris has been proposed to generate funds to compensate for lion-related livestock losses.

These initiatives do much to mitigate HLC. But in 2016 continuing drought conditions were causing herders to overlap with lion, the former seeking dispersed grazing, the latter dispersed prey animals. Expanding tourism has led to greater habituation of lions, making them more confident around humans. Shoot-to-sell policies, whereby conservancies sell contractors rights to shoot antelope and zebra to supply butcheries elsewhere, may exacerbate drought-associated declines in the availability of prey animals.

The outcome is an ever-present atmosphere of alertness. Indeed, living for several months over the last couple of years in a small settlement within the territory of Namibia's desert-adapted lions has confirmed for me the constant possibility of lion encounters and the alertness required for living with this. In late 2014 a carload of Himba herders stopped to help me change a tyre, even though they were on their way to the Sesfontein clinic having been mauled by a lion they were hunting after it had attacked their livestock. In February 2015 lions killed and ate a cow that had been herded with the livestock of the Himba herder based at the settlement at which I was living. Frequently I was advised not to walk in directions in which I might encounter lion.



Different strokes for different folks?

HLC in conservancies can also act as a flashpoint for other frustrations. Livestock herders in communal areas are experiencing punitive measures for trying to protect their animals, in a context of historical land appropriation that squeezed indigenous Namibians into less productive landscapes. Although sometimes also experiencing lion attacks, Namibia's commercial (and still largely white-owned) livestock farming areas benefited historically from the systematic clearance of major predators. One celebrated former Warden of Etosha National Park (previously 'Game Reserve no. 2') killed 75 lions in assisting farmers in protecting their cattle, prior to his recruitment in 1958 to a conservationist role.

Today, wealthy white visitors from afar hunt 'game' animals, including the occasional lion, as trophies, while local herders are punished for killing lions affecting their livelihood and safety. As Keyan Tomaselli observes for Jul'hoansi in Nyae Nyae, north-east Namibia, '[o]ne aspect of this contradiction is that foreign big-game hunters have been licensed to shoot lions; but the Jul'hoansi are denied this, even when lions are killing their livestock.' Many conservancies may be financed significantly by trophy-hunting and tourism, and some local individuals may succeed as hunting and tourism professionals. But these benefits are not evenly distributed, causing distrust regarding new inequalities linked with conservancy management and private sector investments.

All these factors contribute to the intractable nature of the human-lion interface. As Dr Stander points out, this problem is not about to disappear. It requires perseverance in developing 'effective systems to make sure that people can continue to live side by side with wildlife'. As this blog suggests, however, local

people with different histories express very different ways of conceiving and living with lions. Learning more about positive stories of how people lived with predators in the past may perhaps help people and lions to live alongside each other into the future.

[All images by Sian Sullivan unless specified otherwise]

Notes

[1] Ruben Saunaeib Sanib and Sophia Obi !Awises at ≠Habaka spring, Palmwag Tourism Concession / Hurubes, 201114.

[2] Franz !!Hoëb and Noag Ganaseb, Kai-as, Palmwag Tourism Concession, 251115.

[3] Ruben Saunaeib Sanib, Sophia Obi !Awises, and Welhemina Suro Ganuses at ≠Habaka spring, Palmwag Tourism Concession / Hurubes, 201114.

[4] As related by Ruben Saunaeib Sanib and Sophia Obi !Awises at Top Barab, Palmwag Tourism Concession / Hurubes, 211114, also at Kai-as, 221114, and by Franz !!Hoëb and Noag Ganaseb at Kai-as, Palmwag Tourism Concession, 261115.

[5] As related for Jul'hoan by Elisabeth Marshall Thomas in *The Old Way: A Story of the First People* (New York, Picador, 2006, p170-173).

[6] Marshall Thomas, *op. cit.* relates for Jul'hoan people in Nyae Nyae that lions, similar to us in their living arrangements, 'did not bother people who left them alone' (pp. 174, 158).

[7] Christophine Daumû Tauros and Michael !Amigu Ganaseb, !Giribes, Purros Conservancy, 070414. also Ruben Saunaeib Sanib and Sophia Obi !Awises at ≠Habaka spring, Palmwag Tourism Concession / Hurubes, 201114, and through multiple discussions with Franz !!Hoëb and Noag Ganaseb in locations along the Hoanib River, 20-261115.

[8] Christophine Daumû Tauros, Michael !Amigu Ganaseb and Welhemina Suro Ganuses, !Giribes, Purros Conservancy, 070414.

[9] At weblink see entry under 11th August 2016.

Acknowledgments

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