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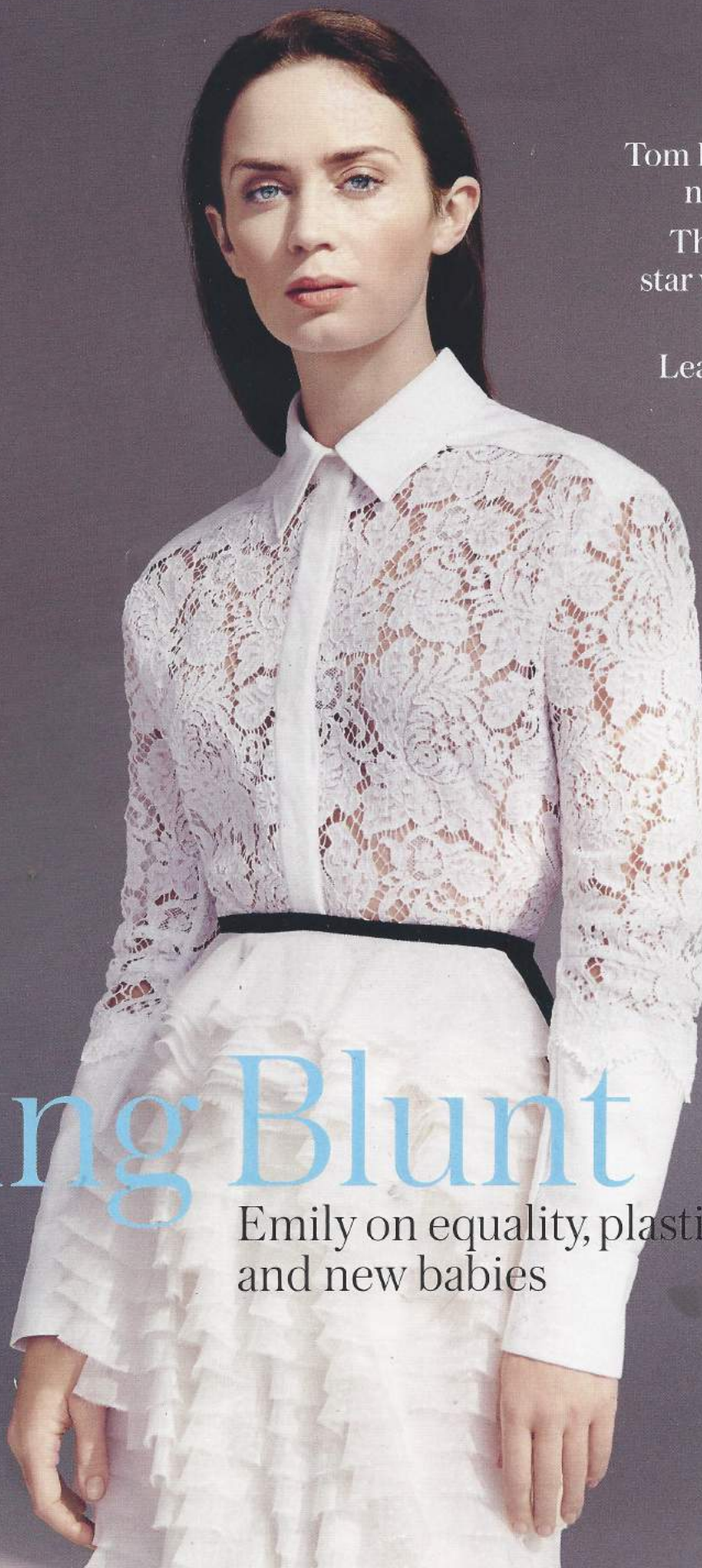
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THE PRIDE

One hundred years ago there were only 20 lions left in Asia. But thanks to the efforts of a deeply eccentric nobleman, the villagers of Gujarat, Narendra Modi and London Zoo, all that has changed. Martin Fletcher reports on a stunning conservation success story



Idrove with a guide one recent afternoon along the sandy tracks of the Gir national park and wildlife sanctuary, a 545-square-mile haven of peace and beauty in a remote corner of south-western Gujarat seven hours by car from the frenetic metropolis of Ahmedabad.

We passed through deciduous forest carpeted in the crisp, plate-sized leaves of teak trees—a landscape of pale browns and yellows stretched out beneath the brilliant-blue sky of an Indian winter. We saw herds of spotted deer grazing on the parched grass, langur monkeys cavorting in the dappled sunlight, and sambar and nilgai (hugely antelope also

known as blue bulls). We spotted flocks of green parakeets and strutting peacocks. Then we found what we had come to see. Lying beside a watering hole, dozing in the gentle afternoon warmth, was a pride of lions: two lionesses and five offspring.

The mothers raised their great heads to regard us with regal indifference as we gazed in awe. These are the only wild lions found anywhere outside Africa. And while their African counterparts are being so decimated by hunters, poachers and habitat destruction that barely 25,000 remain, here they are making a miraculous recovery from virtual extinction.

Asiatic lions once roamed across the Middle East

and northern India, from the Mediterranean to the Bay of Bengal. By the early 20th century they had been hunted so intensively that scarcely 20 remained—all in this forest. Today there are more than 520. That is too many for Gir, so they range across 8,000 square miles of hills and farmland in south-western Gujarat. In 2005 they became the first carnivores to be officially downgraded from critically endangered to endangered.

The lions owe their survival to a long-forgotten Indian prince, the assiduous efforts of the Gujarat Forest Department (GFD), and the astonishing support of local villagers. The villagers do not fear the lions. They do not mind them killing their cattle.

OF INDIA



They do not blame them when they kill humans. They are intensely proud of the lions, feel honoured by their presence and mourn them when they die.

'It's one of the greatest conservation success stories in the world,' says Gitanjali Bhattacharya, regional programme manager for the Zoological Society of London, which assists the GFD and opened a £5 million Asiatic lion exhibit at London Zoo yesterday by way of celebration. 'Not only has the lions' future been secured, but we're now entering a second phase where the lion is beginning to regain some of its old territories. Unlike in Africa, where too many villagers still see lions, elephants, rhinos and other endangered species as competitors for scarce

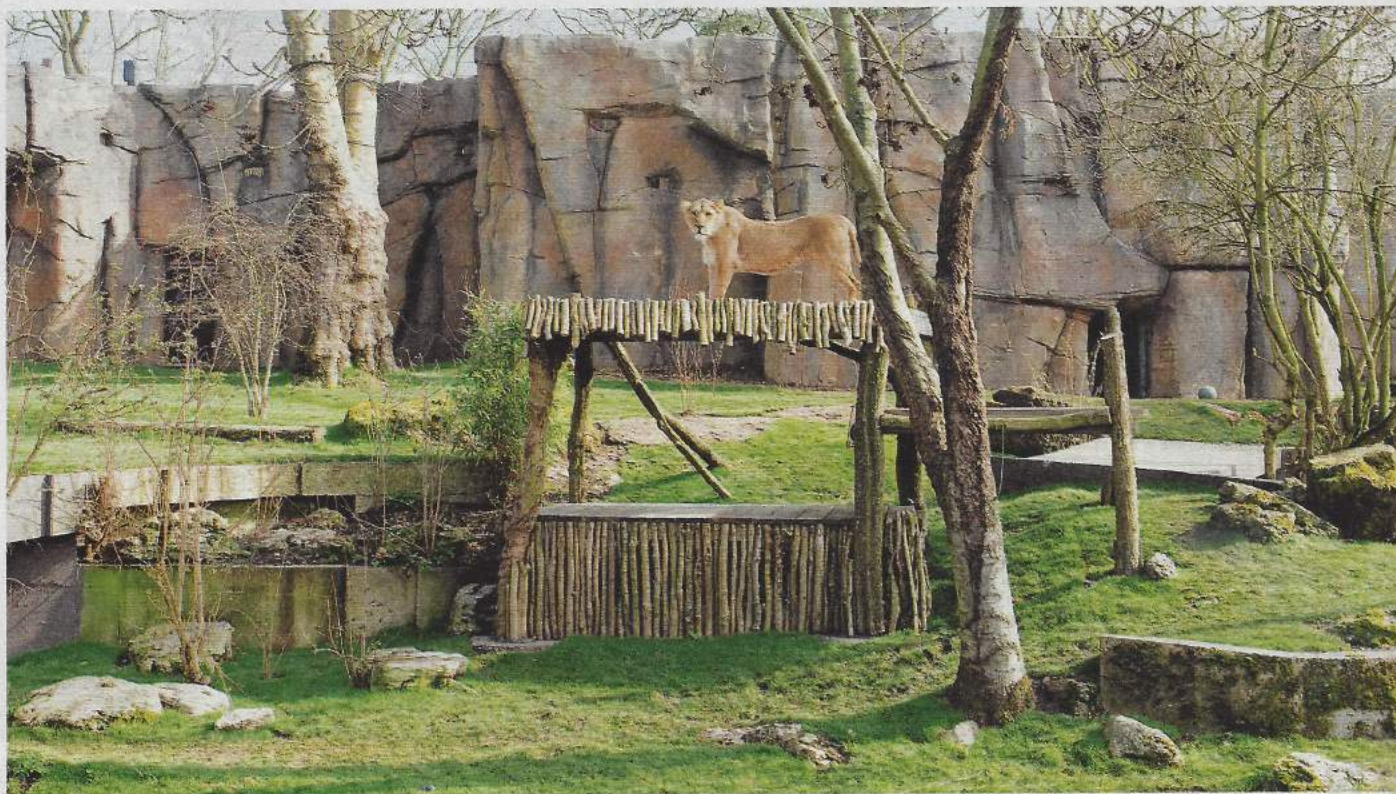
The villagers do not fear the lions. They do not mind them killing their cattle. They do not blame them when they kill humans. They are intensely proud of them

Lionesses and cubs drinking from a pool topped up by forest staff, in Gir Forest National Park, Gujarat

resources, here people revere and protect the lions in their midst.'

The Asiatic lion diverged from its African counterpart 100,000 years ago. It is slightly smaller, with a more modest mane, and sports a distinctive fold of skin along its belly. During the 19th century it gradually disappeared from Mesopotamia and Syria, Iran and Palestine, Arabia and Balochistan. By the century's end British imperialists and Indian maharajas had shot all India's remaining lions save for a handful in Gir, part of the princely state of Junagarh.

Happily, the Nawab of Junagarh, Saheb Sir Muhammad Rasul Khanji II, realised that he was the custodian of Asia's last lions, not least because he



struggled to find one for the Duke of Clarence to shoot in 1890. He declared Gir a protected area.

The nawab was succeeded in 1911 by his son, Sir Muhammad Mahabat Khanji III, who adored animals. He apparently owned 300 dogs, each with its own room and servant. He invited Lord Irwin, the viceroy, to the wedding of his favourite, Roshanara, to Bobby, a golden retriever belonging to a neighbouring prince. The bejewelled 'bride' was carried to the three-day ceremony in a silver palanquin, and the 'groom' was greeted at Junagarh railway station by a guard of honour and 250 brocaded dogs.

The younger nawab banned all shooting at Gir, thereby ensuring the lions' survival, but was less fortunate himself. Being a Muslim, he tried to lead Junagarh into the new state of Pakistan following India's partition in 1947. His Hindu subjects rebelled. The nawab fled to Karachi and never returned. He died in 1959 – of rabies.

The Gir sanctuary was formally established in 1965, when it had roughly 170 lions, and that number has steadily increased. The GFD has invested in keeping the lions both safe and wild. It has imposed a 20km-per-hour speed limit on trains using a line that passes through the sanctuary after several lions were killed. Some 300 rangers track the lions daily – many of them women dubbed 'queens of the forest', most armed only with bamboo sticks called lathis.

'Protecting the lions is my passion,' says one of those women, Madhu Karangia, who rides around on a motorbike. 'It's a beautiful animal,' says another, Rasila Vadher, head of one of three rescue teams that are on standby for calls from rangers or villagers about sick or injured lions.

In a year those teams bring roughly 100 lions to a state-of-the-art treatment centre, most injured in

The nawab owned 300 dogs. He invited Lord Irwin, the viceroy, to the wedding of his favourite, Roshanara, to Bobby, a golden retriever belonging to a prince

Above London Zoo's new enclosure for its Land of the Lions exhibit. **Below** Asiatic lions in their native habitat in Gir



fights with other lions. Occasionally Vadher or her colleagues are lowered into wells in steel cages to tranquillise then extract lions or leopards that have fallen in. All are returned to the wild, unless they have become man-eaters.

In the 1970s the GFD resettled thousands of traditional cattle herders called Maldharis who lived in the sanctuary, a move that led to a substantial increase in the boar, sambar, chital and nilgai on which lions prey. Several hundred Maldharis remain in rudimentary settlements in the sanctuary, selling milk and cow dung, but they live harmoniously with the lions, respecting their territory. Occasionally a lion kills a cow, but usually a weak one, and the Maldharis regard that as its due.

'The lions are like gods. They need food,' Karim, 70, says as she sits with her barefooted grandchildren on a charpoy (a kind of light bedstead) outside her mud-walled hut. She sees lions most days, she says. Her husband has twice been attacked by lions, both times when he was trying to save cattle. But she is not afraid of them. She is afraid only of the forest's many leopards, one of which had recently attacked her 10-year-old grandson, Ravi. He still bears the scars on his neck and cheek.

'Leopards don't have rules,' adds my guide, Dhiraj Dave, a forester who – like everyone else in Gir – has his own favourite lion story. The lions apparently do have rules, and keep to them. He fell asleep near the forest one evening and woke to find a lioness standing across his legs and looking down at him. When his colleagues arrived she walked calmly away.

Only 90 tourists a day are allowed into the reserve, but money is no object. Narendra Modi, Gujarat's former chief minister and now India's prime minister, ensured the GFD had all the resources it needed.

Some 300 rangers now track the lions daily – many of them women dubbed ‘queens of the forest’, most armed merely with bamboo sticks called lathis

Right Rasila Vadher of the Gujarat Forest Department, her rescue team, and the cage in which they are lowered into wells to rescue lions and leopards; Karim, a member of the Maldhari (Gujarati cattle herders), with her grandchild



especially after poachers from Madhya Pradesh killed eight lions in a one-off incident in 2007.

The growing number of lions has generated new challenges. They have begun leaving the sanctuary for lands where their forebears roamed two centuries ago. Roughly 150 now live beyond its boundaries in areas close to villages, farms and temples. They have been spotted on beaches 100 miles away.

The GFD seeks to protect those lions too, and has created four satellite sanctuaries. It has covered thousands of open wells into which lions used to fall. It is erecting fences along many miles of railway line. But it is also fortunate in having a local population that regards the lions as a divine blessing.

The Gujaratis of Saurashtra, as the region flanked by the gulfs of Kutch and Khambhat is known, are

vegetarian, so hunt neither the lions nor the animals they eat. They are extremely devout, and the lion occupies a special place in the Hindu pantheon of living creatures – it is the animal on which the great goddess Durga chooses to ride. Outside Junagarh, carved on a granite boulder in the third century BC, the edicts of the emperor Ashoka prohibit the slaughter of animals.

On a more practical level, the farmers welcome the lions because they scare away the nilgai, boars and deer that destroy their crops. ‘It’s a place where the big cat and local people completely understand each other,’ says Chavinath Pandey, Gujarat’s chief wildlife warden until his retirement last year.

The villagers do not appear to mind that the lions kill hundreds of cows each year. ‘It’s their right.

This is the lions’ land,’ says Bhupat Babu Bhuvva, a farmer in Dhanej village, which loses three or four cows a month. The GFD pays the farmers about 15,000 rupees (£156) a cow as compensation, but that is a fraction of what the beast is worth. Some villagers do not even claim the money, though they are so poor that many still use bullock and camel carts instead of trucks or tractors.

Occasionally the lions kill humans too – one or two a year on average. At dawn on December 26 the young son of migrant sugar-cane labourers was killed as he relieved himself in long grass near his hut. Later that same day, a woman was killed by a lion as she foraged in the forest.

But GFD officials insist that humans are only attacked when they approach lions that are mating,



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'The lions are like gods.
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The Queen officially opened
the new enclosure
for London Zoo's Land of the Lions
earlier this month



hunting or have cubs, or ignore the lions' roar, raised tail, pawing and other warning signals. 'It's always a case of the victims not reading the lion's behaviour,' says Vadher. 'Only when humans make mistakes do they get attacked.'

The villagers agree. Two years ago some drunken youths approached a lioness who had given birth to two cubs in a field near Rajula village. They tried to take photos on their mobiles. She attacked, killing one boy and injuring another. Pandey went there directly and met a female relative of the victims. 'She said the lioness was not at fault. Our children were at fault,' he recalls. 'The villagers didn't want the lioness taken away. I was amazed, and moved.'

When lions are killed the villagers grieve. After 10 drowned in flash floods last June, 400 people

attended a meeting in the village of Krankach, prayed before garlanded photos of the dead animals, and pledged never to let such a disaster happen again. And after the eight lions were poached in 2007, thousands of people staged demonstrations and hunted for the perpetrators.

The GFD is now trying to prepare villagers much further from the sanctuary for the arrival of lions in their vicinity. It wants to pre-empt potential conflicts by teaching them how to live with the lions and protect their cattle. Pandey sees no reason why the lions' territory should not continue to expand. There is enough prey, enough water, enough shelter, he says. In 20 years 'you might find lions around Ahmedabad' - fully 200 miles from Gir.

The spread of Asiatic lions to other Indian states

appears less likely. Conservationists fear the population is vulnerable to natural disasters like forest fires because it is so confined, or to disease because its genetic base is so narrow. India's Supreme Court has ruled that some should be relocated to a reserve in Madhya Pradesh as a precaution, but that ruling has been opposed by everyone from Modi, when he was chief minister, down to the lowliest villager.

GFD officials argue that the proposed site is entirely unsuitable. They insist a new sanctuary being established at Barda, another former princely estate 60 miles from Gir, will reduce the risks. They say they are increasing the lions' genetic diversity and creating a back-up population through a breeding centre at Junagarh's Sakkarbaug zoo. The centre will be sending two five-year-old lions - Amal and Toral - to join four others at the London Zoo exhibit, Land of the Lions, where visitors can view those majestic animals close up through very fine wires and in settings modelled on those in Gir.

Another unspoken reason why Gujarat will not let its lions go without a fight, of course, is its justifiable pride in saving them from extinction and presiding over one of the few successes in the bloody and battered field of modern conservation. The slogan under a large photograph of Gir lions hanging on a wall at the GFD's headquarters says it all: 'Gujarat's Pride, World's Envy!'

Land of the Lions opened at London Zoo yesterday (zsl.org). Ampersand Travel (020-7819 9770, ampersandtravel.com) offers seven-night wildlife tours to Gujarat including all flights and privately guided safaris in Gir from £3,235 per person

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