

## John Kasaona

Community-Based Conservationist

# HOW POACHERS BECAME CARETAKERS

When John Kasaona was a boy growing up in Namibia, his father took him into the **bush** to teach him how to take care of the family's livestock. His father said, "If you see a cheetah eating our goat, walk up to it and smack it on the backside." A cheetah is a very nervous animal. If a person **confronts** it, it will probably run away. John also learned how to deal with a lion by standing very still and making himself look very big. These were useful lessons for a boy who became a wildlife **conservationist**. As Kasaona says, "It is very important if you are in the field to know what to confront and what to run from."

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Kasaona was born in 1971. At that time, Namibia had many problems. The country was at war from 1966 to 1990. Because of the fighting, many people had rifles. This caused a secondary problem—**poaching**. For example, poachers killed many black rhinos for their horns, which were very valuable. To make things even worse, around 1980, a terrible drought killed people, livestock, and wildlife. By 1995, there were only 20 lions left in the Kunene region in the northwest of the country, where Kasaona's family lives. Many other **species** were also endangered.

At the same time, positive changes were taking place. A non-governmental organization, the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC), began working in Namibia to protect wildlife. They met with village leaders to ask who would be able to work with them. They needed people who knew the bush well and who understood how wild animals lived. The

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answer was surprising: work with local poachers. It seemed crazy, but it also made sense. After all, if you spend your time hunting for animals, you will know where they live and how they behave. So IRDNC hired a group of poachers, including Kasaona's own father, to help protect wildlife in Namibia.

Since then, the situation has changed dramatically. The Kunene region now has more than 130 lions. The black rhino, almost extinct in 1982, has come back, and there are now many free-roaming black rhinos in Kunene. Most importantly, more land than ever is under conservation. That protected land generates money from tourism for Namibia to use in education, health care, and other important programs for its people.

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John Kasaona explains, "We were successful in Namibia because we dreamed of a future that was much more than just a healthy wildlife." Kasaona created a model for other nations to follow by starting the largest community-led conservation program in the world.

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**bush** land far from towns and cities

**confront** to challenge (someone) in a forceful way

**conservationist** someone who works to protect animals, plants, and natural resources

**poaching** killing an animal illegally

**species** a group of animals or plants that are similar

**B**  Look at the list of ways we can protect endangered animals. Check (✓) the ideas you predict you will read about in the article. Compare your answers with a partner.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ stop poaching
2. \_\_\_\_\_ create advertisements about conservation
3. \_\_\_\_\_ prevent droughts
4. \_\_\_\_\_ put land under conservation
5. \_\_\_\_\_ support nature tourism

**C** Read the article. Write the dates next to the events.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 20 lions remain in Kunene
2. \_\_\_\_\_ John Kasaona is born
3. \_\_\_\_\_ drought hits Namibia
4. \_\_\_\_\_ war begins
5. \_\_\_\_\_ war ends