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In search of the
**AFRICAN
LION**

ROGER & PAT DE LA HARPE

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The African lion (*Panthera leo*), long celebrated as the king of beasts, faces unprecedented challenges in the wild today. Loss of habitat, through the expansion of human activity, increasingly restricts the lion to game reserves and national parks, while diseases such as bovine tuberculosis pose a threat to the health of lion prides. Over a period of 18 months, Roger and Pat de la Harpe have documented the wild lions of South Africa, and the result is a superbly photographed and engagingly written tribute to this often misunderstood predator. *In Search of the African Lion* enters the complex world of the lion, describing pride dynamics, hunting patterns, the reproductive cycle and interactions with human communities.

The book focuses on four main areas: the Kalahari, the Madikwe/Mapungubwe area, the Greater Kruger National Park and Northern Zululand, each with

its own problems, challenges and opportunities. In addition, the authors highlight the important work done by game rangers, wildlife managers and scientific researchers in understanding the lion and in protecting existing populations.

The *In Search of...* series focuses on the plight of threatened and endangered species. Also available by the same authors: *In Search of the African Wild Dog*.



From their base in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, freelance photographers and writers Roger and Pat de la Harpe have over the years made frequent excursions into various regions of the African continent. They share a passion for natural history, wild places and different cultures, and their work on these subjects has featured in numerous publications around the world, most notably *Africa Geographic*, *Getaway*, *BBC Wildlife*, *Geo* and *National Geographic*. Previously employed in the fields of conservation and local government, Roger and Pat decided in 1997 'to go it alone' and have never looked back.

They have published numerous coffee table books, including *In Search of the African Wild Dog*, *The Big Cats of Mala Mala*, *Zulu*, *Top Touring Spots of South Africa* and *Tuli – Land of Giants*.

In Search of the African Lion is their 24th book. This is a sister book to *In Search of the African Wild Dog*, which was published by Sunbird in 2009. It showcases the African lion as an iconic animal and highlights this magnificent cat's struggle for survival.

Their images and stories can be viewed at www.africaimagery.com.



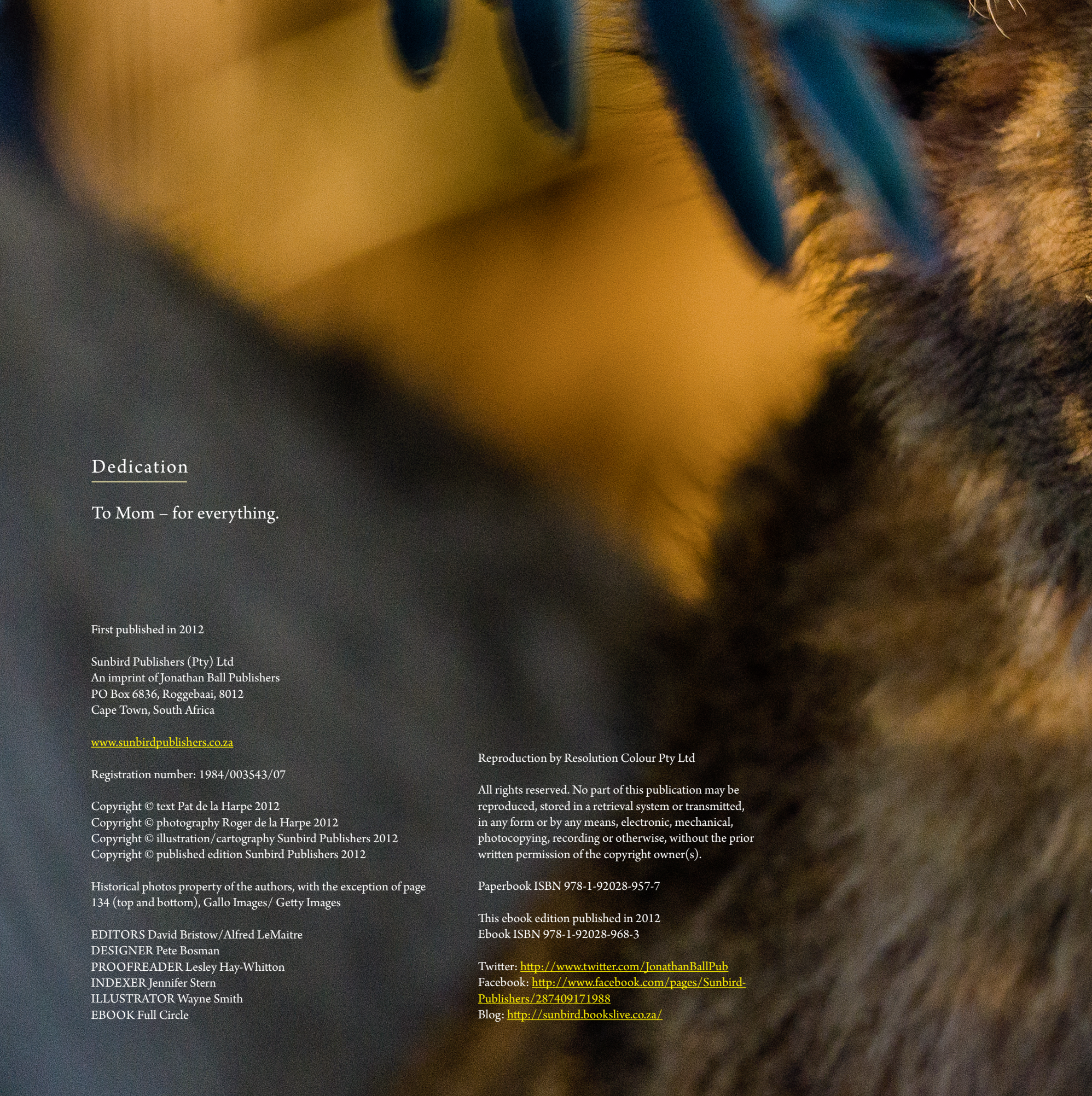
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SUNBIRD PUBLISHERS



Dedication

To Mom – for everything.

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Sponsor's Foreword

OF ALL WILD CREATURES, the lion is perhaps most synonymous with strength and bravery. It is a symbol of Africa's wildlife and one of the prized Big Five game species. However, as with many species, this big cat is increasingly coming under threat. It is estimated that there are some 23 000 lions living in the wild today. This is down from an estimated 450 000 in the 1950s.

The lion can flourish if we better understand it, and this is the aim of many of the conservation projects described in this book. *In Search of the African Lion* is dedicated to better understanding these creatures. From the earliest contacts with lions, including the knowledge of early hunters and adventurers, to their ecology, physical attributes and pride dynamics, this book captures the complex nature of this animal and the integral role it plays in the wild.

Sasol is an integrated energy and chemicals company, driven by innovation. We add value to coal, natural oil and gas reserves, using these feedstocks to produce liquid fuels, fuel components and chemicals through our proprietary processes. We recognise the value of our fauna and flora, and vigorously pursue ways to minimise our environmental footprint and conserve the region's natural heritage. We embrace environmental sustainability as a core business imperative. It is integral to our sustainable development philosophy, which actively seeks to balance our financial, social and environmental performance.

We are pleased to be part of this unique and special publication aimed at engendering an appreciation for our natural heritage. We all need to make a collective effort to ensure that our wildlife is protected and afforded the opportunity to flourish. Through Sasol's support, we hope to encourage all South Africans to get to know the lion better, understand the issues threatening its survival, and appreciate its grace.



In decades to come, the lion will no doubt maintain its pride of place as 'king of the jungle.' Through our involvement in this project, we want to make sure the legacy of this magnificent creature is not confined to books, but celebrated in the bushveld that is the lion's natural home.

DAVID CONSTABLE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
SASOL



Preface

STARING INTO THE FACE OF A LIONESS considering a charge is not something for the faint-hearted. The ears prick up, the eyes seem to grow into deep round orbs, the tail begins to swish from side to side, and a low and tremulous growl fills the space between you and the threatening cat. To say that she is a splendid sight, and every bit deserving of the title of the king – or, in this case, queen – of the beasts, is an understatement. It is an experience never to be forgotten.

My first experience of an angry lioness was in Etosha National Park in 1964. I had seen lions before, but few are privileged to get sufficiently close to raise the animal's ire and have it express its distrust of you in such a dramatic manner. Since then, it has been a joy to see lions wild in Botswana, and in some of our magnificent protected areas, such as the Kruger National Park, Hluhluwe Imfolozi Park, Pilanesberg Game Reserve and even in Gorongosa National Park in Mozambique, where a large pride of lions took possession of the first hutted camp the Portuguese authorities had built.

All of these lions have been wild. Once, in northern Mozambique, while driving to the Tanzanian border, I had the opportunity of seeing, at first hand, the damage that can be inflicted by a wild lion on a human being. I was stopped and asked by a few local Makua tribesmen to take a recently mauled victim to the nearest hospital, about an hour away. On the way, I was struck by the fact that the wounded man bore no ill will to the lion, simply accepting his bad luck and also accepting the right of the lion to exist.

Sadly, I doubt whether one could find too many people these days with such a tolerant attitude. What is even more sad is that the term 'wild lion' can be used with less and less conviction these days. Early in the 21st century, we are seeing

the wild lion under increasing stress, and gradually disappearing from those parts of Africa not formally set aside as protected areas.

People should be constantly reminded about the existence and majesty of this truly dominant member of the cat family. Its very existence alongside us should be a matter of great pride and respect. This new book by Roger and Pat de la Harpe is a timely reminder of what we might lose if we permit the lion to go the way of the dodo.

No better champions of wildlife could be found. Roger is not simply a photographer, and a remarkably good one at that, but he has served with conviction in formal conservation and, if I may say, in an organisation that was fully committed to the task – the Natal Parks Board. It has been a source of real joy seeing one of the staff, with whom I worked, grow in stature from a completely unknown amateur to one of the most famous and talented wildlife photographers in South Africa.

During the past two decades, book after book, highlighting the rich wildlife resources of our country, has emanated from Roger and Pat, and in each one can be seen their passion for conservation and the sheer love of wild things that they share, and want to share, with their readers.

This book is no exception, and I commend their efforts to keep the necessity for conservation so up-front and obvious, and to ensure that this wonderful cat, the lion, such a symbol of strength and majesty, will continue to survive and receive the respect and affection it deserves.

DR GEORGE HUGHES

FORMER CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

NATAL PARKS BOARD AND EZEMVELO KZN WILDLIFE

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Our thanks to Kevin Leo-Smith, whose help and advice at the start of this book was invaluable; Professor Paul Funston, for passing on his knowledge and expertise on the numerous issues facing lions today; Sarah Caithness, who for many months helped us in the field, showing remarkable resolve and patience; and Dr George Hughes, for his continued interest in our work through the years.

We are grateful to those who hosted us in the various game reserves we visited: Mike and Norma Rattray, David Evans and Allison Morphet of Rattray Reserves in the Sabi Sand Reserve and the Northern Tuli Game Reserve; Brett

Gehren of Isibindi Africa in the Kruger National Park; Tim, Nick, Coo and Laurence Hancock in the Timbavati; Kevin Pretorius and Simon Naylor of andBeyond in Phinda Private Game Reserve; Russell Binks and Gus van Dyk of Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve; Jaci van Heteren of Jaci's Lodges in Madikwe Game Reserve; and Ernest Robbertse of Tembe Safari Lodge in Tembe Elephant Park. We would not have been able to get our photographic coverage of lions without the access given to us in these areas.

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A young cub, chased by its siblings, darts off with a wriggling banded mongoose in its mouth. A short time before, the pride's youngsters had come across a little colony of foraging mongoose and had managed to snatch only this one.

of DNA; Andrei Snyman of Mashatu Game Reserve, for his tireless assistance in the field; Clive Curtis of Safari Vision, Randolph Westraadt and Andre Steyn, for their information on the different aspects of lion hunting; and to Sandy and Willem von Willich, for their friendship and support.

Last, but not least, our thanks to the Sunbird publishing team: Ceri Prenter, Peter Bosman, David Bristow and Alfred LeMaitre.

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Introduction

SOME 50 YEARS AGO there were an estimated 450 000 lions in Africa. Today there are only around 23 000. This equates to a quarter of the number of seats in South Africa's premier sports stadium, Soccer City – a truly shocking statistic, particularly because the decline has taken place in so many of our lifetimes.

In contrast, the human population has exploded, creating the need for additional land to grow crops, keep livestock and expand settlements. The continent's pristine natural environment has also halved in area over the past 50 years and is further diminishing at an alarming rate. The loss of habitat affects the survival of all wildlife, with large carnivores like the lion at the forefront of dwindling numbers of prey.

As human communities and protected areas compete for space, conflict between people and predators becomes inevitable and is a major cause of lion deaths across Africa, as it leads to revenge killings for the loss of livestock. As lions come increasingly into contact with domestic animals, they become vulnerable to diseases like canine distemper, which is known to be a killer of lions, while the long-term effects of bovine tuberculosis (BTB) on lion populations have yet to be determined. Meanwhile, generous hunting quotas in some countries, as well as slayings for skins and body parts, play a significant role in reducing lion numbers.

The situation in South Africa is, to some extent, different from the rest of the continent. The Kruger and the Kgalagadi parks are large enough to allow, for the most part, the natural processes that govern lion prides to continue without human intervention. But this is not the case in the country's smaller fenced reserves where lions are to be found, of which there are now about 45. Here, a more active management of the population is necessary to maintain genetic diversity and prevent inbreeding. The natural dynamics that usually keep lion numbers stable appear to partly disintegrate in these small reserves. As a result, managers find themselves with too many lions for the size of the land and the numbers of prey species. There is correspondingly little option for relocating excess numbers to other areas, as these already have sufficient or surplus lions of their own.

The recently formed Lion Management Forum (LiMF) is examining a variety of options to deal with these problems. Various contraception methods, DNA mapping and the concept of a metapopulation (which has proved so successful in managing wild dog populations in South Africa) are being investigated.

When we started our journey in search of the African lion, little did we know the story would be so complicated. In the course of our travels through South Africa, we came across many amazing people doing essential work in trying to find solutions to the issues of lion survival.

We spoke to scientists, ecologists, game rangers, trackers, hunters and those involved in animal rights groups, and were struck by their commitment to lions in many different ways. Our excursions took us to the Kalahari, with its endless red sand dunes and vast skies, the ancient landscapes of the dry northwestern areas, the Kruger National Park and its surrounding private game reserves, and the lush green valleys of northern Zululand in our home province of KwaZulu-Natal.

We spent days and weeks with lions, in conditions that varied from the searing heat of a Lowveld summer to the freezing cold of the Kalahari on winter mornings. Our final afternoon on this project was unforgettable, when a coalition of four adult male lions at Mala Mala, in the Sabi Sand Reserve, used our vehicle as cover to hunt a herd of buffalo. They were unsuccessful but it did not matter, as we were content to just be there, their potential strength enough to see.

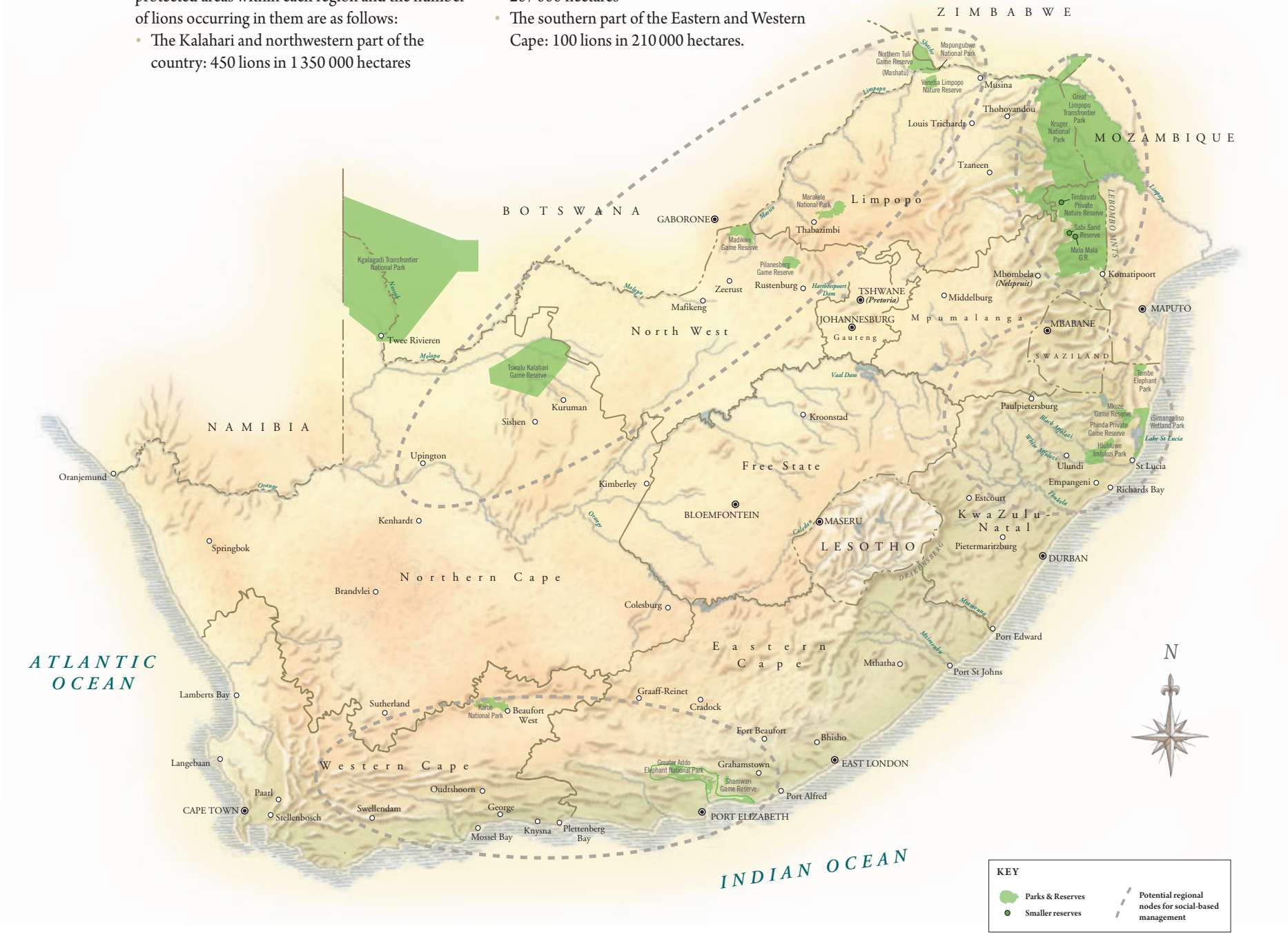
There is no doubt that an African continent without free-ranging lions would be a tragedy beyond words – if future generations got to glimpse these magnificent cats only behind the bars of cages or in the small enclosures of zoos. Indeed, the entire energy of the planet would be diminished in some way – and so would we, without the one other species against which we always have found the measure of ourselves.

ROGER AND PAT DE LA HARPE
HOWICK, APRIL 2012

Distribution of lions in South Africa

The four regions shown within the dotted lines on the map indicate the distribution of lions that occur in the wild in South Africa. The approximate size of protected areas within each region and the number of lions occurring in them are as follows:

- The Kalahari and northwestern part of the country: 450 lions in 1 350 000 hectares
- The Greater Kruger National Park: 2 200 lions in 2 200 000 hectares
- Northern KwaZulu-Natal: 300 lions in 207 000 hectares
- The southern part of the Eastern and Western Cape: 100 lions in 210 000 hectares.





ONE



The African Lion

Panthera leo

‘You know you are truly alive
when you’re living among lions.’

Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), *Out of Africa* (1937)

Left A mature black-maned male lion is a magnificent animal. Its size, muscular presence and latent strength are awesome to see, leaving no doubt that it deserves its reputation as ‘king of the beasts’.