

10 February 2009

International zoo and private lion collections

To whom it may concern,

I am the Executive Director of the African Association of Zoos and Aquaria and want to enlist the active participation of your collection in relation to African lion conservation.

An urgent scientific population assessment of *Panthera leo leo* is being conducted by Wildlink International in association with Professor Helmut Hemmer and Dr Joachim Burger of the University of Mainz. Extended taxon reports and DNA samples are urgently required from your collection of Barbary/Atlas lions, lions whose origins are unknown or otherwise considered “generic” to find healthy animals that carry the genes and other characteristics of their free-ranging ancestors. Decisive action from international zoo and private collections involves submission of samples and taxon reports as soon as practicable as per instructions issued by Wildlink International.

Ex situ conservation measures are recognised by the Conference on Biological Diversity. In the case of Barbary/Atlas lions, “If animals contain the genes of extinct populations, they should prove crucial for preserving the overall genetic diversity of the species.” (Barnet et al, WildCRU 2006) Lions were considered a common species in sub-Saharan Africa 100 years ago but as a species their overall numbers have plummeted in the last 25 years. Current estimates suggest 16,500 – 30,000 individuals (Bauer and Van Der Merwe 2004), 45 – 70% lower than the previous 1996 estimate of 30,000 – 100,000 individuals (Nowell and Jackson 1996) with the entire species having “a high risk of extinction” according to IUCN criteria.

The conservation of African lions is a high priority and it's therefore vital to:

1. Increase numbers of individuals within each recognized subspecies.
2. Maintain the number and diversity of the subspecies currently recognized.
3. Preserve genetic diversity at both species and subspecies levels recognizing the crucial role of both in situ and ex situ approaches for achieving this.

Your collection is asked to support the broader aims of African lion conservation through this study on the Barbary/Atlas lion. Essential breeding recommendations cannot be made to preserve the few remaining Atlas lions in Morocco and in captivity elsewhere in the world unless

2/...

2.

the required evidence is available to justify a conservation programme. A resource-effective breeding programme based upon the outcome would make a significant contribution to maintaining the genetic diversity of the lion species and genetic variability of the subspecies.

All international collections need to act quickly and collectively during this 'final hour' for North African lions. Zoos are widely perceived by the public as having a prime responsibility to make contributions to conservation in tune with our own undertakings to do so and many successes to date. *Privately owned lions, however, are more likely to hold the non-hybridised animals that carry the published mitochondrial DNA markers and are therefore vital to the chances of a successful result. The willingness and efforts from private collections who take part are particularly appreciated as conservation may not be a main priority.*

The Barbary/Atlas lion (*Panthera leo leo*) is considered a 'flagship' subspecies. There are several reasons why the IUCN believes that increased efforts to re-introduce species are justified. "All species are not equal. Many of the species recommended for re-introduction are 'flagships' for conservation that arouse the strongest support from humanity. Re-introductions almost always have associated benefits in terms of public awareness of conservation and education." (Simon N. Stuart, IUCN Species Survival Commission) In other words, the efforts made on behalf of this flagship subspecies potentially benefit all wildlife conservation on the African continent and in countless other developing countries.

These measures are the only way to keep international hopes alive for reintroducing this subspecies into a protected area in North Africa. Every other region of the African continent has plans in place for their native populations via the IUCN Pan Africa Lion Conservation Strategy.

I would like to take this opportunity to ask for your collection to submit the information and DNA samples requested by Pete Thompson and Lisa Lauren of Wildlink International. If your staff have any practical issues regarding this, please contact them at office@thewildlink.org as soon as possible.

Yours faithfully,



DAVE MORGAN
Executive Director