

Lions for Lions

by John R. Platt

In northwestern India, in the state of Gujarat, lies one of the most beautiful and ecologically important sites in Asia: the 550-square-mile Gir Forest National Park.

"You must come to Gir one day. I am sure you will fall in love with it," says Kishore Kotecha, a member of the Rajkot Midtown Lions Club.

Kotecha has been visiting the Gir forest for more than 15 years, not only to see its trees, but to witness—and help—a rare animal that lives nowhere else: Asiatic lions.

One of the world's six wild lion subspecies (the rest are all in Africa), Asiatic lions (scientific name *Panthera leo persica*) once lived throughout India, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. But poaching, habitat destruction and polluted water took a devastating toll on their population. The subspecies was almost extinct at the beginning of the 20th century, right around the time that Melvin Jones was choosing the name of the organization they embody.

Today, despite more than 100 years of legal protection, Asiatic lions aren't much better off. Only 411 of these critically endangered animals live within the borders of the Gir forest. They are now often called "Gir lions" because they live nowhere else.

The Gir lions still face many threats, including poaching and electrocution on crudely built electric fences used by local



A female lion lies next to her cub in Gir Forest.

Photos by Kishore Kotecha

villagers. But those threats pale in comparison to the danger posed by the region's tens of thousands of manmade wells.

These "open wells" are not much more than large pits, says Kotecha. Dug by farmers as a source of water for irrigation or their livestock, the open wells are 60 to 100 feet deep and are often surrounded by vegeta-

tion, which hides them from view. Lions chasing their prey frequently find these wells in their paths, fall in and either drown or suffer crippling injuries.

Between 2001 and 2008, 28 Gir lions were killed after falling in these open wells, more than twice the number that died from all other threats combined. With so few lions in Gir to begin with, these deaths put the entire species at risk.

But Kotecha had an idea. Five years ago, he founded the Wildlife Conservation Trust of India (www.asiaticlion.org), an organization devoted to protecting the lions. The goal: build walls around the wells to protect the lions. Each life-saving barricade—made from economical, earthquake-resistant materials—would cost just \$250. India's forest department agreed to pay \$100 toward that cost, but funding the remaining amount was not easy.

In June 2008, Kotecha approached Mona Sheth, who was just beginning her term as governor of District 323 J. Even though she had lived in the region for many years, Sheth said she was unaware of the plight of the Gir lions. "One photograph of a lion which was hurt in a well and later turned blind moved me," she says. "It was painful to think that the king of jungle would live helplessly for the rest of his life. I decided I would take the cause."

She dubbed the project "Lions for Lions."

"I thought this was the right way of paying royalty to the name 'Lions,' which we use before our names, and which has given us pride and a name in society," she says.

Sheth took the message of the Gir lions throughout the region, giving presentations, distributing pamphlets and interacting with local members, business leaders and other citizens.

The efforts paid off. "Lions for Lions" received enough donations from local Lions to barricade 350 wells. Corporate donations paid for another 100.

Although the Lions did not continue the program after her term ended, Sheth looks at it as the "landmark proj-

ect" of her tenure. "What satisfied me the most was that there has been a drastic decrease in the number of deaths due to open wells in Gir forest during the past year." In fact, just one lion died in a well in all of 2010.

The problem hasn't been completely solved. With their population now growing, lions are starting to drift out of their previous habitat, putting them into risky contact with the more than 9,000 additional wells in the surrounding area. Kotecha is still working to barricade those wells, which he says could take several years.

Meanwhile, wells aren't the only problem Gir lions face. Because they live in only one location, the species is susceptible to being wiped out by fire or another natural disaster. And since their gene pool is quite small, they have less immunity to disease than their African cousins. The Indian government has proposed relocating some lions to a second location to increase their long-term chances of survival, although that could be years away.

But for now, Asia's last lions are safer, thanks to the hard work and dedication of some human Lions who stood up for them.

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A Gir lion roars.

