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The Escalating Threat of Trade-Driven Lion Poaching

Deliberate, organized poaching for body parts represents an intensifying and defining threat to the future of African lions (*Panthera leo*), compounding existing pressures such as prey depletion from bushmeat hunting, trophy hunting, and retaliatory killings by pastoralists.

Once numbering in the hundreds of thousands across Africa, the wild lion population has dwindled to approximately 25,000 individuals, currently relegated to a mere 6% of their historic range and classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.

Key Findings & Conservation Impact

- **Regional Population Declines:** Poaching is experiencing a sharp upward trajectory, particularly in Mozambique and South Africa. Illustrating this crisis, a survey conducted by the Endangered Wildlife Trust revealed that a specific area within South Africa's Kruger National Park experienced a near 60% population drop, plummeting from 283 lions in 2005 to just 122 in 2023. Furthermore, law enforcement officials intercepted and seized over 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of illicit lion parts in Maputo, Mozambique's capital, in 2023 alone.
- **Market Drivers and Transnational Demand:** The surge in poaching is heavily driven by the trade of lion bones, skin, teeth, and claws. Bones are increasingly sought after as a substitute in East Asian traditional luxury products, such as tiger bone wine in China. Locally, approximately 37 African countries utilize lion body parts within cultural, spiritual, or traditional healing practices.
- **Market Shift to Wild Populations:** Evidence suggests that following the 2019 cessation of legal lion part exports from South African captive breeding operations, illegal demand shifted toward wild populations. Additionally, highly organized transnational syndicates historically involved in rhino horn and elephant ivory trafficking appear to be diversifying their portfolios to target wild lions.
- **Transition to Targeted Poaching:** While the harvesting of lion parts was historically

opportunistic—derived from human-wildlife conflict or natural deaths—there is a measurable shift toward deliberate, targeted poaching. Incidents indicate lions are being killed far from livestock areas specifically to fulfill pre-ordered parts.

Strategic Interventions for Collar a Lion's Future

To safeguard the future of Africa's lions, the report emphasizes that urgent, multi-faceted intervention is required. Key operational pillars include:

- Significantly increasing funding and resources for protected conservation areas.
- Strengthening local law enforcement and field security to deter targeted poaching.
- Enhancing intelligence to disrupt illegal transnational trade networks.
- Implementing targeted initiatives aimed at reducing international and local demand for lion derivatives.

Reference Credits

This summary is synthesized from original reporting by **Mongabay** (authored by **Bobby Bascomb** and **Sharon Guynup**), analyzing a primary study led by **Peter Lindsey** (Wildlife Conservation Network's Lion Recovery Fund) with contributions from the **Endangered Wildlife Trust** and insights from **Luke Hunter** (Wildlife Conservation Society).