INFORMATION BRIEF

BIG CATS IN AFRICA

AFRICAN LION (PANTHERA Leo)

Famously known as the king of the jungle, the African lion is the second largest living species of the big cats, after the tiger. African lions are found mostly in savannah grasslands across many parts of sub-Saharan Africa but the “Babary lion” used to exist in the North of Africa including Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, while the “Cape lion” existed in South Africa. Some lions have however been known to live in forests in Congo, Gabon or Ethiopia.

Historically, lions used to live in the Mediterranean and the Middle East as well as in other parts of Asia such as India. While there are still some Asian Lions left in India, the African Lion is probably the largest remaining sub species of Lions in the world.

They live in large groups called “prides”, usually made up of up to 15 lions. These prides consist of one or two males, and the rest females. The females are known for hunting for prey ranging from wildebeest, giraffe, impala, zebra, buffalo, rhinos, hippos, among others. The males are unique in appearance with the conspicuous mane around their necks. The mane is used for protection and intimidation during fights. Lions mate all year round, and the female gives birth to three or four cubs at a time, after a gestation period of close to 4 months (110 days).

Lions are mainly threatened by hunting and persecution by humans. They are considered a threat to livestock, so ranchers usually shoot them or poison carcasses to keep them away from their livestock. Since they need large territories to thrive and hunt, habitat loss is pushing lions towards extinction as their habitats are being converted for human settlement and activities.

They are also very much affected by trophy hunting, reduction of prey, and disease. Lions have been listed under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List since 1996 and given the strongest protection possible under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Appendix I. The recent CMS COP12 further strengthened their protection by listing lions in its Appendix II. They are possibly extinct in Côte d’Ivoire; Ghana; Guinea; Guinea- Bissau; Mali; Rwanda; Togo. To preserve the species, lions have been given protection by certain large and well-managed protected areas. Conservationists continue to resolve human-lion conflicts and to establish more protected areas to preserve these African lions. Some institutions working on conservation of lions include the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), the Réseau Ouest et Centre Africain pour la Conservation du Lion (ROCA), Panthera: Project Leonardo, the National Geographic: Big Cats Initiative, and African Parks. To learn more about lions, visit: http://lionalert.org/page/lion-status-overview.
CHEETAH (ACINONYX JUBATUS)

The cheetah is a large, sleek cat with a light skeletal frame, slim body and long legs. It has a light brown coat with round black spots, a small head and black tear streaks across its cheeks. The cheetah is famous for being the fastest mammal on land, reaching speeds of up to 120km/h. Cheetahs usually live in savannah and arid, open grasslands with available bush for hiding when stalking prey. Cheetahs used to roam most of Africa but have now been wiped out almost everywhere. Today, they are mainly found in Namibia, Botswana and Algeria or in parts of South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia. A few isolated populations still exist in Chad, Central African Republic, and in the W National Park on the borders between Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Females prefer a solitary life when it is not mating season, and males live in groups of two to four, called a “coalition”. The female gives birth to a litter of three to five cubs after a gestation period of about three months. The cubs depend on the mother for another three months, as they are vulnerable to predators such as lions and hyenas. Unlike other big cats, the cheetah chases down their prey instead of ambushing. They prey on animals such as the antelope, wildebeest, gazelle, impala, warthogs, among others.

Cheetahs are threatened by habitat loss, or by reduction of wild animal populations that they prey on. They are also killed by farmers trying to protect their livestock or by people who hunt them for their spotted pelt which is considered a sign of wealth and prestige when worn in certain parts of the world. Recently, the pet trade has also become a major threat with many wealthy persons in the Arab Gulf States buying cheetahs to keep as pets and parade them in photos showing them in their houses or cars. For this reason, the cheetah has been listed under CITES Appendix I since 1975. The recent CMS COP12 further strengthened their protection by listing Cheetahs in its Appendix II.

In Africa, many conservation efforts are ongoing to protect the cheetahs. The Range Wide Conservation Program for Cheetah and African Wild Dogs (RWCP) is working to ensure better conservation measures for the cheetah. A joint initiative by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), the Wildlife Conservation Society, and the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, to review conservation goals adopted by South African countries to ensure that they prevent illegal hunting and trade of cheetahs. The African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) and the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) are other organizations in Africa with expertise and knowledge on conservation of Cheetahs. For additional information on Cheetahs please visit: http://www.cheetahandwilddog.org/cheetah/
AFRICAN LEOPARD (PANTHERA PARDUS)

Very well known in traditional cultures of West and Central Africa, the leopard is the last of the three big cats present along with the Lion and the Cheetah. During the Benin Empire, the leopard was commonly represented on engravings and sculptures and was used to symbolize the power of the king or oba since the leopard was considered the king of the forest. Leopard were also kept and paraded as mascots, totems and sacrifices to deities. As a result of their association with kings in Africa, the leopard’s pelt is often seen today as a symbol of aristocratic rank, chiefs using it as a part of their traditional regalia.

Leopards are very similar to cheetahs but can be distinguished through their long body, large skull, relatively shorter legs and larger spots. In rare occurrences, some leopards have been born with totally black fur giving rise to the name “black panther” in East Africa but generally, leopards are known for their light brown or yellow to golden skin covered with black rosettes. They can be found in all of sub-Saharan Africa and west of the Kalahari Desert including Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo in West Africa. They are highly adaptable and live in a range of habitats, from rainforests to excessively dry deserts. However, they have now disappeared from 49% of their former territory in Africa.

The leopard is often described by wildlife specialists as shy because of its furtive and very cautious behavior. Leopards prefer a solitary life unless they are breeding. Breeding may occur all year round, and the female usually gives birth to two or three cubs after a gestation period of about 3 months.

The leopard is known for stalking its prey from trees and eats just about anything available. Like other big cats, leopards are considered a nuisance to the livestock of farmers. Commercial hunting, habitat loss, and decline in prey populations are significant threats to leopards. Leopards have long been hunted for their soft fur—used to make coats and ceremonial robes—as well as for their claws, whiskers, and tails, which are popular as fetishes. Leopards are doing relatively better in the wild although they are listed and protected. In 2008, they were listed as “Near threatened” by the IUCN. Leopards are listed in CITES appendix I since 1975 and in CMS Appendix II since 2017. Organizations with active programs for conservation of leopards include the Pardus Project run by Panthera, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). For additional information on Leopards, please visit: http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/15954/0 or https://www.panthera.org/

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Our Heritage: Let’s Protect Them

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