

## Generational change at the lions

### Biology

Lions are social animals that live in groups with one adult male and a number of related females. When the cubs are sexually mature the females usually stay in the pride whereas the males leave in order to establish a pride of their own. The dominant male is constantly challenged – partly by the pride's own males and partly by strange males that strive to take over his harem. If a strange male succeeds in defeating the present harem owner the latter will be chased away and the new male takes over the pride. He will accept the grown females but is likely to kill the cubs as they are not his own offspring.

### The situation in the Zoo

The present pride consists of the following:

Breeding male (16 years)

Breeding female (14 years)

Two female cubs from a now deceased female (1½ years)

Two cubs (1 male, 1 female, 10 months) from the present breeding female

As the breeding animals are fairly old a generational change must be made now in order to maintain a healthy future lion group in the Zoo. We aim at maintaining a basic group consisting of one grown male and two grown females. In addition there will be cubs that are expected to be born at intervals of 2-3 years.

As we right now have two female cubs from 2012 it is natural to keep them and get a new male at the right age from elsewhere. If we fail to make the generational change now there is a risk that the male will mate his own offspring leading to inbreed. Furthermore, the following conditions need to be taken into consideration:

- A new male will not be accepted by the pride while the old male is still there. The old male will kill the young male.
- A new male will not be accepted by the pride while the old female is still there as she will kill the new, young male.
- A new male in the pride will immediately kill the young cubs.
- A new male must be introduced to the young females shortly after the old male has been removed. Otherwise the young females may take over the dominance of the old male and kill the new, young male.
- The old female is not to mate again as she may be too weakened to give birth and raise yet another litter.

The above five points describe natural lion behavior that may seem tough but which is necessary in nature in order to secure a strong pride with the best chances of survival.

The consequence of this is:

**To be kept:**

Two young females (1½ years)

**To be euthanized:**

Old male (16 years)

Old female (14 years)

Youngest cubs (1,1) (10 months)

**To be acquired:**

Young male from Givskud Zoo, almost 3 years old

**Process**

The old male is taken out now to avoid the risk of him mating his own offspring from 2012.

It is important to introduce a new male as soon as possible as he is young and therefore lacks the authority of an old male. If the young females spend a long period of time without a male, it may be difficult for a new, young male to enter the pride as the females grow too territorial. Therefore a period without a male is not an option.

However, a new male cannot be introduced to the pride as long as the old female is still present. Therefore she must be put down – due to her age she is already living on borrowed time. If she is put down we have to take the two youngest cubs (from 2013) as well as they are not yet able to manage on their own – particularly if a new male is introduced to the pride.

**Questions**

*Why can't you wait until the youngest cubs are old enough to be sent off to another zoo?*

If we wait there is a risk that the male mates his own offspring, or – if he is put down now – that it will take too long before a new male can be introduced to the pride. Furthermore, the chance of sending the youngest cubs off to another zoo is very slim, and in that case we would just be putting off the inevitable that we initially accepted in order to maintain natural breeding behavior among the lions.

*Why can't you put down the male and let the others live until the youngest cubs are old enough to be transferred to another zoo?*

Because the two half-grown females would then grow too territorial and thereby not allow a new,

young male to enter the pride when the time comes. Then we would have to put down the old female in any case at that point in time and probably also the cubs.

*Why have you allowed for the old female to have the last litter of young?*

Because we give priority to animal welfare throughout the lives of all animals. As natural breeding and parenting is a vital part of the natural behavior of lions we have chosen to let the lions breed as they please at natural intervals.

*Copenhagen Zoo*

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