



EIGHT HUNGRY LIONS stalk after carcass dragged by truck across an East African plain. Author Hunter makes lions do tricks like this for his camera

safaris. His favorite client: New Jerseyite Walter Sykes, who photographed this scene and the charging rhino (p. 94) in 1937, when he was only 16 years old.

THE GREAT LION KILLER

He went into the bush with untrained mongrels to end a terror created by the marauding cats

by JOHN A. HUNTER

WHEN I first came to Kenya, the game covered the plains as far as a man could see. I hunted lions where towns now stand, and shot elephants from the engine of the first railroad to cross the country. In the span of my 65 years the jungles have turned into farmland and savage tribes have become factory workers. I have had a little to do with this change myself, for the government employed me to clear dangerous beasts out of areas that were opened to cultivation. This was in the day's work for me; yet I have always been a sportsman. I would rather hear the crack of a rifle or the bang of a shotgun than listen to the finest orchestra. I cannot say that I did not enjoy hunting; and looking back, I truly believe that in most cases the big game had as much chance to kill me as I had to kill them.

I am one of the last of the oldtime "white hunters" (a term used in Africa to distinguish white professionals from sportsmen and native hunters). The events I saw can never be relived. No one will ever see again the great elephant herds, and old bulls carrying 150 pounds of ivory in each tusk. No one will ever again hear the shrill hunting cries of the Masai as their spearmen swept the bush after cattle-killing lions. Few indeed will be able to say they have broken into country never before seen by a white man. The old Africa has passed and I saw it go.

I began my career as a professional hunter by shooting lions for their hides. Lion hides sold for about \$5 each in Mombasa and leopard skins for nearly as much. At that time there were plenty of lions around the Tsavo area, some 200 miles southeast of Nairobi. Lions were regarded as vermin, for they killed cattle and some were not averse to picking up stray natives.

I knew next to nothing about these great cats when I set out with an old Mauser and a single native boy to make my mark as a famous lion hunter. But I quickly learned that to hunt lions you must understand how they think and behave. A lion is a cat and cats are curious beasts. They are temperamental creatures and highly subject to moods. Weather has a profound effect on them. Rainy weather makes them nervous, energetic and keen. Very dry weather tends to make them lazy and indifferent. Lions hunt mainly at night. Darkness seems to act on them as a stimulant. The darker the night, the more likely lions are to be about; I never heard of a lion making a kill during the full moon. There are many cases of men meeting lions in the bush and scaring the animals off by shouting at them; yet I have also seen a lion charge a truck and nearly knock it over in his attempts to get at the men inside.

Lions are fairly sociable animals and like



DEAD LION was shot by Sykes's brother Howard, at 14. Though complete records are not kept on lions, Hunter (left) believes it set record (11' 7½").



CHARGING RHINO had to be killed to save Walter Sykes, who kept photographing. Hunter dropped it with one shot, then paced distance (*bottom*) to find it fell only nine feet away. Experiences he relates in this article, prepared with the help of Daniel Mannix, American author and big-game hunter, will be part of a book, *Hunter*, to be published by Harper & Brothers in October.

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to collect in groups. A group of lions is called a pride, an archaic term that was forgotten for centuries but has been revived in Africa. I have seen as many as 20 lions in a pride, ranging from old males down to newborn cubs playing with their mothers' tails. Lions are polygamous, and as each lioness comes into season the lion will retire with her for a few days and then rejoin the pride. There may be several males in a pride, each with his own harem, but there is generally one head male and the others defer to him.

Although it would not be true to say that they hunt in packs, there is a certain organization about their work. The actual killing is frequently done by the lionesses or by young males. The patriarch often holds back, directing the business and only throwing in his own weight and strength when necessary. A pride of lions on the hunt communicates with its members by deep grunts that have a strangely ventriloquial quality. It is almost impossible to tell where the noise comes from. Lions very seldom roar; I have heard the true roar only a few times in my life. They must have an amazing ability to see during the darkest night, and I am convinced that they hunt by sight rather than smell. They count on stampeding the game by their hunting grunts and sending it toward a spot where the other lions are waiting. Of course, if they see their quarry they will stalk and leap upon it much as any cat does. Although a lion is absolutely noiseless when stalking, he makes a surprising amount of noise when he runs, his big pads thumping distinctly as he leaps along the ground.

There are few sights in nature more terrible than that of a charging lion. He comes at a speed close to 40 miles per hour, hitting top pace the instant he takes off. If a stalking lion can get to within 50 yards of the swiftest antelope, the antelope is doomed. A man standing only 30 yards or so from a charging lion cannot afford to miss. A full-grown lion weighs some 450 pounds, and in a few bounds he is on you, with fangs slashing and hind claws ripping you open.

I became a lion exterminator one spring in the middle '20s. Captain A. T. A. Ritchie, head of the Kenya Game Department, called me into his office and laid before me one of the most remarkable offers ever made to a professional hunter.

In the center of Kenya lies a great tableland which is the home of a warlike tribe of herdsmen named the Masai. The Masai are a nation of spearmen. They scorn the bow and arrow as the tool of cowards who are afraid to close with their enemies. The young warriors of the tribe, called the moran, subsist mainly on a diet of fresh animal blood and milk. This they consider the only proper food for their fighting men.

The neighboring tribes lived in terror of the Masai. None of them could stand against a Masai war party. They kill lions not with guns but with spears—a feat I had not thought possible. In the old days the Masai had lived almost completely on other tribes. But the British government finally stopped this raiding, whereupon the Masai were forced to raise more cattle as a means of livelihood. Then a terrible epidemic of rinderpest swept the district.

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The lions in the area readily became littered by the carcasses of cattle, these big cats increased greatly in numbers. Soon the Masai country was overrun with lions. When the epidemic had run its course and there were no more dead cows lying about, the lions turned on the live ones. The Masai sallied out with spear and shield to defend the precious remnants of their breeding stock, but for every lion killed, one or two of the young moran were mauled. A wound made by a lion almost invariably causes infection, for the claws of the animals are coated with a rotting film from their prey. So the Masai, under present conditions, had no solution except to appeal to the government for help.

"This is a task for an experienced hunter," Captain Ritchie told me. "We want the trouble-giving lions killed in the next three months to bring the lion population within control. You will be allowed to keep the hides as your pay."

At that time the skins of first-class, black-maned lions were bringing \$100, lioness hides were worth \$15, and the number you could shoot was restricted by law. Although the risks were great, it was an opportunity to make a large sum of money. My wife Hilda and I had four children by this time, and it is surprising how much children cost to raise, even in Kenya.

So a week later, accompanied by a few native porters, six oxen for dragging bait and a motley pack of mongrels I had bought from a pound, I set out for Masai land.

We followed the main highway to Konza about 80 miles south-east of Nairobi, and then turned almost due west. After a day's trek we began to leave the forested country and come into the open plains.

Here was perfect grazing country. The air was clear and cool, a pleasant thing to breathe, and not a house or a road to mar the sweep of the great rolling country. Except for Hilda and the children, I would have little cared if I never returned to Nairobi, for here was Africa as God made it before the white man arrived and began to deface the country with villages and farms.

It was not long before I met my first Masai, two self-assured young moran who were out lion hunting and had seen my camp. When I told them that I had come to kill lions, they seemed rather amused at this idea and said I would have trouble killing lions with nothing but a gun. A spear was the proper weapon to use on a lion. (The Masai have a great contempt for firearms, dating back to the old days when a Masai war party had little trouble defeating Arab slave traders armed only with muzzle-loading muskets.)

Apparently to call my bluff, one of the young men told me that he knew of two lions not far from camp. His friend chimed in, saying these animals were particularly fine specimens and he would be delighted to see me have a go at them. I had not intended making my first hunt before such a critical audience. But confronted with the moran's amused contempt, I felt duty bound to do my best. I told them to lead on, and called to one of my porters to uncouple the dogs.

Low growl of warning

THE Masai led me to a drift, the dry bottom of a ravine that in the rainy season turns into a roaring torrent. The floor of the drift was covered with sand and the Masai easily picked up the lions' spoor and began tracking. The dogs trotted along, examining the strange scent doubtfully. We rounded a bend in the winding course of the drift and saw before us two lions lying stretched out on the sand like big cats. They both rose and stood glowering at us. When the dogs saw what they had been trailing, most of the pack took one horrified look and fled, yelping in panic. But four dogs of Airedale strain bravely stood their ground.

Neither the Masai nor I could spare any thought for the dogs. The two moran stood with their spears upraised waiting for the charge. A noble sight. I took quick aim for the chest of the larger cat and fired. He reared at the impact of the bullet, grunted and fell heavily on his side. His companion promptly bolted into some heavy bush on the left bank of the drift. Instantly my four Airedales charged in and began to worry the dead lion. I let them pull at the mane to their hearts' content, and when the rest of the pack gingerly returned, I encouraged them to do the same.

As we approached the bush, I heard the second lion give a low, harsh growl of warning. One of the Masai tossed a stone into the cover. The lion charged out a few feet, making a feint at one of the Airedales, and then dodged back before I could get in a shot. But I knew it would not be long now before the lion charged, so I steadied myself to meet the attack.

Suddenly the bushes swayed violently as the lion burst out and came for me. He was bunched up almost in a ball, his ears flat and

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DANCING MASAI go through their pistonlike gyrations. They do this when celebrating a lion kill and when under influence of *pombe*, the native beer.

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his back arched. He seemed to fly through the air across the sandy bottom. One of my gallant Airedales met the charge full on and tried to seize the monster by the throat. The lion knocked him over as a child might knock over a toy.

When he was within 10 yards I fired. The bullet hit him fairly between the eyes. He dropped. In the cool morning air, a tiny curl of smoke rose from the bullet hole.

The two Masai went into a war dance of delight. The tense excitement of the charge and the thrill of seeing two fine-maned lions lying before us was too much for them. Still holding their spears, the men bent forward, thrusting out their behinds. Then they suddenly straightened up, throwing out their chests at the same time. As their ecstasy increased this curious jerky motion speeded up in tempo until they were going like pistons. This was a curious sort of emotional seizure common among the Masai and known among whites who now live with this remarkable people as "the shakes."

The fine Airedale that had tried to stop the charge now lay with a broken back. I could do nothing for him but put him out of his pain. Few dogs are fortunate enough to survive the swipe of a lion's paw. The dogs must keep out of a lion's way, forcing him to break cover by snapping and barking at him, but never taking a hold. My poor Airedale had died before he could learn the trick. I could only hope the rest would profit by his death.

News seems to travel through Africa with the speed of radio. When we returned to camp there was a crowd of young warriors waiting to greet me. I can only suppose they heard the noise of the shots and hurried to the spot. There was wild jubilation and my first two friends informed me that the crowd had come to take me to a spot where the lions were "thick as grass."

At daybreak the next morning we started off, the Masai trotting ahead with their spears. Late in the afternoon we came through the bush onto the banks of a muddy stream where a group of old men and women were watering a herd of the long-horned native cattle. It seemed I had come to the right spot, for only a few days before my arrival lions had killed six head of their precious cattle as well as two herdsman who had tried to defend the animals.

The enthusiastic crowd conducted me to their village. I had expected to see a large cluster of thatched huts, but I was almost on top of the place before I realized it was a village at all. It looked like nothing more than an unusually thick mass of brush. The "village" was surrounded by thornbushes, piled high as a man's head, and the huts within were no higher than my chest. They were made of cow dung, plastered like clay over a wattle frame. The dung had been baked as hard as brick by the hot sun and was quite odorless. To enter the huts, I had to bend nearly double. There were no windows except thin slits in the wall and the interiors were dark, but cool and comfortable. Because the Masai were subject to occasional retaliatory raids from other natives, they constructed their homes in this manner to escape notice. The buildings seemed crude, but they were easy to heat during the night and pleasantly cool in the day.

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After we had rested I went out to see the bodies of the cattle that had been killed. The Masai had removed most of the meat. This was unfortunate, for a lion's own kill makes a perfect bait; he will almost invariably return to the carcass to feed. The bodies of the two herdsmen killed by the lions had also been left out in the bush but these had already been devoured by lions and hyenas. The Masai rarely bury their dead, usually leaving the job to the scavengers that roam the plains.*

I trailed the lions and found they had entered a thick patch of sansevieria. They were evidently waiting in the undergrowth for night to fall so they could return to their kills. The Masai told me that when they drove their cattle into the kraal in the evening, they shouted to urge the herd along. The lions apparently recognized these shouts and came out soon after, knowing the coast would be clear.

I asked the men if they could drive their cattle to the kraal earlier this evening while I waited in ambush beside the dead heifer. The old men were greatly amused at this idea and remarked it should work—the same ambush had always worked when they were fighting the Naudi, another warlike people who occasionally attacked the Masai.

I took up my stand in some thick bush and waited for evening. Just as the sun was setting I heard the high-pitched, unmusical cries of the herdsmen as they drove the cattle in from pasture. While I was still listening to the fading sounds, I suddenly saw three maned lions sitting dog fashion on their haunches with their ears cocked as they also listened to the faint yells. When the cries died away the lions rose and trotted toward me in single file. I waited for them to come within gunshot. Sniffing the air, they came straight toward me. It seemed to take years while I gradually lifted my body enough to bring the rifle into position. I turned over the safety catch with my thumb and aimed at the leader. At the shot he dropped as though poleaxed. The others leaped back but did not run. Wild animals that have never heard firearms before are not particularly alarmed by the noise, apparently thinking it is thunder. I fired at the next lion and hit him in the shoulder. He spun around in a circle, roaring with rage; the third lion instantly sprang on him and they began to fight.

I fired again and hit this animal in the shoulder. He reared like a bucking horse, and while he was still on his hind legs I fired again into his neck. He dropped. The second lion was now also dead, whether from the effects of my bullet or the mauling he had taken from his friend I cannot say.

Two wives for the night

IN the distance I could hear the whoops and yells of the Masai who had heard my shots. They came pouring through the bush, and when they found all three animals lying stretched out in front of me, they went mad with delight.

When the time came to retire, I was ushered into the largest of the huts. In one of the compartments was a bed made of soft rushes and covered with bullock skins. The chief's two buxom young wives entered with me and obviously intended to share the bed. I wondered where the chief would spend the night, since there was clearly not enough room for him too. However it turned out that he was staying with some friends, so as not to interfere with any plans I might have for the evening. The girls, clad in Eve's attire except for thin strings of beads around their waistlines, remained at the end of the hut. They lay quietly and said nothing for, according to ancient custom, the male has to make the advances. I was tired after my long trek and soon fell into a heavy sleep.

In the next few weeks I killed more than 50 lions. Then, one evening while I was out alone, I became lost in the tangle of spurs and ravines that laced the foothills. I tried to backtrack, but before I reached camp night came on and I could no longer follow my trail. A storm had been brewing during the late afternoon and now it broke over the distant ridges. For a while I could guide myself by the flashes of lightning, for I knew the approximate position of the storm in relation to the mountains. But by midnight the storm had

*I remember another occasion in the Masai Reserve when I sat up all night by a fine zebra bait, hoping to get a lion or two. I had no luck, even though during the night I could hear lions grunting and the giggling sounds hyenas make while devouring something they like particularly. The bait was not touched. I had thought it particularly attractive to lions and hyenas. But I had something to learn: Masai natives laid my failure to an elderly Masai lady who had died the previous evening. It was she upon whom the animals had been feeding. Maybe in her youth the departed had been a graceful, dainty damsel for whom the Masai vied. Now the beasts of the wild preferred her to a fat, juicy zebra.

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CONTENTED CAT rests in tree despite the photographer's presence. Lions rarely climb trees, but the trunk of this one had a convenient 60° slope.

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blown away and I could only go on blindly through the darkness. Then I heard the distant tinkle of cowbells in a kraal—a lovely sound to me at that moment. I headed toward the noise, shouting as I went. In a few minutes my shouts were answered. A light appeared and I saw ahead a small Masai cow-dung hut with the usual thornbush kraal nearby. The Masai couple took me in and promptly started a fire in the tiny hut.

The man was in his early 40s, too old to be considered a *moran*, and so, from the Masai point of view, already started on the downhill grade that would finally lead to his being left out for the lions. He had heard about my exploits as a lion killer and eagerly asked me questions about my gun and how many animals I had killed. I found that his name was Kirakangano and that his father had been killed by a rhino years before. Kirakangano had developed a

hatred for dangerous wild animals and had devoted his life to hunting them. He had no interest in anything but tracking big game through the tangled intricacies of the bush and then meeting the charge of some infuriated beast with his shield and spear. Here was a man who liked hunting as I did.

When I asked Kirakangano if he would like to accompany me as a guide, he rose, took up his spear and shield, and asked when we were leaving.

He became my right hand. He was a magnificent tracker and absolutely fearless, and I relied on him as I did on myself. He had the knack of thinking in the same manner that an animal does, thus often foreseeing the quarry's next move and preparing for it.

The day he really proved his mettle was when we tracked down a wounded lioness. For a



LAZY LION yawns at another photographer. Then he went off to sleep.

while the trail led through open bush—good hunting country, for you could see 20 yards ahead. But then the spoor made a circle toward a thick, nasty tangle of brush. Here was real trouble.

It was deathly quiet in the thicket. Not so much as the chirp of a bird could be heard. I knew we must be close to the wounded lioness and at any moment she might burst out of the cover on top of us.

The dogs were growing increasingly restless. I told them to go ahead. They sprang forward. Almost at once a din of savage snarls and growls broke out directly in front of us. Kirakangano and I forced our way through the bushes to reach them. We had hardly taken a dozen steps in the high grass when we came on a rounded lair streaked with dried blood. Here the lioness had been resting. Beside the lair two of my brave airedales were lying dead, their

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mouths and eyes still open. They had taken the brunt of her attack. Kirakangano and I owed our lives to the dogs, for the lioness was so cunningly concealed we would never have seen her in time.

The other dogs were still fighting with her and we could hear them racing through the brush, stopping to bark frantically when she turned at bay. We hurried toward the sound. The Masai was carrying his spear at the ready, the long shaft beautifully balanced between thumb and forefinger.

One of the collies came limping back to me, terribly torn. I saw nothing could be done for the poor brute and shot him quickly. At the sound of my shot the wounded lioness suddenly leaped up from a tuft of dead grass a few feet away. At the same instant a second lioness broke from the cover on my right and charged us.

There was no time to think. Both the cats were nearly on us, each coming from a different direction. I fired at the second lioness because she seemed more determined. The bullet hit her half an inch over the left eye. At the same moment I saw Kirakangano plunge his spear into the body of the wounded animal beside us. She turned fiercely, grabbing the spear shaft with her teeth, and tried to pull it out of her body. Kirakangano started to draw his double-bladed knife from his belt, but before he could get the knife free I finished her with a shot in the neck.

Kirakangano and I silently shook hands. Without him, one or the other of the two lionesses would surely have gotten us.

My time on the Masai Reserve was beginning to run out. I had up to now shot 70 lions and still the tribe had cause for complaint. So I decided to try shooting from a thorn *boma* (blind) at night. This is hardly a sporting way of hunting, but I had come to the reserve on business.

I hitched a yoke of oxen to a zebra that I had shot and had them drag the bait several miles across the plains, finally leaving the carcass on the upwind side of a likely cover.

My porters cut brushwood and thorn branches, making a horse-shoe-shaped *boma* where I intended to spend the night with Kirakangano.

When all was ready, Kirakangano and I took up our positions in the *boma*. I gave him a flashlight and showed him how to aim it at the bait when the time came to shoot. Kirakangano was fascinated by the flashlight and kept switching it on and off until I told him to stop.

Lion banquet

AS it grew dusk several hyenas slunk up to the bait, followed by two jackals. The jackals sat anxiously feasting their eyes on the zebra while the hyenas slunk back and forth to make sure all was clear. Finally one dashed in and grabbed the exposed entrails, dashing off with them and giving vent to slurping, wailing guffaws. The others now came closer and began to pull at the bait. Then I saw them rush off while the jackals approached confidently. That meant lions were coming in. I laid my rifle in position and waited.

In a few minutes I heard the low and unmistakable breathing of lions behind the *boma*. They circled us and sprang on the zebra. I whispered to Kirakangano to switch on the light. To my astonishment, I heard him whisper "*Taballo!*" (Masai for "Wait!") I glanced over at him and saw that he was paralyzed with fear. The unaccustomed experience of shooting lions at night from a *boma* had completely unnerved this man who could run up to an infuriated lion in daylight with nothing but his spear.

I grabbed the light from his hand and flashed it through a small opening overlooking the bait. What a sight! There were at least 20 lions and lionesses a few yards in front of us. Two fine, black-maned lions stood staring at the light, the essence of defiance, their manes and chests covered with blood and filth from the stomach contents of the zebra. By this time Kirakangano was literally shivering with terror, but I knew he would gain confidence as soon as the shooting began. Wedging the light between two thorn branches so it shone on the scene, I slipped my rifle barrel through a hole in the brush and fired at what seemed to be the larger of the two males.

A chorus of grunts and savage growls went up from the pride. I fired again and again. The animals had retreated beyond the range of the light so I stopped to reload. Kirakangano was beginning to recover from his funk, and I gave him a piece of tobacco to chew on. Masai love the weed. The sting of the tobacco seemed to restore him somewhat and the sight of the three dead lions was more than any Masai could regard indifferently.

The pride now began to return. Kirakangano grabbed the light and began to shine it from one lion to another, moving so rapidly in his excitement that I had scarcely time to aim. A lion dropped

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at every report of my gun. The lions paid no attention to the shots. They would turn to sniff a dead friend fallen beside them, and then go on with their feeding.

Ten lions now lay dead around the zebra. Then, for some reason, a fine, black-maned lion came sneaking around our *boma* from the side. He stood there, giving vent to rare, bloodcurdling roars. The ground seemed to quiver with the reverberations. This outburst alarmed the rest of the pride, and they slowly withdrew, the old male following them.

I had no intention of allowing these fine hides to be torn to pieces by scavenger hyenas. When I was sure the lions had departed, I told Kirakangano to hold the light on the scene while I went out and pulled the dead animals closer to the *boma*. The Masai had now lost all his fear. I left the *boma* and started toward the dead lions. I had almost reached them when the light suddenly went out.

Calling to Kirakangano to turn it on again, I took another few steps forward. Suddenly I stumbled over the supple, hot body of a lion and fell on top of him. He gave a low grunt; he was still alive. I flung myself clear and raced for the *boma*. I expected every second to feel the lion on my back, but I reached the doorway and bolted inside. There was Kirakangano sitting with the pieces of the flashlight laid around him. He had become curious to see how the strange thing worked and had taken it apart while I was out in the darkness stumbling over wounded lions.

I spoke to him pretty roundly and he apologized. I reassembled the flashlight and put another bullet in the lion to make sure he was properly dead. Then we settled down to wait. During the night two more prides came to the bait. When dawn broke 18 lions lay dead before me. After the noise and turmoil of the night, the scene looked strangely peaceful. Nothing was moving except lion flies doing their creepy, jumpy antics. Taking care that there were no wounded lions about, Kirakangano and I left the *boma* and went out to stand over the dead animals.

I must own that I felt regrets. Yet I knew these animals had to die or the Masai would have continued to suffer their depredations. An artificial condition had created the surplus of lions and it could only have been corrected by artificial means. Whatever the means, Kirakangano and I stood there on the plain confronted by a sight that I doubt anyone had ever seen before—or will ever see again.

Since then I have done a lot of hunting. I hold the world's record for rhino and I have shot more than 1,400 elephants. We didn't keep records on lions, especially in those early days, but I'm pretty certain I have shot as many (about 600) as any other man. I certainly do not tell of these records with pride. Some of my hunting was done as a sportsman. But most of it, like that night kill on the Masai Reserve, was work that had to be done, and I happened to be the man who did it. Over the years I have acquired an enormous respect and admiration for the big animals of the African plains. I studied them because I was honestly interested in them. It may sound strange to the armchair conversationalist, but I mean it when I say that I had a deep affection for the animals I had to kill.



HUGE TROPHIES, a pair of elephant tusks weighing a total of 294 pounds, are held up by Author Hunter. Because of the slaughter by sportsmen and ivory hunters, few elephants live long enough to grow tusks this size any more.