

The Concept of World Heritage Species status for Lions



Rembrandt van Rijn, circa 1650, Louvre

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has a program to conserve sites of exceptional cultural or natural importance to the common heritage of humanity. There are about 890 listed sites in the world in 148 states. A World Heritage Site can be anything from a forest, mountain, monument, building, or even a city. Examples are the Taj Mahal in India, the Alhambra in Spain, the historic centers of Florence in Italy and St Petersburg in Russia, Robben Island in South Africa, the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe/Zambia..... the list is long and diversified.

Each World Heritage Site remains the property of the state in which it is located, but UNESCO, with 186 member states, considers each site worthy of preservation by the international community. Listed sites can obtain funds from the World Heritage Fund and/or member states for their conservation – Germany recently provided \$32 million for programs to maintain Tai National Park in Cote D'Ivoire.

To become listed as a World Heritage Site, applicant countries must make a Tentative List of their significant cultural and natural possessions. This is then evaluated by a series of steps before arriving at the World Heritage Committee to make their final decisions. A nominated site must meet at least one of ten selection criteria, ranging from representations of a masterpiece of human creative genius to “containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation” – hence the obvious inclusion of the Virunga National Park and mountain gorillas.

LionAid would like to introduce the concept of World Heritage Species status for lions. The species is readily identified with and interlinked with world culture through symbolism, iconography, imagery, allegory, literature, totems, fables, art, etc. Lions are richly endowed with representation in world culture as a symbol of nobility, bravery, courage, steadfastness, and loyalty. Criterion six of the World Heritage Site qualification list already expresses the cultural status of lions well – “to be directly or

tangibly associated with ...ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance”.

This species could also greatly benefit from the UNESCO umbrella of protection. Lions in Africa are currently in great decline. Fifty years ago there were perhaps 200,000 lions on the continent, but now we have less than 25,000 remaining. Lions are decreasing at a rapid rate due to habitat loss, conflict with humans and livestock, and trophy hunting. Can we as a world society afford to lose our icons because we are not inventive enough to propose novel ways to ensure their survival?

Early history

Lions very likely have had an important impact on human evolution. Lion fossils dating back to about 3.5 million years ago have been found in deposits at Laetoli in Tanzania concurrent with some of the earliest hominids of that time. Even back then lions already were fearsome predators and top carnivores on the African plains where our distant ancestors struggled to survive. Early hominid populations of *Homo erectus* migrating outward from Africa into Europe and Asia found lions already established, calling for sharpened skills and spears to remain safe. A skull of *Panthera leo fossilis* dating back to 550,000 years ago was found in the same deposit as remains of *Homo erectus heidelbergensis*, and the oldest records of that lion subspecies come from Italy, dated at 700,000 bp.

The continued development and proficiency in crafting stone tools in those days was probably as much attributable to increasing hunting ability as defensive ability. Lions must have had a tremendous impact on the shaping of intelligence of our ancestors – survival with such formidable predators was a strong natural selective force.

When early *Homo sapiens* arrived in Europe and central Asia after migrating in the second wave of hominids originating from Africa (the first emigrators were *Homo erectus*), they again encountered already established lions. These were now a bit smaller than *Panthera leo fossilis*, and have been called *Panthera leo spelea*, or cave lions. Not that they particularly lived in caves, but that was where their early fossil remains were found. Cave lions have a fossil record dating back to 370,000 years ago, and became extinct perhaps as recently as 10,000 years ago. Cave lions ranged widely, and their fossils have been found in England, Germany, Spain, Siberia, and Turkistan.



“Cave Lion” Heinrich Harder, c 1920

Lions and early human culture

Not surprisingly, *Homo sapiens* populations in Europe engaged in an early imagery of lions, representing them in cave paintings, ivory carvings (32,000 years old), and clay figurines – some have suggested that such artefacts implied early religious rituals. Our earliest representations of lions come from cave paintings in the Chauvet Cave in France, possibly dating to over 30,000 years ago. This is a truly remarkable depiction of female lions hunting as a pride, and we stand in awe of the amazing talents of the artists, the equivalent quality of rendition not seen until perhaps 1500 CE. The Lascaux Cave in France also has depictions of lions, dating from perhaps 16,000 years ago, seemingly more primitive drawings than those at Chauvet.



The Chauvet Cave Lions, painted 30,000 years ago



Representation of the Lascaux Cave lions, painted 15-16,000 years ago

Homo sapiens populations remaining behind in Africa, the original birthplace of lions, took a bit longer to make enduring representations of the species. This surely does not represent a lack of importance in lions in the African cultures, but rather a reflection of a more highly nomadic human population than those in Europe where nutrition was probably more predictably available in any area on a yearly basis. Art took time and required dedicated talent from those temporarily relieved from the daily chores of gathering sustenance for their clans.

Dating of such African lion representations is also more difficult – the African art usually occurs on open rock faces either as petroglyphs or paintings and not necessarily in caves where occupation dates can be estimated by C14 dates. Nevertheless, lion representations abound.



Bushman lion representation, Twyfelfontein, Namibia, 6000 years old?



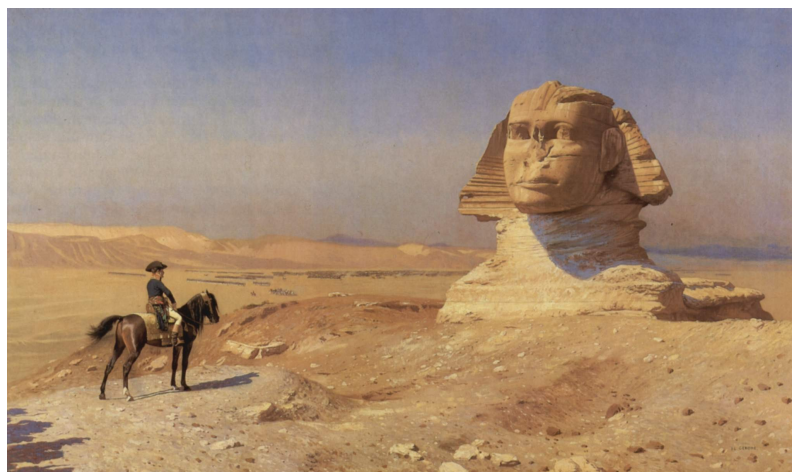
Lion petroglyph, Libya, unknown age, perhaps equivalent to Twyfelfontein.

Egypt

Among other African societies, Egyptian culture had a close association with lions, dating well back to the days of the Pharaohs. Egypt has probably one of the best known representations of a lion – the Sphinx, a statue of monumental proportions built about 2550 BCE by the Pharaoh Khafre, who also might have built the second pyramid at Giza. The Sphinx, with the head of perhaps Khafre on the body of a lion, represented a deity protecting the Pharaohs. Later Pharaohs were also depicted as sphinxes, and Bast, the cat goddess of protection, was originally portrayed as a lion. The Egyptian war goddess Sekhmet was typically illustrated as a woman with the head of a lioness, and during the time of the New Kingdom (about 1400 BCE) the Nubian gods Maahes and Dedun were illustrated as lions – thus associated with war, protection and wealth. It is also proposed that a sacred lioness was responsible for the seasonal floods of the Nile valley, bringing renewed crops and food for the inhabitants.



Sekhmet 1403-1365 BCE



Napoleon and the Sphinx – Jean Gerome, 1868

Ancient Greece and Babylonia

Lion statues guarded the gate of ancient city of Mycenae in Greece, and were greatly represented in Babylon (present Iraq) – a cradle of civilization. The Mycenaean gate lions survive to this day, and in ancient Greece the most celebrated lion in mythology was the Nemean lion, killed by Heracles (Hercules) with his bare hands as one of his 12 tasks assigned by his king. Samson also killed a lion, more about that later. The Nemean lion is thought to be represented as the constellation of Leo and as one of the later 12 signs of the Zodiac. Lions are also richly represented on early Grecian coins.



The lion gate at Mycenae – a major center of Greek civilization. The Mycenaean period in Greek history ranges from 1600 BCE to 1100 BCE



Greek coin from 400 BCE

The Babylonian goddess Ishtar drove a chariot pulled by seven lions, and the lion was regarded as a symbol of kingship in Mesopotamia. The statue of the Lion of Babylon clearly bears an incision in the shape of a saddle perhaps meant for Ishtar, and stands over a human figure, perhaps denoting the demise of an enemy. King Nebuchadnezzar (605-563 BCE) incorporated a lion on the wall of his throne room.



Lion on the wall of King Nebuchadnezzar's throne room



The Lion of Babylon with marks of a saddle for Ishtar

India and the Far East

Lions survive in India to this day, in the small Gir Forest reserve where the lions lead a strange existence with resident villagers and their cattle on the western coast. There are maybe 400 of these Indian lions left, *Panthera leo persica*, the only currently recognized lion subspecies in addition to *Panthera leo leo*, the African lion. The Gir lions are but a small remnant of a population once distributed across central Asia.

Not surprisingly, lions are represented widely in Indian culture. For example, one of the Hindu deities is Narasimha, an avatar of Vishnu described in several ancient texts and one of Hinduism's most popular deities. Narasimha is portrayed as a half man-half lion, and the image worshipped as a deity especially in the south, where he is known as the Great Protector, defending and protecting devotees in times of need.

Narasimha is usually portrayed in the act of killing the tyrant demon-king Hiranyakashipu. Lions are considered sacred animals by Hindus.

Singh is an ancient Vedic name meaning lion, and was originally used by the Rajputs, a military caste. However, in 1699 CE the Sikhs also adopted the name Singh, and thus along with millions of Hindu Rajputs, the name is used by over 20 million Sikhs worldwide.

Lions form the Emblem of India, and the lion is also symbolic for the Sinhalese, Sri Lanka's ethnic majority. The term is derived from the word Sinhala, meaning either the "lion people" or "people with lion blood", and a lion holding a sword is central to the national flag of Sri Lanka.



Narasimha and Hiranyakashipu



Imperial Guard lions at the Forbidden City in Beijing



A Japanese Screen featuring lions – in eastern art, both males and females have manes, presumably as only depictions of male lions were brought from India



The former flag of Tibet featuring snow lions

Lions and Christianity

Lions receive considerable mention in the Bible, and perhaps the best known passage comes from the Book of Daniel, where he is thrown into the lion's den and miraculously survives. Samson killed a lion with his bare hands in Judges 14, and poses a riddle about bees nesting in the carcass to test the faithfulness of Delilah. Mark the Evangelist is symbolized by a winged lion as a symbol of courage and nobility. The lion also symbolizes Christ as king – The Lion of Judah.



Daniel in the lion's den, artist Briton Riviere, 1890 CE



Mark the Evangelist and the winged lion, Lancaster Cathedral



Modern representation of the Lion of Judah

Medieval lions and the Bestiaries

In Europe, Bestiaries, or descriptions of the characteristics of animals in illustrated volumes, became popular in the Middle Ages – especially around the 12th century in England and France. The often fanciful metaphors of the natural history of each animal were accompanied by moral lessons, reflecting the belief that every animal was created by God and thus that all animals had their own special meaning in symbolism of early Christian art and literature.

The earliest Bestiaries compiled “knowledge” of the animals from early naturalists like Aristotle, Herodotus, and Pliny the Elder who had this to say about lions in the 1st century:

“Lions are found in Europe only between the rivers Achelous and Mestus; these lions are stronger than those of Syria and Africa. There are two kinds of lions: a timid kind, with curly manes; and a long-haired kind that is bold. They drink infrequently, and eat only every other day, sometimes fasting for three days after a large meal. If a lion eats too much, it will reach down its throat with its claws and pull out the meat from its stomach. The lion is the only animal that spares people who prostrate themselves before it. When angry it attacks men, not women, and only attacks children when extremely hungry. A lion's greatest strength is in its chest, and its blood is black. When a mother lion is defending her cub from hunters, she looks at the ground so as not to be intimidated by the sight of the hunter's spears. Lions are frightened by turning wheels, empty chariots, crowing cocks, and fire.”



A medieval Bestiary lion frightened by turning wheels and a cockerel, 1300 CE

St Isidore of Seville, writing in the 7th century (Etymologies, Book 12, 2:3-6), among others, creatively expanded on the early texts to include religious messages and moral content in the Bestiaries. Their imaginary stories about these animals, however, were generally accepted as true:

“The lion is the king of all beasts, thus its name in Greek (leo) means "king" in Latin. The kind of lion with a curly mane is weak, but the ones with straight hair are larger and more violent. Their courage is seen in their front and tail; their endurance is in the head; and their strength is in the chest. If they are surrounded by hunters with spears, they look at the ground so as not to become frightened. They are afraid of the sound of wheels but even more so of fire. They sleep with their eyes open. When lions walk, they erase their tracks with their tail so hunters cannot follow them. When they give birth to a cub, it is thought to sleep for three days and nights, until the place where it sleeps is shaken by the roar of the father, which wakes it. Lions can fight with their claws and their teeth even while they are cubs. Lions will only attack a man when they are extremely hungry; otherwise they are so gentle that they cannot be provoked unless they are struck. They spare anyone who prostrates himself and allow captives to return home.”

As the lion was considered the King of Beasts, their description usually comes first in all Bestiaries, and is given the longest treatment of all species by the authors.



The King of the Bestiary, 1450 CE

Lions were supposed to have three “natures”: they would erase their tracks with their tails when hunted, they always slept with their eyes open, and their cubs were born dead (only to be brought back to life on the third day when the male roared over them). Other authors of Bestiaries said the newborns slept for three days until the male roared or the female breathed on them.



Sleeping with eyes open, 1230 CE



Roaring to bring a cub to life after three days, 1270 CE

These three “natures” – all untrue of course – assumed considerable meaning in the Christian allegory of Medieval times. Lions erasing their tracks represented the way Jesus obscured and concealed his divinity except to his trusted followers. Lions sleeping with their eyes open had many meanings – either representing God who never sleeps as he watches over his children, representing Jesus as the Lion of Judah as being always alert and watchful, or representing Jesus physically dead after the crucifixion while spiritually alive in his divine nature. And the cubs being born dead and revived after three days by the male roaring over them represented God waking Jesus after three days in his tomb.



Revived cubs and proud fathers 1200 CE

Lions were also supposed to exemplify moral living – lions would not attack a man lying down, would allow captive men to leave, would not attack women (children occasionally, but only when very hungry!), and were not easily angered. In short, people should reflect these behaviours by being slow to anger and quick to forgiveness.

The illustrated Bestiaries undoubtedly gave rise to many coats of arms prominently figuring lions – Richard the Lionheart assumed a coat of arms with three lions remarkably similar to the current coat of arms of England, and also highly similar to illustrations in the Bestiaries.



The England Coat of Arms and a Bestiary lion

Islam, Turkish, and Mongol associations

All incorporated a symbolic association of lions and royalty in a repeated lion and sun motif. Lions are more highly represented than any other animal.

The Lion and Sun emblem was long associated with Iran, popular in the 12th Century, and became a part of the national flag between 1576 and 1979 when it was replaced by the revolution.



The Lion and Sun

The lion had many historical associations. The symbol became associated with Shia Islam, and the lion and the sun represented the two pillars of society, the state and the Islamic religion. However, during the reign of Fat'h Ali Shah Qajar (1797-1834) the Islamic aspect of the monarchy was de-emphasized. The lion then assumed a symbolic representation of the heroes of Iran ready to protect the country against enemies and as a representation of the monarchy.



A jackal-vizier trying to convince his Persian king to go to war 1429 CE

Statuary

There are truly few international cities in the world that do not display statues of lions. Perhaps the most famous lions in the USA, Patience and Fortitude, guard the entrance to the New York Public Library. Four as yet unnamed but equally famous lions stand guard around Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London. Lion statues abound in Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Rome. Lions guard the headquarters of the HSBC bank in Hong Kong and the entrances to the Forbidden City in Beijing (see above). Stone lions can even be found at Borbudur, a site of Buddhist pilgrimage and

a World Heritage Site dating from the ninth century CE on Java, Indonesia and pre-dating the Javanese conversion to Islam



A lion at Borubudur



Lion in St Peter's Square, Vatican City



Lion guardians at Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, Illinois



The Lion of Lucerne in Switzerland commemorating Swiss Guards who gave their lives protecting Louis XVI during the French Revolution. Mark Twain described this lion as "the most mournful and moving piece of stone in the world."



The Memorial for the 3000 Unknown Confederate Soldiers, Atlanta, Georgia. Note similarities with the Lion of Lucerne.



One of the many lion statues in Paris, France - this one at the Place de la Concorde

Modern day symbolism

If anything, the representation of lions in universal culture has increased greatly in recent times while maintaining all the historical and symbolic attributes of courage, protection, strength, and fortitude. Cities are named after lions, the nation of Singapore is named after lions, Disney makes films about lions, nature programs feature lions, picture books are produced about lions, Aesop's fables about lions are again popular, poetry features lions, their images occur on bank notes, company logos – in short, lions are interwoven with human culture and society, and will continue to be.



Lions on the UK Premiership Football League logo, a pub sign, the Netherlands passport....



....a play advertisement, a beer brand, a film company logo....

SINGAPORE



...the lion symbol of Singapore city, an Indonesian airline, a Japanese baseball team...



... and the lion symbol of Jerusalem, logo of a Dutch bank, and logo of the Detroit Lions, an American Football team

