

**SPEECH READ BY THE MINISTER FOR FORESTRY
AND WILDLIFE HON. DR. NOAH WEKESA, EGH, MP
DURING OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF PRIDE OF KENYA
AND UON SCULPTURE AT NAIROBI SERENA HOTEL
ON 17TH JUNE, 2009 AT 10.30 A.M.**

Dr. Julius Kipngetich, Director Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS)

Will Travers, Chief Executive officer, Born Free Foundation

Charlie Langhorne, Chief Executive officer, Wild in Art,

Dr. Githinji Gitahi, Chief Executive officer, Nation Meida Group

Business Partners,

Invited Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to join you here today as we launch the pride of Kenya, Lion Sculptures. I am aware that 2009 is a very special year for Born Free Foundation as you mark the 25th Anniversary.

This is a most unusual and remarkable event that brings together the diverse worlds of conservation, art and business. The choice of the Lion as a symbol of Kenya's unique wildlife heritage is both timely and appropriate, as the lions symbol of the "safari" makes Kenya a unique tourist destination.

Kenya's lions have featured in several films and documentaries shown around the world. The story of Elsa the lioness, as both a film and book and the work of the late Joy and George Adamson made Kenya famous. The story was told around the world and I am pleased that Will Travers, son of Virginia Mckenna and Bill Travers who featured in that film is here with us today.

Lions play a critical role in Kenya's tourism industry, for lion presence in an area is considered natural integrity. The lion is thus one of the flagship species of Kenya for research and tourism and indeed one of the Big Five. However, the African lion is classified as *vulnerable* by IUCN. The world population is declining. Lions have been extirpated from at least 30% of their historical range in Eastern and Southern Africa and Kenya's lions are no exception.

As often is the case in conservation, there is limited data on status, population trend, and ecology. However, Kenya's national population of lions was estimated at 2,749 in 2002 and 2,280 in 2004. The current estimate is about 2,000 individuals.

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.

I am informed that the funds raised by Born Free through this initiative will go towards supporting lion conservation initiatives in Kenya through the work of Kenya Wildlife Service and other stakeholders as well as supporting the work of the foundation. I would also like to thank the Nation Media Group for their support.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I encourage Wildlife Conservation stakeholders to support such initiatives that can help our world famous lions and other wildlife thrive.

It is now my pleasure to declare this event officially open.