Infectious Diseases Subdue Serengeti Lions

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Infectious diseases stalk wildlife in the Serengeti, and climate change may be an accessory.

Nocturnal hunters, lionesses in a lion pride usually do the killing. They often look for their next meal from tree-lined vantage points, such as beneath umbrella-shaped acacias like those pictured here. Photograph: Guenter Guni.

It must be the wind, this almost-keening that rises and falls every minute or two. But guards outside the door tell a different story. Here at a lodge in Tanzania’s Serengeti National Park, one watchman after another lines a curving brick walkway leading to rooms.

Not far from a guest door, a simba, as he’s called in Swahili, roars. Near the lion—beyond the lodge lights and under a grove of umbrella-shaped acacia trees—recline several lionesses. Perhaps the lionesses, premier nocturnal hunters of the savanna, await their prey. Zebras, among their favored meals, frequent the grasslands surrounding the lodge. The roars continue but sound no nearer. For tonight, peaceful coexistence of lions and people reigns, at least in this part of the 14,500-square-kilometer Serengeti National Park.

Multiple diseases threaten Serengeti lions
Lions face serious threats to their future, some head-on, others lurking in the grasses, unseen until it’s almost too late. From growing numbers of people living along the Serengeti perimeter to the effects of infectious diseases and climate change, the king of beasts (Panthera leo) leads an uneasy life, according to Craig Packer, a biologist at the University of Minnesota who has studied the Serengeti’s lions for three decades. Sometimes, he says, lions face a double whammy.

For example, lions are subject to simultaneous outbreaks of canine distemper virus (CDV) and babesiosis. CDV, a