If indeed, as Marcus Aurelius once wrote to himself, “one’s worth is no greater than their ambitions,” Panthera has made its true worth felt across the length and breadth of wildlife conservation. At its inception in 2006, Panthera’s stated and practical ambition was ultimately nothing less than to save all wild felid species across their ranges and the critical ecosystems that support them…and to do so in a manner that was both scientifically rigorous and sensitive to the needs of the local communities who engage with wild cats in their daily lives.

This aspirational agenda is one that we have executed with massive commitment, energy and passion. In fact, in only several years, Panthera has moved to initiate programs across the broadest arc possible, touching - even redefining - nearly all aspects of felid conservation. Subscribing fully to Edward R. Murrow’s observation that “difficulty is the one excuse which history does not accept,” our single-minded pursuit remains nothing less than to identify all the key hurdles facing wild cat conservation globally and, in tandem with our partners, to channel efficiently and quickly the financial and intellectual capital required to meet those challenges comprehensively.

From a standing start, we now represent, in the words of one of our partner organizations, National Geographic, “the most comprehensive effort of its kind in wild cat conservation.” While we have a long way to go before we could even begin to rest on our laurels, the truth is that we have made great strides on almost all levels. The ultimate expression of appreciation for our progress was evinced last year with the signing of the Global Alliance for Wild Cats. Its cornerstone members are His Highness Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi; Jho Low, Director of Jynwel Charitable Foundation Limited of Hong Kong; Hemendra Kothari, Chairman of DSP Blackrock India and the Wildlife Conservation Trust; as well as my wife, Daphne, and myself. By pledging $20 million each to Panthera, a unique coalition of Gulf Arabs, Chinese, Indians and Americans have united in a common cause to change the face of cat conservation forever. We regard this initial group, hopefully just the harbinger of what will be an even bigger federation within Panthera’s $200 million capital campaign, to be a wonderful example of what people can accomplish if they are willing to work as equal partners…and a testimonial to the concept which suggests that “if you build it, they will come.” For cat conservation, it is certainly a game changer. But even for environmental philanthropy in general, the unprecedented nature of the Global Alliance model renders it a major breakthrough from which we hope others will be able to benefit.

What did these philanthropists see in Panthera that they were willing to commit $80 million in cornerstone pledges? Her Excellency Razan Khalifa Al-Mubarak, Secretary General of Abu Dhabi’s Environment Agency and Managing Director of the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, spoke for the group when she referred to Panthera as the Gold Standard in cat conservation. Coming from one of the Gulf’s leading conservationists, this was enormously high praise. Founder of Tompkins Conservation and the Foundation of Deep Ecology, Doug Tompkins, who with his wife Kris are personal heroes, expressed a similar conclusion:

“In relatively few years I have watched Panthera emerge from its starting gate and accelerate to be, without a doubt, the current foremost big cat conservation organization in the world. A formidable achievement. I asked myself how did this come
about? In looking into how this happened and where did these folks get up so much momentum so fast it was clear to me that this was one of those phenomena that was born of all the right elements. A first rate mission, the zeal and drive of its founders, the recruitment of top minds and leading expertise with obviously good management. I kept seeing what I call “Conservation Stars” joining Panthera and swelling the ranks of a group of world class biologists and feline specialists but being conducted with skill and I might even say bravura. I like those kinds of things when I see them for they spell excellence and virtually always get good things done. I aspire to that approach myself, although I get a tinge of envy to see how outstandingly successful Tom (Kaplan), Alan (Rabinowitz), George (Schaller), Howard (Quigley), David (Macdonald), Luke (Hunter), and many more have been in such a short time! This is an All Star team, and they are not that for no reason either, in simple terms, these are the best of the best. So we can merely expect wonders, and that is what the world is seeing from them. I imagine too that this is going to go on for a long time, and if they keep up this quality of work, they will earn a well deserved place in the top echelons of the worldwide conservation movement. In fact, when I reflect on it, they are already there.”

For an organization that only went fully operational in 2008, testimonials such as that are, as my kids would say, awesome. Gratitude is the mother of all virtues. So to all of those donors, staff, field specialists, local communities, political leaders, members of our scientific and advisory boards, NGO and government partners, and volunteers whose collaboration and confidence have made such endorsements possible... a heartfelt Thank You. Not for one single moment does the Panthera team take any of your contributions and service for granted.

Of course, such endorsements don’t exist in a vacuum. Indeed, we’d wish to believe we’ve earned our stripes... and spots... by paying our dues every day. To advance that agenda, Panthera has established the most comprehensive species-conservation programs in the wild cat field, including:

- The cutting-edge Tigers Forever program, which led the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to turn the Save the Tiger Fund over to us because, as they put it, “Panthera knows how to save tigers”;
- The most ambitious carnivore conservation project in the world, the Jaguar Corridor Initiative, which is working to connect jaguar habitats from the northern-most part of their range at the Mexican-American border all the way to the southern-end of their range in Northern Argentina;
- Project Leonardo, Panthera’s solution to the conservation of the remarkably diminished populations of the African lion;
- The world’s only range-wide leopard conservation program, Project Pardus, an effort that has resulted in major changes to the legal hunting and illegal persecution of the species, and has already yielded incredible fruit through its ‘Furs for Life’ initiative, a program that has likely saved more cats than any other single felid conservation effort in Africa;
- The Snow Leopard Program, which is, with the participation of range state governments, the first comprehensive project to identify and tackle the major threats facing this elusive but savable species.

At a no less impactful scale, Panthera additionally runs two conservation programs on cougars in Wyoming and Chile; is working with its partners at Oxford’s WildCRU to protect clouded leopards and its reclassified cousin, the Sunda clouded leopard; and has begun a new African cheetah program to complement its cooperation with the Iranian Ministry of Environment to conserve the last population of Asiatic cheetahs. Moreover, we are also leading the way on conservation of some of the world’s smaller and lesser-known cats via our Small Cat Action Fund (SCAF), a grants program established by Panthera in partnership with the IUCN Cat Specialist Group. In other words, we are making change happen.

Other achievements include an ambitious joint-venture with the American Museum of Natural History in New York to create the world’s largest Global Felid Genetics Database as an important adjunct to our efforts to devise the optimal genetic corridors worldwide that are a prerequisite for long-term cat survival. Our Strategic Lands Initiative has also secured critical stretches of habitat connecting protected areas in the Brazilian and Paraguayan Pantanal.

Another arena in which we have broken the mold of enduring sustainability is by investing aggressively in the human capital required for felid conservation through education and training. Our range of activities captures the entire value chain of career development from training entry-level field wardens through to post-doctoral research grants. Having independently created the first global scholarship program for post-graduate research in wild cat studies, an initiative which began with one recipient in 2006 and which has thus far encompassed 136 grants to 75 recipients, we are now the largest funder of felid-related education in the world.

Furthermore, we have created a unique strategic alliance that has been created with Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation
Research and, logically therefore, cat conservation. The publications that have covered our work include dozens of great names in media, from The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and National Geographic through to CNN, the Discovery Channel, the BBC, and CBS, where our work to balance the preservation of the jaguar corridor in Brazil with sustainable ranching was the focus of a deep profile by producer Tom Anderson and the late, and quite wonderful, Bob Simon of 60 Minutes. Most recently, the poetry of Tiger Tiger a filmed testament to Dr. Alan Rabinowitz’s indomitable will to save tigers, has captured the inspiring essence of the man who most personifies cat conservation.

Perhaps the best proof of Panthera’s catalytic impact is the caliber of the people it has attracted to its banner. At the helm, we are exceptionally fortunate to have Alan, one of the world’s greatest tiger and jaguar experts, steering the way in his position as CEO, with Dr. Luke Hunter as President. We are equally blessed to have the incomparable Dr. George Schaller, an iconic figure in the world of conservation, as Vice President of Panthera. Joining their ranks, Dr. Tom McCarthy, the world’s leading authority on snow leopards, serves as Panthera’s Snow Leopard Program Executive Director, and Dr. Howard Quigley, one of the Americas’ leading cat specialists, is Executive Director of our Jaguar and Puma programs. The highly esteemed Dr. John Goodrich has come aboard as Senior Director of our Tiger program and Dr. Paul Funston, with 25 years of experience working on African cats, heads our Lion and Cheetah Programs. The Directors of Panthera’s Leopard and Tiger Programs are Dr. Guy Balme and Dr. Joe Smith, respectively, both of whom were scholars whose postgraduate work and projects we funded, and prove Panthera’s model of cultivating the best in breed.

As part of its ongoing commitment to the highest level of transparency and best practices, Panthera created the Cat Advisory Scientific Council, a major milestone in felid conservation. Chaired by Dr. George Schaller, the Council itself is an honor roll of many of the world’s senior cat conservationists, men and women from multiple organizations whose legendary cat-like independence of spirit has coalesced into a common ambition.

Cognizant that conservation requires the “buy-in” of numerous elements of society, Panthera established a Conservation Council as an expert advisory board contributing to the implementation of Panthera’s mission. Chaired by the great Glenn Close, the Council includes an impressive roster of members drawn from business, politics and the media, and provides Panthera with actionable advice and guidance on fundamental topics relevant to the growth and the development of the organization.

Getting to the point where a cause goes from being a terribly daunting task with a handful of adherents to an acknowledged success with momentum and many allies is a rarity. Panthera’s genuine progress to date has been extraordinary, reinforcing a growing perception that our group represents one of the boldest and most exciting forces to emerge in wild cat conservation. The joy that I have been given in working with my colleagues to build this movement is one of the greatest privileges of my life… and participation in Panthera’s mission is an opportunity that I would urge upon anyone so inclined to make a real impact on saving not only the world’s cats, but the vast ecosystems that support them. I have nonetheless always been a firm believer that a wise founder must create a durable succession plan at the earliest possible juncture. Indeed, Alan and I agreed at the outset that, whereas our passion might be catalytic, Panthera’s future rested on conscripting and welcoming others into the fold. It would never be “about us”, except insofar as someone needed to lead from the front, and to announce that a “laser focus” on cat conservation was an idea whose time had come. From activists to donors big and small, Panthera offers a platform for people who share our passion to get involved, to make a difference and to be a part of a model that is advancing among the most comprehensive and effective strategies in wildlife conservation. Moreover, we can offer you, our supporters, something which very few philanthropic organizations can provide. As a consequence of the Global Alliance, Panthera can pledge that every dollar you donate goes straight to our Conservation and Education programs.

It is said that to do a good deed for a wild animal is twice-blessed, for the beneficiary has no means of expressing its gratitude. To those who have always wondered how they might best serve the wider world, wildlife conservation is, at its core, one of the purest forms of giving. If you can, join us. At the end of the day, as my family, colleagues and I have found to our own immense satisfaction, Churchill put it best: “We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.”

Thomas S. Kaplan
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