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MAY 2008 NEWSLETTER

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1. Message from the Chief Operating Officer

As May draws to a close and winter begins to spread its influence on southern Africa ALERT is keeping the heat on.

Our chairman, Andrew Conolly, recently visited the Indaba trade fair in South Africa and spoke to many reserve owners in a number of countries who expressed an interest in receiving lions from the program to restock their diminished populations. Over the coming months we will seek to confirm as many of these as are appropriate.

The released pride at our Dollar Block stage two site are fairing incredibly well, making regular kills and bonding well. A day in the life of the release pride is featured in this issue.

This month in our series looking at the personnel that work tirelessly every day to ensure that the program moves forward, despite a challenging economic climate in our base country of Zimbabwe, we take a look at the role of the guides. This group of people are out in all weathers to ensure the lions in stage one are receiving the necessary pre-release training for their successful release into stage two, and raising awareness of the program with guests to the projects.

We pay tribute to Lucy Bickerton who ran the London marathon on behalf of ALERT and also take a look at upcoming research priorities for our stage one program.

As ever, we thank you for your support as we continue to do our part in saving the African lion.

Kindest regards

David Youldon

ALERT Chief Operating Officer



2. What is ALERT?



The African Lion & Environmental Research Trust (ALERT) is a non-profit organization working with governments, wildlife authorities and private organizations to identify suitable release sites for African lions. ALERT will also provide infrastructure to those sites to facilitate the release and to protect local communities. It was founded in 2005 to support the work of the four-stage African Encounter Lion Rehabilitation and Release into the Wild Program, founded in 1999 at Antelope Park in Gweru, Zimbabwe.

ALERT also carries out scientific research through the **Conservation Centre for Wild Africa (CCWA)**, either in its own right or in conjunction with external conservation organizations and educational institutions. CCWA engages in a diversity of research and conservation related programs, not just for lions but on a wide range of African wildlife to ensure that we can pass on balanced ecosystems to future generations. CCWA is already undertaking a number of research activities throughout Zimbabwe's National Park system.

In addition, the **ALERT Communities Trust (ACT)** is a means to give back to communities bordering conservation areas such that they receive tangible benefits for supporting those conservation programs. A primary element of this is our community education and awareness program to further understanding of the importance and relevance of sound conservation practices. Local communities are involved in eco-tourism ventures related to the conservation programs, and money generated by those programs goes back into development schemes, agreed as priorities with the local community, such as building schools or providing medical supplies.



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3. Stage One Update

This month we thought we would give you an update on which lions are currently taking part in stage one.

Our youngest cubs are the 3Ss of **Sango, Swahili & Sahara**. (pictured top left). They are approaching eight months already and are firm favourites with our voluntourists at Antelope Park. Recently the three of them discovered the joys of playing in the various water pools on their walks; enjoying splashing around and dunking each other.

Mana & Lozi (pictured right) currently at Bush enclosure at Antelope Park are now regularly causing havoc in the wildebeest and zebra herds that they come across on their walks. They still have some work to do on their skill but with continued exposure to hunting opportunities those skills will quickly develop.

The final group walking in stage one at Antelope Park are **Luangwa & Msasa**. (pictured below). A mischievous pair, they are also getting into hunting mode, now aged 17 and 16 months respectively.



At our stage one operation at Victoria Falls sixteen month old siblings **Lungile & Lina** (above) are making a mischief of themselves chasing the local elephant population around.

Echo & Etosha (below) are settling in very well following their recent move from Antelope Park to walk within the Zambezi National Park.

They are now just over 13 months old and starting to take an interest in hunting the prey species that they encounter.





Night Encounters

We currently have thirteen lions of the age that we can take them on *Night Encounters* at Antelope Park to practice their hunting technique. The eldest of these are the 4Ls of **Langa**, **Lokothula**, **Landela** & **Ltalo** (pictured left). We have been taking them out in different groupings to see what effect that has on their hunting success. As a group of four they have achieved a 50% success rate whilst results for the different groups of two or three have been very mixed. Langa, Lokothula and Landela worked well as a three whilst Landela & Ltalo as group of two have achieved the highest success rate at 62%. The lads recently celebrated their second birthday and have another six months of successful hunting ahead of them.



The remaining lions are all new comers to *Night Encounters*. **Acacia** & **Amghela** (pictured below left) have been on six encounters with **Chengeta** and four on their own. To date they have only made one successful hunt, taking an ostrich, but each time they are out they are getting closer and closer to their next kill.



The girls will shortly be joined by **Nandi** (pictured below) who is being split off from **Chaka** & **Nduna** (pictured below). We expect that her addition will greatly assist their hunting as in our experience groups of two females have a success rate of 45%, whilst groups of three females have achieved 54%.



Chaka & Nduna will be mixed in with four other males of the same age, **Amandla**, **Chabalala**, **Chengeta** and **Chando** (pictured below) in order to commence their *Night Encounter* campaign. Amandla and gang have already been out a few times but have not made a kill yet. The three young Cs however are mighty keen and we don't think it will be long before they prove themselves.



One hundred and sixty one *Night Encounters* have so far been conducted at Antelope Park since we brought the practice into the program. The lions have achieved a success rate of 43% overall. They have managed to successfully catch and kill a total of seventy seven animals; 6 birds, 2 mongoose, 3 blesbok, 7 duiker, 22 impala, 3 ostrich, 9 rabbits, 1 spring hare, 1 red hartebeest, 8 steenbok, 1 tsessebe, 1 zebra and 13 wildebeest.



The most successful lion group of all time is the 3Ks of Kwali, Kenge and Kwezi who achieved a 73% hunting success rate. Kwezi will be released soon as a part of a male only coalition whilst Kwali is planned to be released at our Dambwa Forest site in Zambia. Kenge of course was released into stage two last year and was part of the hugely successful hunting team that managed to catch and kill an adult giraffe amongst other species.



Research Priorities

Our ability to observe the lions as they develop at close quarters offers a range of opportunities for research. The following have been designated as research priorities for stage one of the lion rehabilitation & release into the wild program for the forthcoming period after discussion with our consultant ecologists:

1. Left or right?

This study will continue to look at how the young lions learn their hunting skills. Traditional thinking says that cubs learn to hunt by observing the pride adults; however our cubs are becoming skilled hunters with no such input. As such we will be looking at the stages of hunting skill development compared to that observed in wild lions. When do our cubs start stalking? When are they bold enough to give chase? When do they make their first kills?

We will also look at the hunting behaviour compared to wild lions. What prey are our lions choosing? How does group structure affect hunting success? Do our cubs show co-operative hunting techniques and if so what works and what doesn't work?

2. Male pattern baldness

There are many variables as to why lions have certain types of manes, and ambient temperature has been suggested as a major factor in determining the development of manes. However, we have a number of brothers within the program that have the same genetic background, the same parents, the same nutritional input and have grown up in the same location and yet their manes have developed entirely differently in terms of length, density and colour. The question is why?

We will be monitoring the males in the program to ascertain how those manes develop and observe how they change over time, attempting to determine the reasons behind those changes.

3. A thing about noses

It has been suggested that nose colour can be used as a determinant to ascertain a lions' age. The practical application of this is that trophy hunters can shoot only lions over a certain age and therefore reduce the effects on the overall population structure of an area. Aside from some questionable logic that this premise has for all lion populations, a quick look at our lions shows very quickly that nose colour is a pretty weak form of aging these lions. So we thought we'd prove it by assessing the lions' nose colours every year.

4. To sleep or play?

Our lions' lives are enriched through regular walks into their natural environment in a way that other captive lions do not get. What effect on their behaviour is made by this enrichment? Are our lions more likely to be active? Are they more playful? more likely to engage in behaviours that will develop their hunting instincts? When they are older and not able to go on daily walks do they retain any differences in their behaviour? Whilst they are in their enclosures how do they use the space? This will allow us to build better spaces for them in the future.

5. One lion is a little angel, the other is a terror

How does the character of a lion develop? Some of our lions are lazy, others highly active. Some are good hunters, others are not. This is all normal lion behaviour but when do these traits develop? And what implications does that have on putting together a successful pride?

6. That lion has HUGE feet

Can the study of spoor assist in aging a lion cub? We will look at paw sizes, stride and straddle lengths compared to lions of known ages to see if there is any chance that we can accurately predict a lions' age from its feet. This could help ascertain pride structures in a group of unseen wild lions.



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The Role of the Guides

At both our Victoria Falls and Antelope Park stage one locations, our guides play a vital role in raising awareness of the plight of lions and of the ALERT program.

We have as many as 1500 guests in a month that come to walk the lions. The guides meet their guests and explain first how the Rehabilitation and Release into the Wild Program works. This presentation gives information about the current conservation status of lions and what problems are facing them. The four stage ALERT program is explained and then the CCWA and ACT programs are introduced. The presentation is followed by a safety briefing which informs the guests of the correct way to act when with the lions.

Whilst on the lion walk itself the guides provide information about the lion as a species and provide updates as to progress that ALERT is making towards our goals. Sometimes the lions are in lazy mood and that allows the guides to give guests the opportunity to get some close up photos with the cubs.

But this is not the complete story of the guide's job. They play a vital role in the "pride" which is very different to that of the lion handlers. Whilst the handlers act as a dominant force, in some ways like a male lion, the guides are the mothers (whether our male guides like it or not).

The cubs are nervous of the open Bush and require a lot of social bonding and support from the dominant members of the pride in order to help build their confidence. As such, the guides, a constant presence in the lion's life, spend a lot of time building the trust between them and the cubs. Only if a cub trusts the guide will they follow them. This is particularly important when the cubs are very young.

Each set of cubs is assigned one guide who will act as their surrogate mother. That guide will be at every feed, help the cub to learn how to defecate and be there as their eyes open and they start to explore. As the cubs develop that guide will be with them until they are old enough to accept the other pride members and put trust in them as well.

Of course every guide knows that if the cubs that they have raised are to do well they must withdraw from that bond so that by two years old the lions are independent.

ALERT thanks all the guides who have helped in raising the lions and preparing them for a life in a wild environment.

The current guides are:

Antelope Park:

Lovemore, Ed, Simba, Matthew, Depaniel, Roddrick, Kailos, Fanuel, Dustin

Victoria Falls:

Henry, Paul, JB, Anisto





4. A Marathon Effort

We would like to pay special thanks to Lucy Bickerton who, on the 13th April 2008, coinciding with the stage two release at Dollar Block of Athena, Nala & Narnia, ran the London marathon on behalf of ALERT. The funds that she raised will go a long way to helping ALERT realize its dreams. Lucy, you have our sincerest thanks and congratulations for such an incredible achievement.



"Last August I was fortunate to be able to spend a month at Antelope Park where I was able to see the incredible work that is achieved there by ALERT; the highlight was watching the first release of a pride of lions at Dollar Block. When I arrived home in September I decided to enter the Flora London Marathon hoping to get a place and raise some money for ALERT. I was delighted to be accepted and my training began in October, mainly on a treadmill through the winter months and then on the road nearer the event.

The start was very nerve-wracking but I soon began to enjoy the occasion once I got underway. Even in the rain the atmosphere around the course was amazing; people were handing out cakes and bands played on the street. I was extremely relieved to see the finish line and finished in 5 hours 10 minutes.

I am now delighted to be able to hand over my sponsorship money and I hope to one day go back out to Antelope Park to see the progress that is being made there." Lucy Bickerton

If you would like to face a challenge or set up an event on behalf of ALERT, please do let us know. Such endeavours make a huge difference to the lions of Africa.

5. The ALERT Family Grows

This last month Samantha John has joined the ALERT team to provide much needed operational support as well as looking after the day to day finances. Samantha has worked at Antelope Park for two and half years now providing administrative support. Born and raised in Gweru, home of the ALERT program at Antelope Park, she has an accounting and business management education background and will be an invaluable addition to the team.



"It has been amazing to watch ALERT and the lion program grow and make so much progress over the time that I have been at Antelope Park; it is therefore a privilege to be asked to join such a dedicated team and be a part of this program.

There are some personal challenges in the role which I am very much looking forward to taking on, not least of which is getting to know the lions better – at the moment I have to confess they scare me a little, but I am excited about the lion handling training that I am going to receive. The chance to get more involved in the conservation of other species as well as the various community development projects of the program is also a really exciting opportunity.

I hope that I will be able to provide ALERT with the support it needs to achieve all of its goals" Samantha John

6. A Past Voluntourist Returns...

"Three years ago I had the fantastic experience of working with the guides at Antelope Park. My memories are filled with the mischievous daily walks with the 3Ks and 5As which included Kenge, Ashanti & Athena, now in stage two. I was also lucky enough to be there when Phyre was born.

It is these wonderful memories that brought me back to Antelope Park in May 2008 to witness the achievements we read about in the newsletters each month and to see "my" babies all grown up.

On my return I had the privilege to visit the stage two release site at Dollar Block. I was excited to arrive knowing that the four young cubs I once knew were now hiding in the grass somewhere, living a wild life, surviving on their own and bonded into a pride.

We drove past several piles of bones; all that remains of their kills and a huge statement of their success.



It was truly exhilarating finally laying eyes on the six girls relaxing in the grass together. Ashanti stood up to inspect who was disturbing their peace and then settled back down to relax with her pride. She is a striking individual who looks right in her place as the pride leader.

It was particularly good to see Phyre, who I first saw when she was one day old, now out here as a strong and powerful adult in a pride enjoying the independence that ALERT has worked so hard to make possible for them.

Since volunteering it has been great to read in the newsletters about the huge progress that ALERT has made over these past three years, but coming back to witness just how far they have got and to see these young lions fairing so well in a wild environment has certainly been an incredible experience in itself."

Hollie Vercoe

Antelope Park Voluntourist June / July 2005

Hollie (at the back left) in 2005 with fellow voluntourists at Antelope Park



The Dollar Block pride chills out in the morning sun

ALERT voluntourist programs are operated by our partner organization **African Impact**.

For the opportunity to work on a range of conservation, research and community programs please visit www.africanimpact.com for details.



7. A Day in the Life of the Release Pride

As the sun rises on another beautiful African morning we find our pride lying in a pile at the southern water hole where they have been sleeping since yesterday evening.



Ashanti leads the group northwards where a fine mist is still hanging in the morning air. Kenge & Phyre stay at the back and play whilst the others carry on northwards.



After a drink at the northern waterhole there is time for social bonding and mutual grooming.



Phyre stalks through the long grass....



Even during daylight hours the pride is still able to hunt successfully and tucks into a nice piece of wildebeest.

After washing their meal down on a visit to a water hole the girls settle down to rest again to sleep off their busy schedule.



8. The Last Roar

The ALERT supporters' pack is available for download from our web site www.lionalert.org

Thank you to everyone who has already sponsored a cub. Your contribution will go a long way towards our next release.

By sponsoring a lion you will help pay for its food, housing, veterinary bills, micro-chipping, radio collaring, permits, research and its release. You can sponsor an individual lion, or make a big saving for sponsoring multiple lions in a group or a litter, and can pay in either monthly or annual installments.

For your generous donation you will receive:

- ☐ A copy of the ALERT DVD
- ☐ A photo & biography of your lion by email
- ☐ The monthly ALERT newsletter by email
- ☐ Quarterly updates & photos by email for your lion
- ☐ A 5% discount off of any stage one Lion Walk
- ☐ A 5% discount off any African Impact program
- ☐ Priority booking to see the release of your lion.

For your chance to make a difference to these lions simply email alert@africanencounter.org with the following details, stating "Lion Sponsorship" in the subject line:

- ☐ Full name
- ☐ Confirm the email address you would prefer that we use to send you your invoice and updates
- ☐ Your mailing address so that we can send you your copy of the ALERT DVD
- ☐ Whether you would prefer to make monthly or annual payments
- ☐ Whether the sponsorship is for yourself or as a gift. If it is a gift we will also need the recipients mailing and email addresses.

Lion/s	Example	Donation Per Month
Single Lion	Acacia	£10.00
Two Lions	Echo & Etosha	£15.00
Three Lions	Acacia, Amghela & Chengeta	£17.50
Four Lions	Langa, Ltalo, Landela & Lokothula	£20.00
Five Lions	Lungile, Lina, Lisha, Lozi & Luangwa	£22.50

All donations given to ALERT may be used for any of the projects of ALERT, CCWA and ACT at the discretion of the trustees based on their assessment of the various priorities of those projects at the time the donation is received. Any donor wishing for their donation to be used by a specific division of ALERT, CCWA or ACT, or for a specific project undertaken by any of those divisions should write to alert@africanencounter.org specifying the intended division or project for that donation. Should restricted donations be for projects that are fully funded at the time of the donation, ALERT will contact the donor, where practicable to do so, offering alternative projects for the donation to go towards or offer a refund of that donation.

African Lion & Environmental Research Trust is a registered charity in the United Kingdom at 39 St. James's Place, London SW1A 1NS. The Charity Commission number is 1120572. Contact email alert@africanencounter.org

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