

SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR FORESTRY AND WILDLIFE HON. DR. NOAH WEKESA, EGH, MP ON THE "PRIDE OF KENYA – THE LAUNCH OF 50 DECORATED FIBRE GLASS LIONS" ON 2ND SEPTEMBER, 2009 FROM 8.00 AM.

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife,

M. A. M. Wa-Mwachai

Director of Kenya Wildlife Service,

Dr. Julius Kipngetich

Managing Director, Monitor Publication,

Dr. Githinji Gitahi

Members of the Press,

Business Partners,

Friends,

Ladies and Gentleman,

It gives me great pleasure to join you here today. Three months ago I had the pleasure of launching *Pride of Kenya*, a public art project created by the Born Free Foundation and Wild in Art. The objective of *Pride of Kenya* is to raise public awareness about the future of lions and engage people - young and old - in efforts to promote lion conservation and to raise funds to encourage the effective protection of lions in Kenya.

At that launch I pledged that my Ministry and the government as a whole would do all it could to support this important venture. At the time, I thought *Pride of Kenya* was a particularly ambitious initiative.

Today, I can see – and we have before us – the evidence that we have scaled the heights and overcome the challenges.

Assembled all around are some of the most colourful, dramatic, original and beautiful lions you will ever see. They represent the vision, the interpretation of dozens of Kenyan artists and artists who love Kenya. They clearly demonstrate the commitment of all sectors of Kenyan society to ensuring that, through this creative endeavour – symbolic of all that is wild, brave and free – wild lions will remain a key part of our natural world.

So the *Pride of Kenya* CITY SAFARI is about to hit the streets. For the next two months there will be *Pride of Kenya* lions prowling where you least expect to see them.

Our friends in the media – and especially Dr Githinji Gitahi of Nation Media Group has the responsibility to encourage all Nairobians, and our visitors from near and far, to explore our capital and discover where the lions are hiding.

Why, you may be asking, are so many people going to all these lengths?

Well, as the Director, Kenya Wildlife Service, has reminded us, Kenya is one of the few countries in the world where you can find the Big 5 living as nature intended. And for many of our guests, the lion is the species that is at the top of their ‘must see’ agenda.

A Kenya without wild lions would be a tragedy. If we can make room for great beasts like elephants and lions – species that require so much undisturbed space – we can also make room for thousands of other less charismatic but no less unique species as well.

So, as you can see, making sure there continues to be space in our country for lions is vital - but we must also make sure there is space for them in our hearts. We must recognise the challenges that come along when you share your land with such large and powerful creatures. And we must address those challenges with compassion, with tolerance, with understanding and with wisdom.

The government through the Kenya Wildlife service and other conservation partners face numerous challenges in managing and protecting our Lions. This is due to the reduction of available space for wildlife outside national parks and reserves.

Threats to lions in Kenya are mainly due to Habitat loss and anthropogenic activities due to human encroachment, reduction in wild prey base because of competition with domestic stock and illegal hunting. The issue of poisoning by carbon furan (Furadan) has also been of major concern as the reports of wildlife deaths mainly Lions calls for public education and awareness about the correct use of pesticides available in the Kenyan Market.

I take this opportunity to thank the organizers of this event “pride of Kenya” for bringing wildlife art to the people. By holding the event, many businesses will be able to demonstrate their commitment to conservation and long-term future for wild animals in a high profile way.

That leads me to the next step in *Pride of Kenya*.

After the CITY SAFARI comes the Auction. I understand that each of these unique works of art will be auctioned on 6th November and the profits will be put to good use by the Kenya Wildlife Service and our partners at Born Free Foundation to maintain the highest possible levels of protection for Kenya’s wild lions.

I am sure that the Director, Kenya Wildlife Service and his team, together with Will Travers, Winnie Kiiru, Alice Owen, Wanja Kimani, Charlie Langhorne, Sally Ann Wilkinson and Born Free will put these resources to maximum use.

Kenya is a stronghold for wildlife. Kenya is a stronghold for the lion. I encourage you all to play your part in helping *Pride of Kenya* make sure it stays that way.

It is now my distinct honour to announce the *Pride of Kenya* CITY SAFARI open.

Thank you!