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AGE MATTERS

It's more important than ever that hunters who pursue the King of Beasts do it right.



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Some African countries are starting to implement laws that mandate that hunters target only lions six years old or older, and leave the younger ones to make more lions. Even in places where it's not the law, this is the right thing to do.

The definition of a “trophy” varies with every hunter, and even changes through a hunter’s lifetime. These days, the term has mostly been co-opted by those obsessed with record books. But an old animal, one that has lived long enough to pass on its genes and to become extremely wily and challenging to hunt, is my definition of a true trophy.

Age-based trophy selection is getting more and more attention lately because in some cases, taking only older animals from a population is also the most sustainable way to hunt. This is especially true with an animal that has long been considered the top hunting trophy in the world: the African lion.

Today, the opportunity to hunt lions is teetering on the brink. In many parts of Africa, wild lion populations are not what they once were, and anti-hunting forces have lined up to blame hunters. For the most part, that is ridiculous—lions are under threat from number of factors, including loss of habitat and widespread extermination by locals who object to lions killing their livestock.

Regulated safari hunting is, overall, a huge plus for the African lion. The economic advantage created by licensed, controlled lion hunting is one of the few things that can actually create an incentive for people in lion country to keep the big cats around.

That said, irresponsible hunting practices *can* contribute to the problem. A lion hunt is very expensive these days, and there is a lot of pressure on PHs and their clients to get a lion—sometimes *any* lion, even if it’s a young one. Taking a young lion that hasn’t bred yet, or one that is right at breeding age, can have a detrimental effect on lion populations. That’s because when a pride male is killed, the new lion taking over the pride will kill all of his predecessor’s cubs so the females will come back into estrous sooner. Lions that don’t get to grow up are lions that can’t replenish and strengthen the population by passing on their genes.

The solution, according to biologists: Hunters should take only lions that are six years old or older. By then, the big cats are past their prime breeding years, and removing these lions has little effect on the overall population. Experienced hunters and PHs can tell old lions from young ones using the techniques that lion expert Paula White shares with us in “How Old is Your Trophy Lion?” on page 102.

Support for age minimums for trophy lions is widespread and growing. Tanzania recently passed new regulations stating that lions taken there must be at least six years old. In the Niassa area of Mozambique, a system is in place that assigns lions to categories: four years old or less, between four and six, and six or older. The system assigns points to each trophy based on its category; if two or more lions under six are taken in one year, operators lose part of their quota. If all trophies are six or older, the quota is increased. This provides a strong incentive to hunting outfitters to ensure they and their clients do the right thing.

So if you’re lucky enough to have the chance to hunt a lion, hold out for one that has lived a long life in the wild. He’ll look a lot better in your trophy room, and more important, your decision will help ensure that the roars of African lions will continue to echo across the savannas for decades to come. 