



Protocol for Lion Sightings – Hoanib River

During the past five years the number of desert-adapted lions have declined substantially due to hyper-arid conditions and an increase in human-lion conflict. Most of the lions that utilise the Hoanib river are also occasionally involved in incidents of HLC. It is thus all the more important that we, as tour operators, approach the lions with caution and treat them with respect. Over the years, as tourism expanded, lions have learnt to distinguish between conservancy / farmer vehicles (generally white coloured pick-ups with people on the back) and tour operator vehicles (generally brown or green in colour with closed rear ends). Lions make this distinguishing not only by the looks, but also by the way people drive. To ensure that the quality of lion sightings and tourist experiences remains high and sustainable, tour-guides should approach slowly. Especially in the beginning when they first spot the lions – give the lions a chance to recognise this as a “friendly” tourist vehicle. Once the lions become relaxed and stop staring at the vehicles, then they can approach closer. In short, watch the lions carefully and allow their behaviour to guide your approach, with the basic motto: keep your impact low & respect their space.

The following procedures will ensure safe and quality sightings for the guests who are privileged to see and observe desert-adapted lions.

Protocol:

- It is assumed that there is radio communication between all the vehicles.
- The vehicle that first arrives at the sighting should take charge of the proceedings and direct/control the movements of additional vehicles joining the sighting.
- Only two or three vehicles should be allowed to join the sighting, depending on the terrain and circumstances at that given moment.
- The volume settings on radios should be low enough that it can't be heard by the lions.
- The “Vehicle-in-charge” of the sighting should direct the approach and position of the additional vehicles joining the sighting.
- Only one vehicle may drive at a time.
- The “Vehicle-in-charge” must watch the lions carefully and if they notice the lions becoming restless or disturbed, they must instruct the approaching



vehicle to stop, switch engine off, and wait for lions to relax. Thereafter the "Vehicle-in-charge" can direct the others towards the optimum positions.

- Never drive directly towards lions. Always approach from an angle.
- A slow approach (1st gear or 2nd gear Low-range) will always produce good results.
- Continuously watch the lions for facial expressions and behaviour that could suggest disturbance. Stop & switch of engine immediately.
- The ABSOLUTE MINIMUM DISTANCE that a vehicle is allowed to approach a lion is **50 meters**. Lions may often move closer towards the vehicles.
- Once a vehicle is parked in position it should stay there. Constant moving and juggling for better positions should be avoided. Guides should learn to anticipate where lions may move and pick their spots accordingly.
- Speak softly and in a low tone – lions do not like the sound of human voices.
- If really necessary for vehicles to change positions, that should be done one at a time.
- When lions begin hunting, all vehicles must remain stationary, even if it means the lions and prey run out of view. Any movement by a vehicle during a hunt will have an influence and mostly result in a failed hunt. Rather allow the lions to have a fair chance, and when they succeed, tourists can enjoy close-up viewing of them feeding.
- All vehicles should attempt to follow the same track towards and away from the sighting in order to minimise the impact of vehicle tracks.
- Any new tracks made to a sighting should be swept and rehabilitated as soon as possible after the lions have vacated the area. This will avoid other vehicles following the tracks and new roads developing.
- No person should ever get out of the vehicle.

This Protocol strives to ensure a sustainable, long-term, and profitable relationship with our uniquely adapted Desert lions.