



By Emmanuel Koro
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Los Angeles residents grieved the death of a wild mountain lion in late December. The cougar, as it is properly known, was put down by veterinarians when it could no longer stalk food or defend its territory.

P-22, the name assigned by Fish and Wild authorities (P for Puma and 22 for its tracking number in their registry), had roamed a vast park in the middle of the highly populated Hollywood Hills for more than 17 years.

He got to this urban island above the movie capital by somehow safely crossing two different highly travelled, high speed freeways in search for a mate. Sadly for all who followed P-22's story, he never found one.

Soon after his death, many animal-lovers questioned the need to euthanise him, reflecting the tendency in Western cultures to treat all animals as the equivalent of human beings in need of compassionate and sensitive end-of-life care.

Some of the outpouring of grief was sparked by a Los Angeles Times eulogy written by Ms Beth Pratt, a local animal rights advocate:

"Dear Friends, I can't finish this sentence without crying ... Biologists and veterinarians ... announced today they have made the difficult decision to end Puma-22's suffering [from internal damage caused most likely in a collision with a car] and help him transition peacefully to the next place. I hope his future is filled with endless forests without a car or road in sight and where deer are plentiful, and I hope he finally finds the mate that his island existence denied him his entire life."

This excerpt from Ms Pratt's letter captures how most Westerners romanticise the life of wild animals and have such difficulty understanding the reality of living among wild animals in Africa.

But this type of romanticism can also enhance the fundraising capability of animal rights groups. The reality for wild animals across the globe is vastly different. The paradise Ms Pratt imagines does not exist.

Simply put, wild animals do not easily find abundant food and a compliant mate anywhere in the world despite the hopes of starry-eyed dreamers in the West; what these animals achieve is by means of their constant awareness of the dangers that lurk about them and their overpowering desire to survive. Africans understand this but have yet to convincingly communicate this reality to Westerners.

There is no equivalent to the Disney fantasy world in Africa. The crushing defeats by Western interests of Southern Africa proposals to benefit from wildlife is proof enough that the goal of wildlife unfettered by any human interference is an important fundraising theme for the animals rights groups.



Just listen to the apology Ms Pratt offers in her eulogy for P-22 moments before the life-ending drugs were administered: "I sat near him, looking into his eyes for a few minutes, and told him he was a good boy. I told him how much I loved him. How much the world loved him. And I told him I was so sorry that we did not make the world a safer place for him. I apologised that despite all I and others who cared for him did, we failed him."

Botswana Chieftainess Rebecca Banika, whose Pandamantega Community benefits from hunting wildlife that moves out of Chobe National Park into her community, dismissed the romanticism of Western animal rights advocates: "They are demon-possessed because they are inhumane and don't have any feelings for mankind."

"Early this year a 65-year-old woman was attacked and injured by a lion while weeding her crops and became visually impaired. This made her unable to fend for herself and to care for a mentally-challenged son and a 90-year-old mother."

There was no known mention of this incident in the Western media, yet this vicious assault represents just one of many cases of wildlife attacks that African communities co-existing with wildlife experience regularly.

A member of the Chobe-Caprivi Conservancies Committee, Mr Nchunga-Nchunga, blasted the grief-stricken Los Angeles residents for acting "as if they have lost a president." The Executive Director of Botswana's Ngamiland Council of Non-governmental NGOs, Mr Siyoka Simasiku said, "I find it hypocritical to put animals at the same level as people. I think the world has gone crazy now."

A Zimbabwean resident of the wildlife-rich Masoka Community — where an international hunting revenue-built-school is producing medical doctors, nurses, teachers, technicians and accountants, Mr Ishmael Chaukura said that every year hundreds of people living with wildlife are killed or injured by wild animals, but the "Western countries and animal rights groups are silent about it."

Elsewhere in South Africa, Ms Esther Netshihvongeni, Chairperson of the African Community Conservationists, said that "in Africa we respect our animals as animals, but not as human beings." The Western animal rights groups "are driven by greed and a colonialist mission. Africans have different clan names associated with wildlife such as elephant, eland, lion, buffalo, etc. These clan names are meant to remind us to manage, control and use these animals sustainably."

Weakened by his poor health, P-22 killed a Chihuahua (a very small, large-eyed, large-eared dog native to Mexico), attacked three other dogs and had "several near-miss encounters with people walking" in Hollywood's residential neighbourhoods." The animal rights groups thought the problem could be solved if the animal were brought back to full health. But his injuries and age proved beyond current medical capabilities.

Mr Harris has long thought about the reason Westerners want to treat all animals as equal to humans. "Western countries transitioned from rural to urban life in just a few generations as industrialisation enabled rapid growth," he said. "Kids on farms had a realistic attitude towards their animals as sources of life and livelihoods to them and their families."



“But kids living in apartments in cities have no such connection to the animals that provide the food they eat or the money they need. The only animals most urban kids know are the pets they live with. They are cared for as members of the family, not as sources of food and sustenance.”

Mr Harris notes that wild animals have never been free of human attention. “We have always wanted them for their food, their medicinal benefits, their skins, and their parts,” he said. “But we have also always needed to protect ourselves against their predatory attention to our crops and domesticated animals. It is the eternal struggle of predator versus prey.

“Unfortunately, as human populations grew faster than the animal numbers, our needs began to decimate their vast numbers. But to our credit, we realised the folly of destroying species through human excesses and greed. As a result, we moved to change human behaviour through organisations and rules that would protect them.

“But the pendulum has now swung too sharply away from the balance that both humans and animals need to successfully co-exist. Like most good things, unscrupulous forces have found ways to take advantage of the situation. The desire to protect wild animals has been corrupted by those [animal rights groups] who have made their personal benefit rather than the community's benefit or the animal's benefit, the objective to achieve.

“That is what CITES [the UN's Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Species] has allowed,” Mr Harris observes. “It is time for new mechanisms to arise — to keep the best of what CITES does while producing a new way to achieve a sustainable balance that will get us and all of nature's species to the 22nd century and beyond in harmony.”

Supporting Mr Harris' view is Dr Rodgers Lubilo, the chairperson of the SADC countries Community Leaders Network (CLN), representing millions of people co-existing with wildlife. Dr Lubilo comes from Zambia's South Luangwa Community. It has embraced family planning to avoid over-population that would displace wild animals from land set aside for them. “If the humanising of animals is not opposed and condemned, it can potentially spread a worldwide anti-wildlife-use-culture in the future. That will be disastrous,” he warned.

Meanwhile, Kenya-based wildlife resources expert, Dr Dan Stiles laments how the anti-use NGOs consistently exaggerate the risks involved in regulated, sustainable trade.

“The principle of sustainable use has almost been eradicated from CITES by the anti-use NGOs. That approach holds that if an outcome is uncertain, better to act on the side of caution.” Since certainty can't be established until wild trade is fully tested, the anti-use NGOs have successfully frozen nearly all use of wildlife resources through CITES.

But the end result of this cautionary policy has proven to be the opposite of what the anti-use NGOs want: Increased poaching of and illegal trade in endangered species and their products, loss of species management, reduced species population, and decreased rural incomes.



The bottom line is that animals are not human beings and should not be treated as such. When the win-win relationship between people and animals is lost, the necessity and incentives for people to conserve wildlife disappears. The people who live among wildlife act on a single truism:

If it doesn't pay, it won't stay.

Western animal rights groups understand that their ongoing influence on wildlife trade ban triggers poaching and illegal activities. But they want these crises because they tend to stimulate fundraising. The fact that wildlife protection suffers in the process seems not to matter. This makes them worse than poachers.

About the writer: Emmanuel Koro is a Johannesburg-based international award-winning environmental journalist who writes independently on environmental and developmental issues in Africa.