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ANIMALS

How the world's largest lion relocation was pulled off

To bring lions back to central Mozambique, logistics ranged from providing safe transport to blessings from the spirit world.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMI VITALE

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Zambezi Delta, Mozambique— There was once a peaceful hunting community called the Thozo, living in the lush, wildlife-rich wetlands of central Mozambique. Beyond their village, great herds of buffalo thrived in the swamps, elephants rumbled in the forests, and prides of lions hunted on the fringes of the floodplains.

The village was led by a great chief, Galanguira—a hunter who loved the land because it provided for his family and community.

One day, a large army from a neighboring tribe arrived. Twelve warriors with spears came to Galanguira's house to kill him, while the rest of the army waited nearby. Galanguira fought like a warrior, defending his life and his village. He killed ten of the men. But he didn't finish off the last two. Instead, he dropped his spear and raised his arm—exposing his heart—and told them to kill him. With one thrust of an enemy's spear, Galanguira dropped to the floor.

The two triumphant men were about to leave when suddenly a magnificent lion rose out of Galanguira's body and stood before them. Shocked and fearful, the men ran off to tell the rest of the army the about the supernatural animal and the powers of the Thozo people.

The army was never seen again.

“Galanguira's spirit lion still lives near here, protecting us,” says Jorge Thozo, waving at the thick forest behind his house. He is the current chief of the Thozo community, and the great, great grandson of Chief Galanguira. Sitting on a wooden bench outside his small mud-brick house, he tells the story of his grandfather with such pride and enthusiasm that one can feel the meaning of the words even before they are translated from his scattered Portuguese.

Jorge can hardly remember the last time he saw a real lion.

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Africa, a similar decline is occurring, with wild lion numbers dropping 42 percent in the last two decades, mostly as a result of habitat loss.

In 2018, conservationists, landowners, donors, and the Mozambican government came up with an ambitious plan to add some two million acres to African lions' range. They identified 24 healthy lions from reserves in South Africa and planned to relocate them to central Mozambique—the largest lion reintroduction ever attempted.

The lions' proposed new home was the Marromeu Game Reserve—Chief Thozo's backyard—where the local community subsists in the thick forests that fringe the Zambezi Delta floodplains.

With all the permits signed, partners on board, and the lions ready to go, all pieces were in place to make the ambitious project happen.

But one question remained: Would the spirit lions allow it?

A restoration story

There was very little wildlife in the Coutada 11 concession, in central Mozambique, when Mark Haldane, a South African hunter and one of the architects of the lion reintroduction, first arrived in 1995.

“I guess, when you are young and stupid, I looked at the place and said: ‘This is my piece of Africa!’” He laughs loudly as we sit in the humid Beira airport, the springboard to the wildlife concessions of central Mozambique. “It was my first chance to actually lease a concession. I think it was a heart thing. Because it didn't have a lot of game. It was as wild as it is now, but the big game had gone.”

In a spontaneous decision, Haldane bought the lease from a German owner who wanted nothing more to do with war-torn Mozambique. At the time, there were fewer than 44 sable antelope and perhaps a thousand buffalo on one million acres. The forests were full of snares and traps for small game species, and signs of civil war were everywhere.

“The brick walls that line our runway were chipped with bullets. Mortars,” Haldane says. “Back then, I didn't know how good it would get.”

Operating a single hunting lodge, Haldane dedicated much of his time and resources to helping the wildlife return by investing in anti-poaching measures, such as motorbike patrols and a team of scouts. “Animals gravitate towards the most ideal habitat and protection, and I think, just by absolute chance, it happened to my block,” he says. “They came in, and then we had to look after them.”

Haldane takes me on a tour of the land in his helicopter. As we swing over the floodplain, the full scale of the wilderness comes into view. Striped throngs of zebra bound below among groups of red hartebeest and shaggy waterbuck. Reedbuck dance through the water. And then a scene of true African elegance: A herd of sable run in unison, their brown and white mains flowing like waves across heavy backs, and their iconic, sickle-shaped horns dancing on their heads.

“There are over 3,000 sable antelope on the concession today,” Haldane says over the chopper din. We circle over a big herd of buffalo—some 300 galloping through the reeds like combine harvesters. Today, he says, his block holds some 25,000 buffalo.

“All the animals have come back, virtually to capacity, with the only exception being the apex predators.”

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“All of my ancestral spirits are lions,” says Jorge Thoza, the chief. “If I want to be a spirit lion, the witch doctor goes in the bush to get secret sticks, nobody really knows what they are, and they make medicine. If I take that medicine, I will turn into a lion when I die. As a spirit lion, I will stay here to watch over the people.”

Long before plans were made to re-introduce 24 lions into the area, Haldane and his partners on the project spent time with the community living in the concession. Some villagers are employed at his camp, but most rely on subsistence farming. How would they feel about having a potentially dangerous predator roaming the bush once again?

“Most of the conservation areas in Mozambique have people living on them,” says Samuel Bila, a veterinarian from the University of Maputo and a key partner in the project. “When we decided to bring back the lions in Marrameu, the people were concerned for their safety, so we had to consult them first.”

He says he was quite surprised and happy to hear that the community had such a deep spiritual connection to the lions. “The spirit lions are perhaps one of the reasons that they were happy with the proposal,” he says.

After a number of meetings with the community, the chief gave his personal blessing over the lions. But it did come with one warning: In the end, he said, it would not be up to him whether the lions would survive. That would be the decision of the spirit lions.

The plan

This was going to be the largest movement of wild lions across borders in history—24 in total.

“Many people said it's not possible; you can't do that volume,” says Ivan Carter, a conservationist, hunter, and TV personality who founded the Ivan Carter Conservation Alliance. Finding and transporting that many healthy, disease-free lions would not be cheap or easy, and keeping track of the lions once on the ground would be a huge challenge. “But if you allow the naysayers to control your life,” he says, “you won't get anything done.”

Carter is a partner in the reintroduction project. A long-time funder of the anti-poaching efforts in the concession, he connected Mark Haldane with donors from the U.S., the Cabela family, who have helped to fund the project.

Carter agrees that 24 lions is a lot to manage. “But that gives us a better chance of success,” he says. “By putting 18 females and six males into such a big area, you now can afford to lose a few in their normal, natural way of living.”

In order to keep the genetic mix as wide as possible, the team sourced the lions from various reserves in South Africa and kept them all in a boma in KwaZulu Natal's Mkhuze Game Reserve for three weeks to complete medical tests. Then they were sedated and put in two private planes for the journey to Mozambique.

On August 5, 2018, a large crowd was gathered at the dusty airstrip in Marrameu Game Reserve as the planes touched down with their precious cargo. Many of the local villagers had never seen a lion before, and there were murmurs of both fear and excitement as the lions were offloaded. They were moved to a holding boma, and that's when the ceremony began.

“We made a ceremony for my ancestors [the spirit lions] to introduce the lions,” says the chief, recounting the day the big cats arrived. The chief laid out various offerings in plastic cups—coke, beer, tobacco—for the spirit lions. If the spirits were unhappy, Jorge explains, they would kill the new lions. And if the lions were accepted, “we asked the spirit lions to protect the village, and to prevent the lions from biting anybody.”

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the lions' ears flicking dew. One of the females rises and walks out of the thicket into the open, shaking the condensation from her body as if emerging from a morning sauna.

It's been six months since the lions were released from the holding bomas. Vets and ecologists have spent the last few days darting, testing, and collaring the lions, and Haldane and Carter are happy with their condition and progress.

"You just have to look around and you can see this the perfect habitat for lions," whispers Carter as we sit in his truck and watch the lions emerge. "They've got over two millions acres to explore. There's a wealth of game here. You can't drive for five minutes without seeing warthog, reedbuck, zebra, hartebeest. I can't imagine what they don't have here!"

Though the stress of the big relocation is over, Carter is not ready to relax just yet. "The next milestone is going to be when the cubs come out," he says. "I'll only relax and consider this successful when we can truly consider this place a stronghold for the wild African lion."

These particular lions will never be hunted, says Carter. A proponent of the conservation benefits brought by hunters' dollars, he says: "Some time in the future, if there's 300 lions walking around here, and hunting three of them will sponsor your anti-poaching scouts for a year, why wouldn't you? You hunt three lions out of 300, less than 1 percent, and suddenly you have paid for your scouts for over a year."

With Mozambique's war-torn history, Carter is certain that this wilderness and its animals would not exist if it were not for the few hunters who pass through the camp each year. And it's been through careful off-take management that Haldane was able to build such a healthy population of animals while still running a hunting camp.

"A lot of hunting outfitters don't give a damn about anything other than profit, and their concessions are dying" says Carter. "But if you look at Mark's investment in anti-poaching—it's in the millions! The helicopters, the motorbikes, and anti-poaching teams are the foundation of the success of the reserve."

As a vet, Samuel Bila says that hunting is not his first choice for conservation. However, "Mozambique needs income and to develop its conservation areas. Marrameu is a designated hunting area, and this can bring in profit and help with protection. Of course, we put strict laws and quotas in place based on numbers. But hunting is part of the utilisation of wildlife in Mozambique."

Settling in

Six months after the introduction of lions, and the community is in good spirits.

"At first, the people were very scared," says Thoza. "Now, people are not scared anymore. They know the lions are out there, but they are not aggressive."

He says he's not worried because his grandfather is protecting him and the villagers from the lions. He knows that if the lions attack a villager, the spirit lions will kill them.

We meet a younger man named Jon sitting beside the road with his kids climbing up and down his leg and hanging on his back. He speaks about his grandfather, a spirit lion. He says that when his grandfather was alive, he always promised that he would become a lion and remain there to protect them. Now, when Jon is out in the bush and feels scared or lost, he asks his grandfather for help, and he always receives it.

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As we head back to camp, filled with the stories of Galanguira and the spirit lions, Carter begins to talk about his own life path. What initially began as an ambitious career in guiding and TV, he says, has developed into a quest to make an impact. He created his NGO because he saw a need for frontline conservation work. He now helps fund various projects across Africa, including ambitious projects to save orphaned chimps in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and supporting giraffe conservation in Africa.

“You get so inspired when you do something that really matters,” he says. “I hope that one day this place will be a stronghold for the wild African lion. I hope they will be here long after I am gone.”

Just a few months after we left Mozambique, a lioness suddenly became pregnant, and later two more, ending up with six little cubs. Haldane sent me a message saying how excited they were to see cubs so soon, and suspects the father is a very old rogue male from Mozambique that he's seen on only one occasion, and he presumed was dead.

“Perhaps he was a spirit lion,” I replied, with a wink.

Editor's note: The spelling of Mark Haldane has been corrected.

Photographer [Ami Vitale](#) has covered many subjects for National Geographic, including the wild side of pandas and the fragile peace in Sri Lanka.

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