



*Lowell Thomas Awardee*

# A QUEST FOR BALANCE

*Laly Lichtenfeld*

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Interview by ALAN FELDSTEIN

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FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES, LALY LICHTENFELD HAS BEEN PIONEERING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO RESOLVING HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICTS IN EAST AFRICA. IN 2005, THE YALE-EDUCATED, TANZANIA-BASED CONSERVATIONIST CO-FOUNDED—WITH HUSBAND CHARLES TROUT—THE AFRICAN PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE FUND (APW), WHICH IS DEDICATED TO HELPING RURAL AFRICANS MANAGE THEIR LAND AND WILDLIFE POPULATIONS WHILE ALSO ACHIEVING SIGNIFICANT SOCIETAL BENEFITS.

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**Alan Feldstein:** How did you get into wildlife conservation?

**Laly Lichtenfeld:** I have had a passion for wild places and wild animals ever since I was a little girl. My mother and I would often play hooky from school to go to the Bronx Zoo. Not only did I love that experience and learn a lot from it, it is what drove me to want to see animals in the wild. For some reason, I naturally gravitated toward big cats, lions in particular, and I was drawn to Africa. The first time I got off the plane on the continent, I knew immediately this was going to be the place for me.

**AF:** Through APW, you have worked to create a balance between the needs of wildlife and the needs of expanding human populations. Might you tell us about that?

**LL:** I love that you use the word “balance” because that is really what our work is about, finding the common ground for both people and wildlife. We continue to lose habitat in so many places and we have found that adding new protected spaces is not a reality anymore. Tanzania, for instance, has more than 30 percent of its land in formal protection, yet we know that is not enough. We are now trying to help people live with wild animals. Elephants and lions can be quite destructive, but can be an incredible resource. Finding ways to improve habitat protection for them in ways

that make sense for the local people is key. So we have turned the question around. Rather than asking why preserve elephants or why preserve lions, we are asking why would a local community member want to protect their natural habitats? We are working to prevent human-wildlife conflicts in the first place, engaging in capacity building programs so that communities can better manage their natural resources, and fostering local conservation incentives for ecological and/or financial benefit.

**AF:** How have you been able to engage local stakeholders in your work?

**LL:** As I was undertaking my Ph.D. work, I would often ask local communities, “Do you still want to see lions on this landscape?” I really wanted to see if there was an inherent tolerance for wildlife. And I found that there absolutely was. The majority of people didn’t want lions attacking their livestock every night but they also did not want to see the lion vanish. So the question is how do we reduce conflicts so that they are not a daily event? If we can successfully prevent conflicts, then we can create an environment in which people are able to think about the lions in a different way and to think of them as a potential resource in their community, and in doing so bring their lifeways into balance.

**AF:** Have you made progress in creating this much-needed balance?

**LL:** A key aspect of our program has been working with the local Maasai to develop what we call “living walls” to help them protect their livestock. Living walls are

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A MOTHER LION GROOMS HER CUB IN THE SERENGETI. 20,000 TO 36,000 LIONS REMAIN ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT, DOWN FROM 100,000 A CENTURY AGO. PHOTOGRAPH BY LALY LICHTENFELD.

essentially traditional bomas that have been fortified with chain-link fencing. Bomas are concentric circles of acacia thorns and small trees that the Maasai build around their livestock and living quarters to keep out predators such as lions, hyenas, cheetahs, and wild dogs. Unfortunately, the structures tend to degrade in the sun and lose their efficacy. We currently have more than 650 living walls in place, which are protecting 125,000 head of livestock, as well as more than 12,500 adults and children. So far, they have proven 99 percent effective in keeping predators out and no lions have been killed at corrals fortified with living walls.

But there is more to this aspect of our work than that. By engaging in these joint construction projects, we have been able to show the Maasai that we are there to help protect them and their livestock. When we are installing a living wall, it also opens up an opportunity for conversation with people, to find out what other issues they are facing from an environmental point of view. Is it water? Is it grasslands? Is there another species that is giving you a problem? How else can we help? Complementing this effort, we have trained community-led teams of “warriors for wildlife,” who have been able to assist in our efforts in wildlife monitoring, big cat conflict prevention, and enforcement of wildlife laws.

**AF:** How are you addressing the needs of the next generation?

**LL:** We have a youth environmental education program. It is specifically for rural kids living out near the national parks. The Maasai community is a community in

transition. They have to decide how much of their rangelands they are going to convert to agriculture or allow others to convert to agriculture. This is a hugely important issue to them. Not every kid is going to become a conservationist. We have kids who want to become doctors, nurses, or engineers, but through our programs they will have that understanding of the environment and bring that forward with whatever work that they do.

**AF:** What have been your greatest rewards and greatest challenges at APW?

**LL:** Probably in the day-to-day work we do. The most pleasure is when I am out in the field. When I get to go out and install a living wall or go out looking for lions. Those are the things I really love to do. But this morning we had a team reporting four lions were causing trouble in one of the communities and there was a potential lion hunt going on. Everyone on our team has smart phones with “WhatsApp” and can immediately contact us, which is both amazing and crazy at the same time. I remember writing letters home to let people know I was still alive. Now we can communicate instantly. So far, today it seems things have calmed down, but someone has been injured by one of the lions so people are still upset. It is a fluid situation. That is when I feel anxious. I don’t want people to be hurt, but there are so few lions left today.

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*“No lions have been killed at corrals fortified with living walls.”*

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A YOUNG MAASAI BOY OUTSIDE A LIVING WALL, A TRADITIONAL BOMA REINFORCED WITH CHAIN-LINK FENCING THAT KEEPS OUT PREDATORS. PHOTOGRAPH BY FELIPE RODRIGUES AND APW.





**AF:** A number of people who have gone on safari still seem to be unaware of the dire conservation issues facing Africa.

**LL:** We have found that to be one of our greatest challenges. I was just on safari leading a National Geographic expedition. We had one of those amazing opportunities in the Serengeti to see a pride of 24 lions. When you are there, it is hard to understand that these animals are in peril. But the numbers tell a different story. A century ago we had more than 100,000 lions across the continent. Today, there are an estimated 20,000 to 36,000 lions remaining on the whole of the continent; 80 percent of that population decline has occurred in the past 20 years. Access to agricultural pesticides has increased. Access to guns has increased. It is no longer about someone spearing one animal but taking out an entire pride. But it is equally important for people to understand the local point of view. Most citizens in the United States, for instance, don't want deer in their backyard eating their shrubbery. Imagine if a lion come into your home, looking for livestock in the middle of the night. You can't see what is going on, your children are terrified; it can be frightening.

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THE AFRICAN PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE FUND HAS WORKED WITH LOCAL MAASAI TO ERECT 650 LIVING WALLS TO PROTECT LIVESTOCK, AS WELL AS THEIR FAMILY COMPOUNDS.

**AF:** Do you ever get discouraged?

**LL:** I do. But I am inherently an optimist. There have been times in different communities in the past 16 years when I can see the change on the ground; it is sometimes positive, sometimes negative. I still have hope that lions and other big cats on the African continent will survive. It is fortunate that lions reproduce rather quickly and can

recover really well when given a reprieve. I see our work as hills and valleys. Conservation is fluid. The challenge that you face today may not be the challenge of tomorrow.

**AF:** Any parting thoughts you would like to convey to readers?

**LL:** Things in the world are so polarized, whether you are talking about politics, religion, or conservation. The challenge is in finding the balance. When you see a world in balance, when you see communities in harmony with their

natural surroundings, the outlook is positive. I want people to understand just how much we get from our natural world, that it brings us peace of mind. There have been studies showing that taking a walk in the wilderness actually stimulates our brains in different and important ways. I think wildlife conservation is an essential topic of the twenty-first century. If we want to find the balance in our lives, then we have to embrace nature as a resource and we should not give up hope. 

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