

SHORT NOTE

Unusual diet of the lion *Panthera leo* in the Skeleton Coast Park

by

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The diet of the lion *Panthera leo* has been well recorded in Africa (Eloff 1973, Makacha & Schaller 1969, Pienaar 1969, Rudnai 1974 and Smuts 1979) and consists mainly of the larger terrestrial mammals. Observations in the Skeleton Coast Park, South West Africa, confirm this, as the main prey species appears to be gemsbok *Oryx gazella*. In a similar desert habitat, the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, gemsbok are also the main food supply (Eloff 1973), and in the semi-arid Etosha National Park, gemsbok were found to be the preferred prey species (Berry 1981).

However, during the course of routine coastal patrols in the Skeleton Coast Park from May to December 1982, there were 14 confirmed cases of lions feeding on the Cape fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*, the majority in the vicinity of the Hoarusib and Hoanib Rivers, with one record from the Khumib River and another from the Ugab River (R. Loutit, pers. comm.).

It could not be established whether the seals were preyed upon or scavenged. Nonetheless, they are easily approached when sleeping on the beach and thus could readily fall prey to a large predator. With a large colony of seals at Cape Frio in the Skeleton Coast Park live seals are common on the beaches. At certain times of the year dead seals abound, as during August 1982, when 22 were counted in a 50 km stretch north of Möwe Bay.

Scavenging by lions is common. Makacha and Schaller (1969), Pienaar (1969) and Rudnai (1973) all record lions feeding on carrion. The seal carcass remains were all found by following the obvious drag marks, which in the majority of cases were over long distances, from 100—2 600 m ($\bar{x} = 1\ 100$ m, $n = 14$). In six cases carcasses were dragged from 100—300 m; the rest were all over distances exceeding 1 000 m. Two gemsbok carcasses were dragged 1 000 m each near Springbokwasser, some 40 km inland.

In contrast, in the Nairobi National Park carcasses are dragged a maximum distance of 400 m, with a mean of 50 m (Rudnai 1973). The dragging away of carcasses before feeding is a felid behavioural characteristic, regardless of a sheltered or open position, and also the hiding of the carcass from view and/or light (Rudnai 1973).

The exposed beaches of the Skeleton Coast Park are characterised by winds, mist and low temperatures and the dragging away of a carcass could be a combination of physical discomfort on the beach and a behavioural characteristic. Most of the carcasses (75%) were dragged to the shelter of vegetated hummocks or reedbeds in the rivers, which would both hide them from view and offer some protection against the elements. This behaviour was also observed with gemsbok inland which were dragged to the partial shelter of small trees.

No reference can be found of lions feeding on seals in the Skeleton Coast Park during the past 12 years (E.W. Karlowa, pers. comm.). However, with the absence of

other prey species it seems a logical, if unusual, step for the lions to take.

Other unusual prey species of lions recorded on the Skeleton Coast Park coast include porcupines *Hystrix africae-australis*, black-backed jackals *Canis mesomelas* and cormorants. A lioness was twice seen to charge into a group of White-breasted Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo*, on each occasion only catching one bird. Cape Cormorants *P. capensis* have also been taken in large numbers, a fact which is substantiated by remains found and the presence of feathers in the lion droppings.

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