

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Will the lion sleep tonight?

Why do we take so long to wake up to conservation emergencies? We did it with the Tasmanian tiger – in an astounding case of sluggishness, a vast thylacine reserve was created in 1966, 30 years after the last-known survivor had died – and we've done it with umpteen endangered species since.

And now it's happening with lions. Half a century ago, there were hundreds of thousands of lions in Africa. Today, according to a report by LionAid, there are only about 15,000 left, and nearly half live in Tanzania.

Admittedly, not all experts agree with this figure, but they do concede that the population is declining rapidly: lions are extinct in 25 African countries and virtually extinct in another 10.

Lions face everything from habitat loss and dwindling prey populations (due to poaching) to retribution killings where they come into conflict with livestock and excessive trophy hunting. Nowadays, their bones are replacing increasingly rare tiger bones to supply the demands of traditional Chinese medicine.

It should be headline news, but the big cat's plight seems to be passing the world by virtually unnoticed.

Perhaps we're lulled into a false sense of security,

because most lions live in protected areas and are easy to see on safari. Perhaps it's a lack of political will, because politicians never do anything until a situation becomes critical. Or perhaps it's because money is tight. But if you can't raise funds for charismatic animals such as lions, then I despair.

Just how rapidly, and by how much, does a population have to decline before we take action? We've seen what happened to tigers,



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with numbers plummeting from about 100,000 in the early 1900s to a frighteningly low 4,000–5,000 in the early 1970s, before a few visionaries took action. But even now the species' future is far from secure. Haven't we learned anything?

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.