

SECTION 4

Well, most people think that lions only come from Africa. And you would be forgiven for thinking this, because in fact most lions do come from Africa. But this hasn't always been the case. If we go back ten thousand years we would find that there were lions roaming vast sections of the globe. But now, unfortunately, only very small sections of the lions' former habitat remain.

My particular interest is Asiatic lions, which are a sub-species of African lions. It's almost a hundred thousand years since the Asiatic lions split off and developed as a sub-species. Q31

At one time the Asiatic lion was living as far west as Greece and they were found from there, in a band that spread east through various countries of the Middle East, all the way to India. In museums, you can now see Greek coins that have clear images of the Asiatic lion on them. Q32
Most of them are dated at around 500 B.C. However, Europe saw its last Asiatic lion roaming free two thousand years ago. Q33
Over the next nineteen hundred years the numbers of Asiatic lions in the other areas declined steadily, but it was only in the nineteenth century that they disappeared from everywhere but India.

So, how can you tell an Asiatic lion from an African lion, with which you're probably more familiar? Well, in general, Asiatic lions are not as big as African lions. The colour is more or less the same, but the appearance of the mane is different – that's the hair around the lion's face and neck. The Asiatic lion's mane is noticeably shorter than the African lion's. Asiatic lions also have a long fold of skin on their undersides, whereas not many African lions have this. Q34

Well, I'd like to talk to you now about the Gir Sanctuary in India. That's where I've just come back from. The sanctuary was established specifically to protect the Asiatic lion. It's 1,450 square kilometres in area and most of it is forest. There are now around three hundred Asiatic lions in India and almost all of them are in this sanctuary. Q35

But despite living in a sanctuary, which makes them safe from hunters, they still face a number of problems that threaten their survival. One of these is the ever-present danger of disease. This is what killed more than a third of Africa's Serengeti lions in 1994, and people are fearful that something similar could happen in the Gir Sanctuary and kill off many of the Asiatic lions there. Q36

India's lions are particularly vulnerable because they have a limited gene pool. The reason for this is interesting – it's because all of them are descended from a few dozen lions that were saved by a prince who took a particular interest in them. He was very wealthy, and he managed to protect them – otherwise they'd probably have died out completely. Q37

When you see the Asiatic lion in India, what you sense is enormous vitality. They're very impressive beasts and you would never guess that they had this vulnerability when you look at them.

The Asiatic lions don't have the Gir Sanctuary to themselves, I should add. They actually share it with about two thousand farmers. A significant proportion of the lions' diet is made up of the livestock of these farmers – goats, chickens and so on – as much as a third, in fact. And they've even been known to attack humans, especially in times of drought. Q38 Q39

One final piece of interesting information – in ancient India one of the greatest tests of leadership for a man was to fight a lion. Now it seems, in modern India it will be a great test to see if the lion can be saved. I'm sure this is something that all of you will share concern for too. Q40