The Story of Asia's Lions. Divyabhanusinh. Marg Publications, Mumbai. 2005. 259 pp. Price: Rs 1850.

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word biography as 'an account of someone's life written by someone else', typically referring to books describing the life and times of a human personage assumed to be of importance in some sphere or the other. Flipping through the pages, one comes to the definition of natural history as 'the scientific study of animals or plants, especially concerned with observation rather than experiment and presented in popular form', a subject area focusing less commonly on human animals than on their wild co-passengers on planet earth. But what does one call a book that is a biography in a certain profound sense, an intense and gripping natural history, and is also a history *per se* richly chronicling the lives and times of a certain people and a certain species? Biohistoriography? Naturography? The word has to perhaps be coined to describe this genre of work. In a world of vanishing wilderness and increasing human onslaught on nature, the worth and import of works of this genre can hardly be overstated.

The book under review is an excellent example of such a work, which goes beyond what the author modestly calls 'the history of an animal'. A true labour of love driven by the author's lifelong passion for the subject and crafted over a decade of research and writing, *The Story of Asia's Lions* brings to life the naturography of one of the world's most magnificent animals, a species that came perilously close to being eliminated in Asia. The book appears exactly a decade after the author's previous work of this kind *The End of a Trail – The Cheetah in India*, an excellent history of the less fortunate cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* that went extinct in India (see review in *Curr. Sci.*, 1998, **74**, 1107–1108).

The Asiatic lion *Panthera leo persica* was once found over a vast expanse of Central Asia and India 'from Palestine in the west to Palamau in eastern India'. Today, a mere 300 or so lions survive in a single protected area in the Gir region of Gujarat, India. Divyabhanusinh's book chronicles the history of the Asiatic lion across these far-flung regions, traces archaeological and historical records, portrays its inter-relationships with peoples over more than three millennia, ending with a description and prognosis of the conservation threats the species faces today – a challenging goal that this book makes a brave effort to achieve.

The book is a treasure trove of information on Asiatic lions in thirteen copiously illustrated chapters supported by an extensive bibliography, five appendices and five maps. The publication quality is excellent and error-free, with an attractive design that makes the book a pleasure to see and read (although at 259 large pages, hardbound, it is not really a book to curl up in bed with). The book contains over 175 spectacular colour and black-and-white illustrations, including photographs of lions, their habitats and sympatric species, and their depictions in ancient and new coins and medallions, in paintings, frescoes and sketches, in sculptures and friezes, in seals and craftwork. The illustrations are generally well-chosen, many are truly fascinating, with the only flip side, so to speak, being that a few are slightly inconveniently placed in relation to the text and require the reader to flip a few pages back and forth or locate them using the references and index.

The author begins with a chapter describing the present status of Asia's lions and their habitat in the Gir forest, and the physical and behavioural characteristics of lions, especially their peculiar relationship with the local people. Although the author mentions the drastic decline of the lion's range in the opening itself, there appears to be no reference to the maps included at the end of the book. These maps (or slightly better ones) showing the extraordinary extent of decline could have ideally been included with the chapter itself to vividly illustrate to the reader the scale of extermination of Asiatic lions by humans and the small thread by which they now cling to for their survival.

In the succeeding three chapters, the author traces the history of the lion in ancient times, synthesizing information from places as diverse as ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Assyria, Persia, the Indus Valley and India. Three things are clear from the ancient record. First, the lion has had a close and fascinating association with people and culture since time immemorial. Second, the lion being a creature of obvious power and strength and the largest carnivore readily visible in its relatively open forest and savanna habitats, was naturally adopted as a symbol of royalty or royal power, and even worshipped. And finally, it is clear that even the earliest humans took to hunting lions, devising varied and new techniques. Thus began, in early antiquity itself, the irony of veneration and persecution, wherein we both revere and annihilate a magnificent species that we share the planet with. This discrediting human trait today threatens many wild species with extinction – tigers and elephants being obvious ones in the Asian context.

The fifth and sixth chapters deal with the changes that came about in the wake of invasions of the subcontinent and the development of Islamic rule under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. The lion was no stranger to the string of rulers, most of whom along with their nobility keenly hunted the animal using old and improvized methods. Barring photographs of lions and their habitats in the other chapters, these two chapters con-

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tain the richest and most colourful illustrations to go with the author's chronicle, with beautiful paintings on almost every page. The author indicates how the Mughals differed from their predecessors in restricting the hunting of lions and other game to a more or less exclusively royal prerogative. This, coupled with the fact that human populations and agricultural areas were relatively less extensive, enabled the lion to persist over most of its range through the reign of the Mughals. The situation changed rapidly over the next 200 years with the advent of the British Empire, the spread of sport and trophy-hunting (perhaps more appropriately called species extermination), and increase in human populations and agriculture.

The impact of these changes on lions was devastating. The author recounts in the next chapter how with single British officers reportedly 'bagging' up to 300 lions (more than thrice what the Mughal Emperor Jehangir killed in his lifetime), hunting of prey species, and the alteration of habitats, the lion began to wane rapidly, until by the turn of the century it was more or less restricted to the Gir region. The author's account of the adoption of the lion as an imperial symbol and his detailing of the hunting and shooting can hardly be faulted for they do convey the history of the species in that period. Nevertheless, for the reader, the exhaustive description of hunts and hunting methods in this chapter and the previous one on Mughals is a bit tiresome, not to mention gruesome at times, and the minutiae could have been consigned to an Appendix. The world has had its fill of shikar literature.

An interesting comparison of the fate of the cheetah and other carnivores *vis-à-vis* the lions (pp. 126–127), almost lost in the middle of this account, deserves further emphasis and scrutiny. A key question is to what extent the hunting of lions versus other forces such as loss of habitat to agriculture or persecution of prey species contributed to the range decline of Asiatic lions. Were there regions where hunting played less prominent a role and habitat loss or conversion the major forces impacting lions? For instance, despite widespread persecution of tigers, their range did not decline as much during British rule possibly because 'the preferred habitat of the tiger was the last to be disturbed or substantially destroyed'. Graphic accounts of hunting exist for a period when information on land transformation is scarce – surely the possibility that the latter had an equal or far greater impact on lions can hardly be discounted as a consequence? Can the historical records be used to draw range maps, say a few decades apart, that illustrate the pattern of range contraction? This would be useful for further research on the questions mentioned above and would be valuable additions to understanding the story of Asia's lions.

Chapters 8 to 10 chronicle the lion's history in Gujarat during the last days of the British Empire and the transition to independent India, along with the inclusion of Ashoka's lions in the national emblem derived from the Sarnath Lion Capital. There is an absorbing account of the dawning of realization among the Nawabs of Junagadh state that only a few lions were left and of their efforts to protect them, despite the pressures of requests from British officers for trophies and the subterfuges employed by neighbouring states to lure lions out of Junagadh for hunting. Although the author presents a fascinating account of the effects of the 1899–1900 drought on lions, on Gir, and on the incidence of human–wildlife conflict, it is all too brief. The descriptions based on the accounts of various people (pp. 142–144) are presented mainly in the context of the developing efforts to protect lions, but deserve further emphasis and analysis, as they have greater relevance for understanding the ecology of Gir and its lions and the ontogeny of human–lion conflicts in the region – issues of equal pertinence in today's context.

The final three chapters bring us back to the present-day situation describing attempts to estimate the number of remaining lions (chapter 11), finding a second home for lions (chapter 12), and an overview of the current situation in Gir with all that it portends for the future of the lion (chapter 13). These are must-read chapters for all conservationists, managers, and administrators concerned with the future of lions in Gir and in India. While the author's call for modern, sampling-based scientific efforts at estimating lion and prey numbers (to replace the more unreliable 'total count' methods) could have been made more strongly, his account of the past relocation efforts is cogent and clear, and will hopefully help remove unsubstantiated fears of failure that plague the proposed second home for lions in Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh. If the persistence of the lion in Gir over a century inspires people to believe that all is well with lions and nothing further need be done, then a read of the final chapter will reveal that the lion has scarcely seen the last of its problems yet. Burgeoning tourist and pilgrim crowds, cattle grazing and human–lion conflicts, lack of protection to surrounding forests with small populations of lions, and a litany of other issues continue to confront the lion, as spelt out in compelling detail by the author. The chapter could have benefited from a more emphatic account of the value of the protectionist approach to Gir, as well as a description of the effects of relocation of the Maldhari villages on the lion, the habitat, and the people themselves. Gir has been fortunate to have had a number of scientific studies over the last few decades that document the recovery of wild prey following village relocation, the functional response of the lion as predator in switching from livestock to wild prey, and the recovery of habitats. The incidence of human–lion conflicts in the present day requires further description and analysis, especially as pointers to what is lacking in terms of information or understanding. Questions raised during the drought over a century ago remain inconclusively answered: to what extent are conflicts due to increase in lion numbers, habitat deterioration, incursion of livestock into the sanctuary, climatic effects, or variation in individual lion behaviour? These are aspects every wildlife manager in Gir and elsewhere needs to understand.

In sum, this is an excellent book on the Asiatic lion and another pioneering effort by the author in this genre. It can be compared to works such as Peter Matthiessen's *Wildlife in America*, with the writing being less lyrical and with a stronger tilt on history. Divyabhanusinh's book will be a valuable addition to the bookshelf of any biologist, administrator, or lay person concerned about conservation of India's wildlife, with the only possible deterrent being the price of this hardbound edition. The absence of this wonderful book from libraries of institutions concerned with biology, conservation, administration, and Indian history or culture would be unpardonable.

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