

Cat Conservation

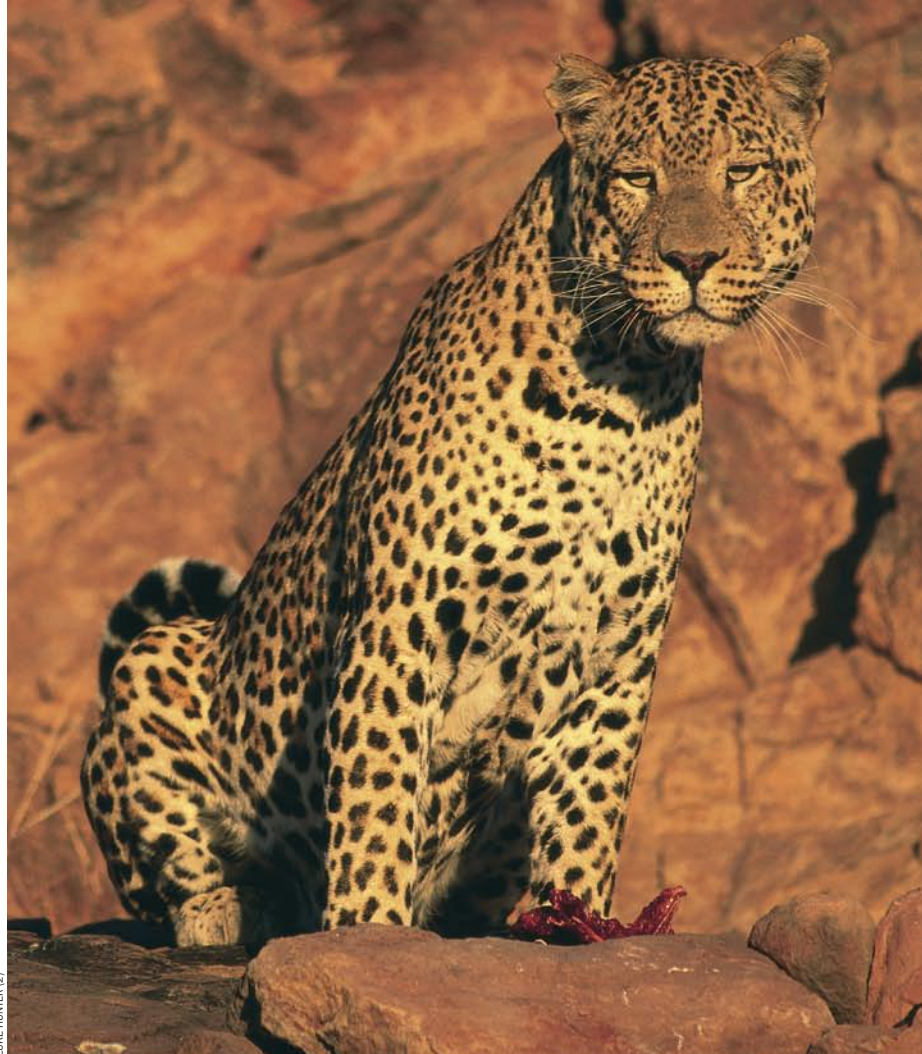
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There is nowhere like Africa for seeing wild cats. A few days in a national park can produce extraordinary sightings of cheetahs, leopards, and lions, which makes it difficult to remember that these cats are in peril. Protected areas safeguard only a small portion of the continent. Beyond these areas, cats are losing ground at alarming rates. In a comprehensive analysis by WCS's Global Carnivore Program, Justina Ray compared the modern distributions of African cats to their historical ranges. Of the three large cats, the adaptable leopard is least affected. However, it is now extinct in more than a third of its historical range. The cheetah has lost 77 percent of its former range, and the lion—rarely considered as requiring conservation attention—has disappeared from almost 83 percent of its original range. These figures are sobering, but also a powerful impetus for action.

Last February, I traveled with Tom Kaplan, a WCS donor and passionate cat enthusiast, and two friends, to northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. There, I head a project assessing the impact of persecution on leopards. Although leopards are resilient, local parks are small and isolated by farms. This fragmented landscape, where leopards are killed in high numbers, is fertile ground for testing methods to foster tolerance for large cats outside protected areas. With leopards as our “tool,” we are gradually developing a model for creating a more carnivore-friendly landscape—one that we hope can be applied to big cats elsewhere in Africa and around the world.

The timing of this trip was excellent. Three of our radio-collared females were due to be re-captured to replace their collars, but our schedule allowed only four days. Arriving at the site, our chances looked bleak. Guy Balme, a graduate student working with WCS, had tracked all three females into restricted areas. We radio-tracked them from a distance until, on the last night, our luck changed. A three-year-old female, Ngoye, crossed briefly into Phinda Game Reserve, a protected area we are permitted to traverse freely. With Tom assisting (and taking hundreds of photographs), we tranquilized and fitted Ngoye with a new collar. She will now be “on the air” for another two years. Ngoye spends most of her time outside protected areas, so her data will be critical in determining how leopards survive beyond the protection of parks.

Tom later told me that though he had seen wild leopards before, his experience with Ngoye brought home the problems faced by wild cats outside reserves. And he responded with



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Above: Despite being adaptable, the leopard has vanished from more than a third of its historical African range. Right: WCS donor Tom Kaplan and graduate student Guy Balme with sedated Ngoye.



an extraordinary gift to support wild cat conservation. With Tom's generosity, WCS has initiated a comprehensive strategy to conserve the lion throughout Africa, and launched the Kaplan Awards, a new grants program supporting young biologists working on cats around the world. The funds are supporting students working on snow leopards in Kyrgyzstan, lions in Uganda and Tanzania, and jaguars in Argentina, Colombia, and Panama. Tom has committed to further funding for wild cats, including very significant ongoing support for building our lion conservation program. As he noted over breakfast the morning after we caught Ngoye, there are no quick fixes for conserving wild cats. With enduring support such as his, and that of other Members and donors, I think they have a chance.