

*Lions and Warriors: Conservation among Traditional
Masai Pastoralists*

Living with Lions Interim report
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Photo: Michael Calvin

Background

Throughout Africa, lions are disappearing because people kill them to protect livestock and herding tribes have lost their former tolerance for predators. People are abandoning the ancient methods that allowed coexistence between lions and livestock, and are spearing and poisoning lions on a scale which threatens extinction outside the largest parks and managed areas. Here we summarize recent progress of the Kilimanjaro Lion Conservation Project (KLCP) and its collaborators in southeast Kenya.

The year 2006 has been a very mixed year for the African lion in Kenyan Masailand. In most of the region, the picture is the same (grim) or worse than the previous year. However, on Mbirikani Group Ranch (MGR) where the KLCP, the Masailand Preservation Trust, and the Mbirikani Predator Compensation Fund are operating, there have been what can only be described as sensationally positive developments; we are all more optimistic than we have ever been. Thanks to strong support from the Masai community, lion numbers are increasing on our study area. In 2007, we are expanding our mutual efforts from 500 to nearly 1700 square miles of Masailand.

Lion Population Increase

For the last four years, the Mbirikani Predator Compensation Fund, headed by Tom Hill and Richard Bonham, has compensated group ranch members for livestock killed by predators, with financial incentives for proper herding and anti-predator measures. Our lion monitoring program estimates an increase of 10 lions (67%) on MGR, attracted initially by high seasonal prey numbers, but apparently staying due to lack of persecution compared to neighboring lands. We are currently collaring members of each group. Of the estimated 25 lions on the ranch, 18 are cubs or subadults, a substantial cohort with an optimistic future. Most significant, four of the recent immigrants are adults, more than doubling the breeding population.

Report on Lion Killing

In May 2006, responding to a dramatic upsurge in lion killing, we prepared a report *Lion Killing in the Amboseli -Tsavo Ecosystem, 2001-2006, and its Implications for Kenya's Lion Population* on the rate of lion killing in Masailand and sent it to interested parties, including our donors. A few days later, we were surprised to see it featured prominently on the National Geographic website, which engendered coverage in the Kenyan press. Our data show that in spite of ever-dwindling numbers of lions in this, Kenya's premier tourism region, lion spearing by Masai warriors was increasing annually, with a dramatic rise in 2006, particularly in and surrounding Amboseli National Park. The report covered only the first half of the year; an additional 12 were killed by December, for a total of 32, an all time high at a time when the lion population must be at an all time low.

However, only one of those killings was on MGR, and the youths involved were severely punished by the elders. The dramatic difference in lion killing between MGR and other nearby Group Ranches is strong evidence that compensation is working.

Lion Conservation Film

In order to reach a larger audience, both in Laikipia-Samburu (20,000 square miles) and in Kenyan and Tanzanian Masailand (nearly 40,000 square miles, the largest and most important wildlife habitat left in Africa), we have produced an educational video on predator conservation and livestock management, filmed in local settings and using local Masai-speaking people as narrators, speaking in the Masai language. *The great majority of*

pastoralists have never seen a TV, let alone a film, so this is a very powerful way to reach people with a conservation message. The video is being shown widely in community meetings throughout Laikipia-Samburu by Steven Ekwanga, our community education officer, and throughout Kenyan Masailand through our new initiative, Lion Guardians (below). DVD projectors and generators have been purchased through a grant from the Denver Zoo.



Photo: Kathryn Combes

Community film show in Laikipia, Sept. 2006. Seventy people in a 15' x 20' one room schoolhouse.

The film has been beautifully produced by Kenyan film makers Jenny Sharman and Richard Jones, with footage of local people in traditional settings, wildlife, and practical livestock management advice; the soundtrack is a local Masai musician playing an ancient one-string instrument. It covers the following critical conservation issues, all featuring local people speaking Masai:

- The value of wildlife in general and lions in particular. Many people have never actually seen lions and other wildlife, and this footage generates much excitement.
- A realistic appraisal of the costs of living with lions, featuring footage of cattle killed by predators and local people discussing their livestock losses.
- The efficacy of traditional measures in protecting livestock from predators.
- The circumstances under which predators turn to livestock, including:
 - poor daytime herding
 - faulty bomas
 - availability of livestock remains around settlements
 - absence of dogs
 - absence of natural prey species
- Detailed illustrations of methods that protect livestock
- Extensive discussion of overgrazing and alternative approaches to a livestock-based economy, which is becoming increasingly difficult due to overgrazing.

The film is extremely popular, and we are inundated with requests to show it much more widely.



Photo: Anthony Kasonga

LGF and hyena biologist Stephanie Dolrenry addressing morans about predator conservation at March 3 meeting

Lion Guardians

On March 3, 2007, we witnessed an unprecedented event: hundreds of young warriors of Mbirikani Group Ranch met to celebrate the end of lion-killing as a manhood ritual, and the beginning of conservation as a career for young men. The Lion Guardians (aka Simba Scouts) initiative has come out of Leela Hazzah's Master's work on Masai attitudes toward conservation and predators. They have been generally hostile, because they earn next to nothing from conservation and tourism, but pay a high price in lost livestock, wildlife disease transmitted to their cattle, and grass lost to wild grazers. Now, Lion Guardians is turning young Masai men, the great majority of whom are uneducated and unemployable, from lion killers into paid and respected conservationists and community educators. Their responsibilities include:

- monitoring and protecting lions in their areas
- informing their neighbors of lions' presence so that they can be avoided
- helping people find stray livestock before they can be taken by predators
- educating their communities about conservation in general, and livestock protection in particular
- showing the video

We are seeking funds for a vehicle which will be outfitted as a mobile video theater, and will also be used by the coordinator of the Lion Guardian project as it expands throughout the region. They will operate under Leela's guidance (this project will be her PhD. thesis) under the aegis of the existing Amboseli-Tsavo Game Scouts Association, which has wider responsibilities for anti-poaching, rhino protection, and security.



Photo: Anthony Kasonga

Chief Lion Guardian Mukoi ole Kanatia radio tracking a lioness he discovered, named and helped collar .

There are currently six Lion Guardians, and numerous volunteers; jobs are keyed to the number of lions in the region, increasing as the lion population increases. If lions are speared or poisoned, a job will disappear.

As a further measure of changing attitudes, they *morans* themselves have formed the *Mbirikani Moran Conservation Society*, led by their Chief. This is equally unprecedented, showing that these young men are beginning to understand that their environment and its wildlife are key to their future prosperity and cultural identity.

In June, a delegation of MGR *morans*, including several Lion Guardians, will spend six weeks at the San Diego Zoo, kicking off the new Wild Animal Park and publicizing lion conservation efforts in our region.

Herding Improvements

Our early analysis of the compensation data showed that much of the depredation problem is due to poor herding practices in this region – unlike most pastoralists, the Masai in our area leave many livestock out at night where they are killed by predators. We recruited Ogeto Mwebi to do his Master's work on herding practices, comparing them to Laikipia, where stock are rarely left out at night. He found a number of differences (e.g. in Laikipia, people count their livestock in the evening, whereas MGR Masai do not). In response to Ogeto's work, in late 2006 the PCF hired experienced herders to look after cattle belonging to people who had unusually high losses. Those herds lost nothing during the experimental period, demonstrating to all the necessity for better herding. We continue to monitor the results, to see if people will change their own practices accordingly; this program will continue.

Attitudes Toward Compensation

Shari Rodriguez completed her Master's thesis on the community's response to the Predator Compensation Fund, and her findings are helping to fine tune the system, especially educational outreach.

Expanded Regional Lion Monitoring

Seamus MacLennan spent four months at Oxford writing up his analysis of four year's of PCF claim data, and has just returned to resume and expand his monitoring of lion population trends. Stephanie Dolrenry stood in during his absence, and is about to start her PhD work on hyena conservation, both in Masailand and in Laikipia.

As a central part of expanding all our efforts on a much wider geographic scale, Seamus has begun collaring lions on Kuku Group Ranch to the south of MGR, essentially doubling the size of our study area. Kuku is also initiating a compensation plan modeled on Mbirikani PCF. We are collaborating with Dutch researchers on a study of Amboseli National Park lions, which will by necessity include Olgului Group Ranch which surrounds the Park, scene of most of the 2006 slaughter. Lion population trend data are the only meaningful measure of conservation efforts, and will underlie all evaluation of our various programs as they expand regionally.

International Human-Lion Conflict Mitigation Initiative

Living with Lions (the KLCP and the Laikipia Predator Project) is one of the very few organizations in Africa with practical experience in reducing lion-human conflict, the only real threat to lions. LGF and Steven Ekwanga are starting a new program with the Wildlife Conservation Society that will involve travel to other eastern and southern African countries to educate local game departments and conservation NGO's on practical methods to reduce lion-human conflict. Initially, we will be working in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Botswana. Because it so effectively deals with all the major conservation issues of predators, livestock, and landuse, we will design these workshops around the film described above, and are seeking funds to translate it into both English and Swahili for use internationally, and for African broadcast TV.

Acknowledgments

Living with Lions is one of the very few conservation organizations dealing directly with the complex human factors that are responsible for the lion's current plight. Our superb team of dedicated and talented young biologists are devoting their lives to ensure that the lion will still roar in the African dusk for millennia to come, and they all deserve our deepest respect. Their work is wholly dependent on donations from individuals and foundations who are dedicated to the same vision. The entire *Living with Lion* team expresses our gratitude to our supporters for their foresight and generosity.