

ASLI GEDIK

BY KAMILA METWALY

A BANKER WHO SAVES THE LIONS

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Investment banking and Saving the Lions is like apples and oranges: they are totally different! How did you combine them?

Well I do not really think that they are like apples and oranges. Both of them carry a lot of adrenaline, challenges, high risks and enormous high returns when you succeed. I always liked to live on the edge, work hard and take chances in areas that are almost impossible to reach. Investment banking also gives me the opportunity to spend my earnings to heal the planet and give back to nature. On the other hand my professional experience in investment banking and my dedication and passion for animal rights and conservation is a combination that makes me the person I truly am.

What made you interested in saving African lions?

I have always had a passion for Africa as a continent. I always felt welcome and at home whilst there. Regardless of where I went... Egypt, Malawi, Zimbabwe or Tunisia... Africa was and is the continent of beautiful people, incomparable wildlife, natural resources and breathtaking scenery. I feel a calling to Africa. Hence, my visits there were quite frequent.

Apart from this I am a passionate about cats - especially big cats. So it was only a matter of time before I meet the king of animals. We have been told so many stories for so many years. I was unaware that lions were on the brink of extinction. I was unaware that the numbers declined from over 200,000 in 1975 to only about 30,000 currently - and that this number was still dropping. More recent reports from across the continent suggest that not only are lion populations continuing to decline, but they are doing so at an even faster rate. So what will be Africa's future, the future of the world, without these beautiful creatures in the picture? As soon as the figures of the decline in lions were made clear to me, there was no choice but to invest in them. I do not imagine and I do not want to even begin to imagine, Africa without it's symbol, without its King of Wildlife.

How long have you been working with lions?

I grew up in a family promoting human, nature, environment and animal rights. I learned at a very early stage that respecting others as much as ourselves was essential in life - and not limited to other human beings.



Hence, I started working with animals at an early age. We always had cats, dogs, rabbits, birds... My sister and I were bringing home all the sick, baby stray cats and dogs to take care of them. The passion developed as I grew older and an opportunity came up for me to work with apes; to save them from vivisection, to conserve them from extinction. And up to today I am still involved in that work.

While I was working for the conservation of Elephants in Malawi I frequently saw the King of Beasts and wondered how and when I would be given the chance to work with them. The African Lion and Environmental Research Trust (AERT) gave me that chance. We are making some very good progress, but this is still a vision. Visions are big and it takes time to realize them. I guess in answer to your question: I have not been working for them long enough.

At the pace we are consuming our Earth, it appears we are going to tell these stories much sooner than expected.

We know very little about lions, except for what we saw in the movies; can you tell us something about them?

To try and put it into words I would not do justice. They are royal, proud, independent, beautiful, powerful, intelligent and fearless. They are just perfect! They say you will fear for your life 3 times: when you see a lion's footprint, when you hear them roar and when you see them for the first time. It is an exclusive world and an extremely exciting moment to walk with them as a member of their pride while they are learning to hunt, while they play or just sit with them while they rest and relax.

I am not sure if many of us would know to what extent your work, along with others, is so important to Africa. Please tell us why saving African lions is so important.

Lions are the top prey species in Africa. If we lose them we lose the balance nature has tasked us with keeping. The following repercussions would be severe in the area of human animal contact. Explosion in the numbers of hyenas, painted dog, impalas, etc. would be inevitable. Lions are balancing the ecosystem of Africa and are keeping the continent as we know it today. We must keep in mind their countries of origin, as well: the larger population of lions will have little chance of survival without a habitat. Without a habitat there simply is no wildlife. We should also not forget that the lion is the world's most important animal, a symbol of courage, strength, power, ferocity, beauty and royalty. The King of Jungle is on countries flags and corporate emblems. Can you imagine world without them?

Lions are considered the symbol of Africa: What has led them towards extinction?

So many factors have played at the same time on this species and made them so vulnerable on their capacity to live in their natural habitat. Some of them are: human encroachment, animal-human conflict, hunting, poaching, canine distemper, snaring, poison, cattle-spread pathogens, such as bovine tuberculosis (from buffalo), feline aids....

In a few words, can you compare a regular day at work in the bank to a regular day spent saving lions of Africa?

The common point with my day at work and a day with lion is that you never know what

the day will bring you - for good or bad. My working day in the city starts with a daily much needed workout, then straight to the bank, then face all the surprises the financial world is bringing to you. I am a trader by profession and this is still filling my days at the bank. Buying and selling assets around the world and making profit out of them. The same goes for a day in Africa. I wake up much earlier as the days are shorter and the tasks to accomplish and sometimes more time consuming as you do not have all the equipment and technology the Western world gives you. The daily duties we have can range from feeding the cubs, walking with them, being with them on night encounters and patrolling the area for possible snares and hunters. We are at the same time organizing and planning what we can do to accomplish the stages of the program. It is not a small task to try and save a species from extinction. So I must say that both of my days, regardless the region where I spend them, are full of challenges.

Having the above question answered, I would assume that your work as a banker is very different from the adrenaline rush you get from working with lions. How do you manage to lead two, very different and distinct, though very interesting lives?

I have adrenaline in both. The one for the bank is more "mind oriented" and "capitalist;" the one for the lion is more "physical oriented" and "idealist;" though I must say that I prefer in so many more ways to spend my life with lions. It is the feeling of doing something much bigger than you, much more rewarding and full of responsibilities towards them and towards Mother Nature.

When you were appointed as one of the Ambassadors at Lion Alert, how did you feel?

Honored. I just felt honored. I descend from a family full of diplomats. My mother represented our country abroad (like France and Belgium), as did my grandfather. While my family members were representing our country abroad, I am feeling honored and touched to represent African lions abroad. I couldn't wish for more at this stage.

What is most challenging effort that you make to save lions, in your opinion?

I guess not enough people know, or believe, that lions are on the brink of extinction. We have been told for many years that lions were not endangered. I guess the first challenge is to change the opinion of humans and to let them know about the crisis these animals are facing and what we, as ALERT, are doing to help them survive. But I have to say that the most challenging effort will still be to show our program of reintroduction to all corners of Africa as a way to help stop the decline in the population of lions. We are a group of private individuals and these efforts take time and money. When the finances are limited, your means are also limited. We accomplished stage 2 of our program; we still have 2 stages to go. So, as much as I do not like to admit or talk about finances even if it is my profession, we are always in need of funding for our rehabilitation and rescue program.

How can we spread awareness of this enormous problem?

First of all, as you are doing in such a great way. We must make people aware of the problem, via magazines, newspapers or television. This is the most important means of communicating the problem. Most people do not even know that the lions are endangered. We have always thought that the King was still fully operating in the jungle! Unfortunately, that is not the case. Secondly we must try to find time to communicate, like I do, via conferences or via some events, the problem to larger masses.

Thirdly, we need to find strong partners to bring us the extra strength we need in order to accomplish the extremely challenging, but rewarding task. We always need an extra push and people who would like to take this extra mile with us.

Lastly, we have many programs for people to relax while they help lions... You can volunteer in the park, you can spend some luxurious holidays in one of our tents or lodges, or you can just come and see what we are doing to save lions. Our doors are open to anyone that wishes to learn more and get involved in the future of these beautiful animals.

Whoever wishes to take that extra mile can always contact us at asli@lionalert.org

Looking at animal extinction from a bird's eye view, specifically when discussing the problem of lion's extinction; could you please give us your professional opinion on the impact this extinction on human race, along with other animal extinctions?

The extinction of any animal affects what is known as the "food chain." When you remove one animal from a fragile ecosystem, it has disastrous, complex and long-lasting effects on biodiversity. The impacts are much greater than we just usually perceive, it has repercussions on habitat and other species, including humans. It is a fact and a general way to assume that there are larger numbers of animals who are lower ranked in the food chain. Hence, the animals on the higher levels of the chain are keeping the harmony by balancing the nature.

You should never have more animals higher up in the chain than lower as that would then mean the animals towards the bottom will become extinct, therefore making the ones at the top die, as well; whereas less animals up at the top will mean the lower animals will still have a chance to reproduce to feed other animals without becoming extinct themselves.

On the other hand, animals high ranked in the food chain can also lead to a general extinction. The lion is at the top of the food chain in all the ecosystems it lives in and is keeping populations of wild hogs, hares, impala, buffalo, wildebeest, giraffe and antelope in order. Without the lion to control them, these species would overpopulate. So basically, if one species in a food chain becomes extinct, there is a knock-on effect on other species; and if one animal goes extinct, there is a great effect on the other species and a higher possibility that many go extinct with it, including us, humans.

Some people in Egypt don't take efforts such as yours seriously, or any animal rights efforts for that matter, because they say we have still so much to do to save humans, so how can we then move on to animals? How would you comment on that perspective?

I guess this is not only a phenomenon found in Egypt but a generally perceived and extremely sad approach towards



Is this the kind of bedtime stories we should leave for the next generations?



Once upon a time there where forests...

nature. From my perspective, I have to say that if we do not save the animals and the nature where they belong to, how will humans exist? We have to learn to save and preserve the lands that give us food and life, while co-existing with the beings that are an unarguably part of the ecosystem. I am trying not to involve myself in any discussion based on which living being is more important than the other. I am not God, nor a creature that can favor one life over another. I do also help humans in need and was on site digging for survivors in the 2 major Turkish earthquakes. We also take care of 2 orphanages in Africa and some local hospitals and schools. On my last trip there a few months ago I brought a total of 6 bags weighting 128kilos to bring to the orphanages as first aid help. Most importantly I believe in the right of living and coexistence for every single human and non-human life on the planet. Being human comes from respecting every single living thing - no matter how small or big or different they are.

What was the most dangerous situation you have faced when saving African lions?

It was probably when walking with a pair of 4-year-old lions; a brother and sister (Tsavo and Tanaka). The point was for me to be able to explain to the world and the press about the program and get some visuals. Especially dangerous was being with them at night when they can hunt. I generally get along very well with all

I have come to realize that there are two kinds of people: the ones who make things happen and make history, and the ones who just pass by and watch while it happens. Which one do you want to be? Which one do you believe you deserve to be?



animals. I have been doing this kind of work for years and the only time I remember facing death was when an elephant charged at me in Malawi. Other than that, I was pretty lucky in all my work.

Do you have a favorite lion? If yes, tell us more about her/him?

Of course I do! Her name is Meeka. (You can see her in some of the pictures as well, with her sister Kali). She is a real beauty. She was a gorgeous child and she has grown up to be a perfect teenager. Her face is the most beautiful lion face I have ever seen. Her sister, Kali, has a real strong character and is very courageous with the prey. Meeka, however, is the queen of the pride!

What is the saddest situation you have experienced when working on this project?

The saddest situation I face is the day I need to board my flight back to Europe. I cheer all my days while working with the lions. We are working in conservation, in a rescue and release program. I only have positive memories of forming the future for these animals.

But if I have to narrow it down to one day... then it would be the day when one of our lions at the second stage killed the baby of another mother, thinking that she lost her own child. That would be the saddest memory I have.

Do you think that African lions have hope?

I am not convinced that it is possible to fully heal the world of the wounds we have caused. We outgrew nature and animals by too far. We consumed, ate, killed, hunted, abused and savaged them for too long and in great numbers. We simply did not think of any consequences it could have on us, on our surroundings, on our future. But I do believe in hope and I do believe if everybody would take care of a small piece of the world that it will give even more hope for the future. For the specific area of the African lions (Panthera Leo), I do only believe they will survive through the ALERT program.

Otherwise, the future of the king of the jungle looks dark. In only a few decades we might not see them roaming on the continent any longer.

We can see more and more that Earth cannot cope with its wounds any longer: earthquakes, fires, tornados, natural disasters of all sorts are happening almost on a frequent basis. Have you ever asked yourself "why?" Our ecosystem is close to collapsing. And we, as humans, are responsible to heal the wounds as much as we can. We should turn the standard of saving and protecting pushing way beyond optional linen changes and energy saving bubbles. This is no longer enough. Never forget that all the efforts to help nature, small or big, are - and will be - good and rewarding. As long as you do! We should never forget that the continued existence of wildlife and wilderness is important to humans' quality of life. How are we going to have a society if we destroy the environment? If humans are the most intelligent animals it is our duty to preserve and save the ones that cannot do it themselves.

What about other animals?

As previously stated, I do work with many kinds of animals. My focus is lately mostly for lions, but I am doing extensive work for orangutans as the Representative of Orangutan Outreach Europe, other apes, stray animals, laboratory animals and fur animals. I am on the Board of Directors of the Animal Right Federation Turkey, as well as the head of the Wildlife, Animal Testing and Fur commissions and a member of Animal Rights Party of the Netherlands.



Once upon a time there was nature...