



# We're growing living walls to save lions

By Richard Schiffman



"A lion came up to the mesh screen of my tent. She was just curious. I didn't feel like I was her next meal"

(Image: African People and Wildlife Fund)

*Masai people in Tanzania kill lions that kill their livestock – so conservationist Laly Lichtenfeld is helping them make corrals to keep all the animals safe*

**To protect Masai livestock from lions – and in turn protect lions from reprisals – you are using “living walls”. What are these?**

They are a Masai innovation. The tribe uses African myrrh (*Commiphora africana*) for the outer walls of their family enclosures, and the idea was to plant these as livestock corrals too. Dried-out tree limbs are stuck in the ground, and when the rains come, they sprout to life. We can then join the growing trees together with a chain-link fence to create a predator-proof barrier.



the first one was installed in 2008. And we've built over 350 of them so far. From our camera trap and other data, we're seeing the population beginning to rebound, with healthier pride structures, more cubs and young adults. We're also hearing more roaring as groups engage in territorial battles again. So there is definitely hope on the horizon for these lions.

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### **The Masai are famous for hunting lions, so why is the tribe working to help save them?**

It's true they are adversaries; the Masai take pride in the bravery of the hunt. But they also see the lion as the biggest warrior of all wildlife, and respect its intelligence. Scientists have one understanding of lions. The Masai have a different understanding, based on reverence and respect.

### **Why are conservation measures so crucial?**

Lions are now almost gone from west Africa. Their numbers have plummeted in the last century. In the 1960s there were approximately 100,000 lions in the whole of Africa. Today there are no more than 35,000 left. About 80 per cent of the decline in the last 20 years is due to conflict with humans and a decline in the populations of prey species. There is also a growing trade in lion bone for Asian medicines.

### **Before you began building the living walls in Tanzania, what was the situation there?**

In our part of the Masai steppe, an area of grassland and Acacia woodland that stretches across 20,000 square kilometres, 40 to 60 lions were being speared, poisoned and shot each year in retaliation for attacks on livestock. The problem is that over 90 per cent of lion territory is outside national parks, where people live. The animals need this huge amount of land to maintain connections with other populations, and with that, genetic viability. But this wide-roaming inevitably puts lions into conflict with humans.

### **Have you ever had any close encounters?**

A lion came up to the mesh screen of my tent. She was just curious. I didn't feel like I was her next meal. We just looked at one another. Moments like that are incredibly special. As a wildlife conservationist, they're what you live for.

The Masai call me "Mama Simba" or Mother Lion. I love everything about lions. They are the only truly social cat. I love their family structure, the look in their eyes, their power. They epitomise what remains of true wildness in this world.

## **Profile**

**Laly Lichtenfeld** is the co-founder and executive director of the African People & Wildlife Fund and a research affiliate with the Large Carnivore Group at Yale University. She lives in Tanzania where she works to protect lions

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