Lion (*Panthera leo*)

**Conservation Status:** Vulnerable

Lions are iconic African large cats, built to prey on animals many times their size. Their coat is a smooth tawny color with whitish underparts. They have a muscular build, heavy muzzle, strong jaws, large paws, and a long tail that ends in a black tassel. They are sexually dimorphic, with males being larger in size and having full manes that vary in color from blond to black. Cubs have spots that tend to fade by 3 months of age.

**Fun Facts:**

1. Male lions are unique among the cat species for their thick mane.
2. Lions are the only truly social cats.
3. It is believed that lions copulate 3,000 times for every cub that survives over one year.

**Habitat**

Lions have a broad habitat tolerance; they are able to thrive in plains or savanna habitats that have a sufficient prey base and available cover present. They are absent from tropical rainforests and the interior of the Sahara desert but can thrive in most other habitats found throughout Africa.

**Diet**

Anything from tortoises to giraffes; will hunt what they grew up eating, and different prides specialize in or prefer different prey types. Can take down prey as large as buffalo, rhinos, hippos, and giraffes by hunting cooperatively.

**Predators**

Adult lions have no natural predators, except humans. Lion cubs, however, if left alone, are vulnerable to other large predators.

**Behavior**

Lions are social animals that live in groups called prides. Prides can be as small as three or as big as 40 animals. Generally, the females in the pride are related—mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and sisters. Prides hunt, raise young, and defend their territory together. Pride members perform a greeting ritual upon meeting; they rub their heads and sides together, with their tails raised high, while making friendly vocal noises. The females in the pride generally do most of the hunting, going out in groups of two or three to kill their prey. Males only join after successful kills. Females will generally stay in the pride they are born into for life, while adolescent males are forced to depart when they become sexually mature and are seen as rivals. After being kicked out, adolescent males will typically spend a few years as nomads until they mature and take over a pride. Males will lead a pride until challenged and defeated.

**Breeding**

After a 3.5-month gestation period, a lion will typically give birth to a litter of one to four (up to six) cubs. Females within the same pride tend to reproduce in synchrony, cross-suckling their offspring and engaging in cooperative rearing of the young.

**Size**

Length: 2.4-3.3 m

Height: 1.1-1.2 m

**Weight:** 260 kg

**Life Span:** 10-14 years in the wild; up to 20 years in captivity

**Gestation Period:** 3.5 months

**Average number of offspring:** 1-6