



A STORY OF HOPE

RETURN OF THE LOST LIONS

Written and directed by **Ruth Berry**
Executive producers: **Sabine Holzer, Walter Köhler**
1 x 50 min., 4K, 5.1 + Stereo



This is the story of Florence, a rare West African lion, and how she is bringing back her kind from the edge of extinction in Niokolo-Koba National Park – Senegal’s best kept secret.

N iokolo-Koba is bigger than Yellowstone. It is a rare gem, vast enough to be a refuge for many endangered West African animals including a little-known subspecies of lion. There may be as few as 120 West African lions in the wild, but in Niokolo-Koba National Park they have made a miraculous comeback thanks to one lioness, Florence.

West African lions, also known as Senegal lions, are different to their southern cousins. The big cats of West Africa are taller and more muscular, and they lack those hallmark luxurious manes. They are even genetically distinct – members of a subspecies which used to range across North Africa, and closely related to Asiatic lions now found only in India.

A decade ago West African lions were undergoing a catastrophic population collapse. In Niokolo-Koba National Park only 10 to 15 remained. Poaching was rampant. In response, Senegalese National Parks’ staff and NGO Panthera began anti-poaching measures and a project to collar and monitor the lions.

The lion population slowly began to recover.

Then Florence came along.

In 2023, Florence made international news when rare footage was filmed on a camera trap. She appeared with three lion cubs. For hours they ate from a buffalo carcass and played – as lion cubs do.

Scientists believe she has given birth to three litters – nine cubs in total – in her lifetime. She is now considered the matriarch of Niokolo-Koba. Florence

has contributed approximately one third of the park’s lion population, which is now about 30 individuals.

Among the nine cubs are three males that have formed the park’s first male coalition. An especially encouraging sign of lion recovery because these units only form when numbers are high enough to warrant competition between males. Now, as these lions fill in the landscape, new prides are forming in new areas.

Over two seasons we follow the journey of the lions as they regain their hold inside Niokolo-Koba.

The World Heritage listed Niokola-Koba National Park has never been the subject of a documentary. Its diverse habitats – from rocky slopes to savanna floodplains and the iconic River Gambia – are also home to West Africa’s largest population of leopards and Africa’s northwesternmost populations of elephants and chimpanzees. The Park is the stronghold for some of the last surviving African wild dogs and western giant elands.

In this precious, little-known place, comes a story of hope, thanks in no small part to Florence, the West African lion.

The government of Senegal has given Ruth Berry exclusive access to Niokolo-Koba and this story.

A production of Terra Mater Studios



#terramatters