

Life with lions



A male lion stares down the camera.

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between humans and lions over food resources around the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana. Up to 30 lions are shot by graziers and other people near the reserve each year. Now the Botswanan government wants to stop this attrition, so is helping to support MacFarlane find ways to avoid the killing.

As a first step, MacFarlane needs to know as much about the lions as possible – including information on their movements and feeding habits.

He and his colleagues are fitting a representative sample of the cats with GPS collars so they can track them around the 52,800 square kilometre expanse of the park.

They're also keeping a close eye on the behaviour of the lions, from a safe distance, as well as analysing the animals' stats to collect information on what they're eating.

When he's not in the field, MacFarlane is back at base camp analysing GPS data or lion ID photographs. He's also worked hard to build support for the research project, both from institutions and individuals who want to help safeguard the lions. The tracking collars and other equipment are expensive and the team members need to be paid.

"It's a hard balancing act, spending time in the field and chasing the money," he says.

To stay in touch with donors and help find new support, MacFarlane has built a detailed website and sends out regular newsletters on how the project is developing.

"One of the sad things with lions is that so few people realise that they are in bad shape as a population," he says. "They've really declined recently. One of the great keys of having a charismatic animal at the front of your conservation project is that other animals that maybe aren't as charismatic benefit. The wider environment will benefit. So, in a way, the lions are a flagship and we're trying to bring up the conservation value of the whole area."

As the research project reaches the 18-month mark, MacFarlane says he is inspired to keep going by the thought of helping to reduce the conflict between humans and endangered animals, conflicts in which the animals rarely come out on top. He says the answer will always lie in working with people as well as the animals.

"The local people need to get value. They need economic reasons for protecting their own wildlife. That's the shift we're talking about. It's really the locals on the ground who need to benefit." ■

More information: <http://www.ckgqlionresearch.org>

Macfarlane says that crouching by the
metised body of a lion is "absolutely humbling"
"often we're so busy doing our field work
t get time to think about the experience,"
ays. "But as soon as you stop, say when
se is doing something, you can sit there and
n. They are huge creatures. The male weighs
40 kilograms. The paws are enormous."

gist spent his early childhood in South
ows from experience how far away one
n from a wakeful lion to remain safe. He
nowledge is background noise when he and
s are working up close with one of the big
g a new tracking collar or collecting the
e already in play. For this kind of work,
ers need to put the lion to sleep and then
omplish all their tasks within the 60 minute

are on top of the lion, and you're
you're feeling it breathe," MacFarlane
both humbling and makes me feel like the
man on Earth."

me is as driven as he is lucky. The PhD
from the Fenner School of Environment and
MU is exploring ways to reduce conflict