



# In conversation with Beverly & Dereck Joubert

After 30 years documenting Africa's big cats, photographer and film-makers Beverly and Dereck Joubert believe the next 10 years are critical to saving wild lions from extinction

Interview by Keith Wilson



It is a harrowing sight. But I’m left transfixed and unable to look away. In the African bush at night, the video camera of Dereck Joubert has captured a spectacular battle that few photographers have witnessed. From the safety of his vehicle his wife Beverly trains a powerful spotlight onto the combatants: a pride of lionesses have launched a frenzied attack on a lone female elephant. One of the lions rides the elephant’s back, like a fearless bronco rider on a bucking horse, but there are no spurs here, instead the lion digs her claws deep into the elephant’s thick hide, her jaws clamped vice-like to the back of her neck. Despite her frantic efforts, there is no way this lion is being thrown. Beneath her, the other lions claw at the elephant’s legs, tear ferociously at her flanks and the blood begins to pour. The elephant’s desperate movements and fitful calls add to the horror of this spectacle, but the lions are merciless and unshakeable. Eventually, they immobilise her and bite with greater urgency, pulling at her bulk till her legs weaken. Suddenly, their giant victim is on her knees, the life drained out of her. This gruesome gladiatorial contest

seems all but over. But to the Joubert’s utter amazement, the elephant summons the will to force herself up and with a supreme effort shakes the lions free and escapes into the night. ‘She found her hope from somewhere,’ says Beverly in the film’s voice over, ‘and it has stayed with us as a memory and inspiration forever.’ This extraordinary footage was the first time anyone had filmed lions hunting elephants and it remains one of the highlights of the Joubert’s 30-year-long career as wildlife photographers and film-makers. Their speciality is big cats, particularly lions, and they are in London on a flying visit to promote the release of their new documentary films for National Geographic: *Big Cat Odyssey* and *Living with Big Cats*. We are sitting in a quiet sofa-laden corner of the National Geographic store in London’s Regent Street. It is a setting far removed from this husband-and-wife team’s normal surroundings – home for the Joubert’s is a canvas-topped camp frequently blown asunder by the storms that lash across the Okavango Delta wilderness of northern Botswana. As we speak, it is hundreds

of commuters and not buffalo that herd outside, while beneath us lies a café for thirsty shoppers rather than a waterhole for hippos, elephant and lion. I ask Dereck about the significance of the filming of the attack on the elephant and, like much of the interview, he looks to Beverly to check his facts: ‘It was a time when we were doing quite a bit of night filming, I think it was 1997 and it was an extraordinary thing to witness,’ he says. ‘Watching that elephant, you can see death appear in her eyes, she gives up, it all seems hopeless, but this footage shows that even when it is that desperate, she was still capable of pushing on.’ For the Jouberts, this astonishing fight back by the elephant now represents a lot more than one individual animal’s survival from a predator. It has become symbolic of the plight that now faces Africa’s big cats. The ultimate hunter has become the hunted and for the first time there is a poignancy and urgency not seen in their previous documentaries. The message that comes sharply to the fore is shocking: the African lion, the King of Beasts, is on the brink. Beverly spells out the frightening facts: ‘Fifty years ago, there



were 450,000 wild lions in Africa. Today there are barely 20,000. Leopards have suffered too, 700,000 down to 50,000 in fifty years. At this rate, wild lions will be extinct by 2020.’ It is impossible to gloss over facts as stark as these and the Jouberts now prefer to describe their life-long quest to photograph the big cats as more of an obsession. They spend 280 days a year in the field surrounding their base camp at Duba Plains, a small island rising just high enough above the surrounding marsh of the Okavango to keep their feet dry. From here, whether by customised Toyota Land Cruiser or light aircraft, they have explored the Okavango’s unique environment, photographing, filming and editing award-winning stills and movies that have been seen by more than a billion people worldwide. Dereck is the cameraman, Beverly the sound recordist, as well as the stills photographer, and it is her black & white images from Botswana that hang in the ground floor gallery of the National Geographic store. The couple’s books and DVDs are on prominent display too in the store shop. With all this imagery widely distributed and available to the public it seems strange to hear Dereck express feelings of failure. ‘The numbers don’t lie,’ he utters with quiet authority. ‘For every one of

Beverly’s images adorning these walls or other exhibitions there are many more stuffed heads with glassy eyes staring down at you.’ The stuffed lion heads Dereck refers to are hardly ever of females. Instead, licensed hunters want to take aim at the magnificent maned males. Yet males account for less than a quarter of those 20,000 surviving wild lions. Suddenly, extinction by 2020 does not seem far-fetched. With just 4,500 male lions left in the wild, Dereck deplores the South African government’s

decision to issue licences for the hunting of 600 males each year, more than 550 of which go the United States. Beverly refuses to let these appalling losses undermine their mood. ‘I have to be optimistic,’ she stresses. ‘I have always believed in inspiring people with our images. We immerse ourselves in telling a story, building emotion to that story so that it makes people conscious of what is at stake.’ But she then concedes: ‘If we cannot inspire them with our images and stories then the situation is hopeless.’







A large part of the problem for Africa's lions is an extraordinary lack of public awareness. As Beverly so succinctly puts it in *Big Cat Odyssey*: 'Everyone thinks someone else is looking after them.' She has come to the conclusion that as a species, humans instinctively do not like predators because 'we feel threatened by them, we have to compete with them and they make us scared.' She does not expect this perception to change overnight, but something has to change to prevent Africa being devoid of lions within



the next ten years.

The lion is also in the shadow of its larger, more endangered Asian rival, the tiger, which has been the subject of a high profile but chequered global conservation drive since India initiated Project Tiger in 1973. But, as Dereck points out, there is an ironic yet tragic link connecting the plight of the two big cats: 'The demand for tiger bone in the Far East has created a market for lion bone which is being falsely sold by poachers and smugglers as tiger bone.' The demand for 'mock tiger bone' is the prime threat to lions, he says, followed by retaliatory poaching by farmers, habitat loss and hunting. There is, he says, a huge publicity drive needed in China to raise awareness of the perilous state of lions and tigers. 'If you were to stop the average Chinese in the street he will think there's an abundance of tigers but there isn't and the tiger bone market is now flooded with lion bone.'

It is fascinating to observe this couple working the interview in tandem and I am struck by the similarities with Jonathan and Angela Scott, their contemporaries, who have operated for a similar length of time photographing big cats in Kenya's Masai Mara. Like Dereck, Jonathan takes charge of the video camera for filming *Big Cat Diary*,

while Angela is renowned for her stills photography. Do they have the same battles as the Scotts over custody of the 500mm lens, I ask? The question brings an immediate response of knowing laughter and amusement. 'Not to the same degree!' laughs Dereck. 'Beverly is the photographer and I just leave it to her.' Like the Scotts, 30 years of working together has created a telepathic understanding of each other's working patterns, so for every subject and situation there is a rich selection of complementary stills and video footage to edit. While Beverly may instinctively reach for the 500mm lens or adopt a low angle to emphasise the massive height and bulk of a bull elephant, she doesn't think she has a recognisable style. 'I am not consciously stylistic in the way I photograph because I'm always thinking about stories, not so much about an individual picture.'

One of their most celebrated examples of storytelling is of a female leopard cub they first spotted when only eight days old. Calling her Legadema, the Jouberts proceeded to follow her life, knowing that it could be brutally brief. Fortunately, Legadema survived the next three years into adulthood and the Jouberts had enough material for their documentary *Eyes of the*

*Leopard*. Legadema is now six and a huge close-up poster of her eyes dominates the window to the National Geographic store for Beverly's exhibition. The impact on the passing public is extraordinary. Many stop in their tracks, mesmerised by the leopard's stare, some take pictures, then walk on. How many will still remember what they have seen by the time they get home? How many will be moved to donate to the Big Cats Initiative or the Great Plains Conservation, campaigns started by the Jouberts to conserve the lions and their surviving habitat?

Up to now, the Jouberts' own images of Okavango have reinforced the impression of this region as one of Africa's great wildlife havens. This is not a false impression: Botswana does not have the population pressures of Kenya and, as the world's largest inland river delta, the Okavango is rich in wildlife and the prey needed to sustain the predators at the top of the food chain. But even in this remote corner of Africa that Dereck describes as 'feeling like the edge of the world', climate change is making an impact. 'For the last five years now, the wet season has been longer and stormier,' he says. 'We are getting so much more rain in that part of Africa

and that creates problems for the animals as greater areas are flooded for longer.' But there are other, more sinister signs that the lions of Duba Plains aren't immune from the wider threat of extinction. Recently, the Jouberts have seen sisters in local prides attacking each other's cubs and even eating their own. As Dereck succinctly states in *Big Cat Odyssey*: 'The closer lions get to extinction, the more rapid the journey becomes.' As 2020 draws nearer, it is time to start thinking of an Africa without a single wild lion. ■



» The DVDs *The Jouberts: Big Cat Odyssey* and *The Jouberts: Living with Big Cats* are available now, priced at £14.99 each from National Geographic.

» To find out more about the Jouberts' big cat conservation initiatives and how you can help, visit [www.greatplainsconservation.com](http://www.greatplainsconservation.com) or [www.animals.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.animals.nationalgeographic.com)

