

transfrontier



FULL MOON RISING: Kgalagadi is a large area, very important for conservation. For the writer, the stare of a lion epitomises the feral experience of the Kalahari. Pictures: SCOTT RAMSAY

CONNECT WITH KALAHARI

WHEN a pride of wild Kalahari lions stare directly at you, their predatory gaze fixed on your human frame like a missile locked onto its target, there are two things that happen.

First, everything else on your mind tends to disappear instantaneously. Right then, there is nothing in the world that matters, except the lions and you. Work, obligations, anxieties, ambitions, dreams... they all evaporate in the golden glare of an animal that cares for you only as food.

Second, you can't look away – and you don't want to. A primordial fascination rises up, and something stops you from averting your own gaze. It's a mixture of fear, enthrallment, vulnerability and excitement.

An encounter of this sort is best left to the experts, and fortunately my guide was Kebonyemodisa Mosepele, from Ta Shebube lodge on the Botswana side of Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Although we were in the confines of a 4x4, he whispered to me to sit very still as the lions walked straight past us, their eyes focused on us.

Then they started roaring, a cacophony that reverberated through our bones.

The stare – and roar – of a lion epitomises the feral experience of the Kalahari, a vast semi-arid, sandy region in southern Africa. Here you are ripped out of your modern-day existence and thrust into a much larger world.

The immense size of the park is impressive. Spreading across 38 000km², it traverses Botswana and South Africa (and borders Namibia). It's one of the world's largest protected areas, bigger than some European countries. And it's a largely self-regulating natural system, unlike many other protected areas, which are highly managed by man.

"It's a large area, that's very

YEAR IN THE WILD



SCOTT RAMSAY

important for conservation, especially in an arid region," explained zoologist Dr Gus Mills, who with his wife Margie lived in the park for several decades, researching carnivores.

Although winters are busy with visitors, during summer you can drive for hours along sandy tracks, not seeing another human or man-made object.

Springbok, gemsbok and wildebeest drift like phantoms through the intense midday heat. In the early morning and evening, cheetahs, hyenas, jackals, leopards – and lions – patrol for their prey.

But it's not entirely natural, and man's influence is evident in the numerous waterholes in the dry Auob and Nossob River beds, quenching the thirst of the animals, especially wildebeest, which would otherwise not be able to survive the dry spells.

The entire Namibian and South African border of the park is fenced, while 100km of fencing runs from the main entrance north along the Botswana border. "Because it's arid," Gus said, "the nomadic antelope are dependent on rainfall and need particularly large areas to move around, but the areas around the park are becoming increasingly developed.

"The numbers of springbok have declined. I believe it's related to the insidious increase of human pressure, things like the trans-Kalahari highway and the increasing accessibility of the area to communities, but we don't know for sure."

The lions, however, are thriving, and remain one of the healthiest populations in Africa, an anomaly as their numbers have dropped dramatically elsewhere due to human pressure. "The Kalahari is a very good area for large carnivores."

The male lions' huge black manes lend them an especially fearsome appearance, although they are in fact no bigger than other lions. As they roared next to our vehicle, I certainly felt very small.

Despite increasing pressure on the margins, the park itself seems impervious to man. Centuries and millennia can pass without anything really changing. Thorn trees stand forlornly and resolute in the dry riverbeds, which flow only every few decades after exceptional rains. Here e-mail and Facebook updates seem ridiculously superfluous and irrelevant.

After leaving the lodge, I set up camp at Polentswa, a small campsite on the Botswana side of the Nossob. The area is famous for its resident lions, which amble through the unfenced camp whenever they wish.

As I lit my fire, the barking gekkos and crickets began their chorus, filling the dense night air with a symphony to rival any orchestra. Jackals started howling, probably to alert the neighbourhood of the arrival of the three resident lions.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the lions started roaring. How perfect, I thought. I didn't want to be anywhere else on Earth.

For Ta Shebube, see www.tashebube.com.bw For Kgalagadi TFP, see www.sanparks.org

Ramsay is a photojournalist focusing on protected areas in Southern Africa. For more, see www.yearinthewild.com. Partners include Cape Union Mart, Ford, Goodyear and K-Way.

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