

## The Man-Eating Lions of Serenje

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Lions are no longer resident over most of the Bangweulu Basin that encompasses Kasanka and Lavushi Manda national parks, as well as the Kafinda and Bangweulu game management areas. This complex lies at the eastern-most point of the Congo (Democratic Republic) Pedicle, within Zambia's north-eastern Central and southern Northern provinces, to the north of the town of Serenje. It is generally surmised that the occasional vagrant lion may enter the area from the Congo, or possibly the Luangwa Valley to the east.

Records from the 1950's and 1960's indicate that lions occurred widely in this area. At that time, especially in the 1950's, game was still abundant but poaching was to increase and numbers dwindled alarmingly. From game department correspondence and reports of visits to the area by officials (*kindly made available by David Lloyd*) it is clear that declines were drastic. Much game was centred on the Mukuku Flats (Kalasa Mukuso) to the north-west of Kasanka National Park. In 1952 518 Buffalo were counted, in 1955 just 98 and despite an extensive search in 1960 none were seen, although tracks of a herd were located. There were also concentrations of Tsessebe, Eland, Roan, Sable and Plains Zebra.

Lions were rarely seen but quite often heard and were considered to be particularly numerous along the Lulimala River. Even in areas where game is once again abundant, Kasanka National Park (especially Puku and Sitatunga) and the south-eastern Bangweulu floodplains around the Chambeshi, Lumbatwa and Lukulu rivers (Black Lechwe, Tsessebe) lions have not immigrated from areas such as the Luangwa Valley or the Congo.

The area has a high human population and poaching remains a serious problem throughout. In 1960-1961, whether due to the reduction of game numbers or unknown factors, man-eating lions terrorized the local people. The area was centred on Chief Kafinda's territory to the north of Serenje and the vicinity of the then Kasanka Game Reserve. On the 3rd April 1961 the headmaster of Mpelembe School, one A. Chintu, wrote the following to the District Commissioner:

"Sir, We are in great danger here<sup>e</sup> sir. Ferocious lions are roaming about near the school compounds during the day and night hours. And already we have quite a number of victims, attacked by lions, in the very surrounding villages. To-day, a young man was killed at a destination lying a few yards from where the school children were working in the day time around 11 A.M., within the school premises. .... Will you please rescue us from these fierce and ferocious wild animals."

On the 15 May 1961 one N.F. Chipepa also of Mpelembe School wrote to the District Commissioner (G.E.K. Walsh),

"I have received two reports of recent attacks on the villagers, by lions, in the vicinity of

Mpelembe and Reuben Schools.”

Apparently Reuben School had closed for two weeks in October 1960 when a woman was killed by a lion near the school playground. Another fatality was recorded for January 1961.

The District Commissioner wrote to the Game Officer at Mpika as follows:

“...arrange a determined attempt to destroy the marauding lions in Chief Kafinda's area, as several people have been attacked including the wife of Reuben the Game Guard.”

On the 10th August 1961 L.D.C. Allen (Mpika Game Officer) noted that he had purchased four ounces of Strychnine for the control of man-eating lions. On the 18th of August the District commissioner contacted the Game Officer again pointing out that the Kafinda lion/s was/were still active to the west of Kasanka to the Congo border area, that is Mwao in Congo and adjacent Kafinda. Local reports indicated that three people were killed in Congo in July. A man was attacked at about the same time in Talanga but he apparently survived .

By September 1961 it seems that the Serenje man-eater/s was <sup>were</sup> no more. There is no clarity as to whether one, or more, lions were involved. According to a report in *Nshila* number 95 (12.9.1961) the Serenje lion was believed to have killed 26 people in villages on both sides of the Zambian (then Northern Rhodesia) / Congo border. Of these 18 were killed and six injured in the Serenje District and at least eight killed within the Congo.

## LION SITUATION IN ZAMBIA:

Submitted by Chris and Tilde Stewart

**L**ion in Zambia- not a happy picture we fear! Obviously our research is still in the early stages but from what we have been able to glean so far the only viable lion populations are located in the Luangwa Valley (especially South and North Luangwa national parks) and to a lesser extent Kafue National Park.

In the north-east (our research base is in the Kasanka National Park) numbers are critically low and they probably have no future here. This is mainly because of fairly high human numbers and the fact that their prey species have been decimated by poachers and subsistence hunters. The last sighting of lion in Kasanka, was of three animals in 1996, and it is felt that they came from the nearby Congo pedacle and not from within Zambia.

We were also told that poisoning of predators was common but we did not have time to establish this. In the south of the country there is a small lion population in the Zambezi National Park but we have no idea of numbers. In the west very little is known of lion status but from the bit we know populations are expected to be on the small side. The major

problem seems to be the lack of wild ungulates outside the parks, causing lions to take to killing livestock.

The wildlife department in Zambia is struggling to get organized and is currently under the management of a consulting firm- mainly from the administrative point of view. Even in parks such as Blue Lagoon and Lochinvar poaching levels are very high, as they are in parts of Kafue. Random poisoning in non-park areas is believed to be quite high but detail is lacking. As our research progresses we hope to get a more complete picture of lion status and other species.

The status of lion in north-eastern Zambia, excluding South and North Luangwa national parks, looks bleak indeed. There are no lions resident in Kasanka National Park, nor it seems in Lavushi Mande NP. The last observation in Kasanka was of three lions in 1994 but they did not stay and it is believed that these and other wanderers come in from the Congolese pedical where human population is very low. Man-eating was prevalent in the area, on both sides of the border, in the mid-1960's and this was dealt with by a zorous poisoning campaign. The man-eating stopped but one can only help wonder how many other carnivores were killed.

Northwards the Meru Wantipa and Sumbu national parks have few if any lions as the game populations have been massively reduced by poaching. Outside parks the situation is grim and game has been decimated. We will be back in the area again from September to January and intend expanding our general vertebrate surveying north and east from Kasanka. It seems that the only hope for lion in eastern Zambia lies in the Luangwa Valley.

So at present we cannot give you an estimate of the size of the lion population but we guess it to be in the low thousands. We will get back to you with more information later.