Let the Games begin - Lion Guardian Games 2017

The 2017 Lion Guardian Games was a wonderful weekend of comradery, competition, knowledge-sharing, and fashion! The event was held in northern Tanzania for the first time, and teams from Lion Guardians, KopeLion and Ruaha Carnivore Project competed in spear-throwing, 100m sprint, high jump, limbo-skimming (stick-throwing to the uninitiated) and traditional fire-making. The events are designed to test the traditional skills of the warriors, and each year they demonstrate amazing skill, sportsmanship and humour.

The Ndutu Safari Lodge was a wonderful host - ensuring the teams were cared for, well-fed, and had sufficient competition in the limbo and tug-of-war! This annual event provides a hugely valuable opportunity for our own Lion Defenders to mix with the Lion Guardians and the Ilchokuti from KopeLion to share experiences across sites and remember they are part of a broader team working to mitigate human-lion conflict.

Our team did us proud and won several events, and next year we hope to have a similar event in Ruaha to showcase the skill of the Lion Defenders to a home crowd, and to engage the wider community in this kind of wonderful event.

A selection of images from the 2017 Lion Guardian Games, which was a wonderful experience for bonding both within our team and with the other teams developed through the Lion Guardians model. © BenJee Cascio
RCP Director gives TED talk in Tanzania

This year’s TED Global meeting was held in Arusha, Tanzania, celebrating 10 years since the first TED Global event which was held in the same location. This is a high-profile event which brings together some of the leading entrepreneurs, philanthropists and innovators from around the world, so we were thrilled when our Director Amy Dickman was invited to attend. The talks were inspiring, and when a chance came up to give a last-minute talk, Amy applied... and was both thrilled and terrified to be chosen! People usually get months to practise TED talks, so having 48 hours was daunting, but she was lucky enough to have great advice from a group of experienced fellow TED attendees, justifiably known as the “Super Super” group! With their help she gave a very well-received 6-minute overview of the challenges of carnivore conservation and what RCP is doing to address these issues. It was a wonderful opportunity to raise awareness about RCP to a new audience, and was a very worthwhile - if nerve-wracking - event!

Amy (above) with the “Super Super” group of TED attendees, (below) giving the talk.

RCP Porridge project expands into a second school

One of our most valued local benefit programmes is the Porridge Project, where we provide nutritious daily meals to primary school children. This project came about when we realised that relatively few students were able to pass our qualifying exam to become a Simba Scholar, and when we talked with the teachers about what the problem was, they highlighted a lack of food at school as a major limiting factor. Therefore, we set up a programme where we work with local women to source ingredients such as maize meal, sugar, peanuts, eggs and milk, and they are employed to cook a filling porridge for all the primary students at a school.

The porridge, known locally as mgongeo, is sweet and well-liked, with students queuing up for a second cup wherever possible. Photo credit: Jacob David, Ruaha Carnivore Project.

We started this programme in Kitisi Primary School, and it was rapidly clear how positive the impacts were, as it was linked to a marked improvement in both attendance and educational attainment. It was extremely popular amongst the community and there was a strong demand to expand it, so we have just expanded it to Malinzanga Primary School, which is in an area where many people suffer from human-wildlife conflict. This school has 6 teachers and 541 students at present, many of whom walk long distances to and from school each day. As the school had no cooking facilities before this programme started, the students often stayed without food all day, and the hunger was recognised as a reason for their inability to study well.

The school head teacher, village chairman and the wider community were all very pleased with the expansion of the porridge project here, and it has already had an impact: since it started, there have been no unexplained absences from school, as both pupils and their families are keen for them to have breakfast.
to attend as they know they will receive at least one good meal a day. In an area where half of people cannot meet their daily food needs, this programme provides incredibly important benefits for local people, and shows that wildlife conservation initiatives can have a marked positive impact at a household level.

There is a huge need to expand this programme further into more local primary schools: it costs around US$ 9000 per year per school, but every contribution counts, so if anyone would like to help us continue and ideally expand this programme, please get in touch on info@ruahacarnivoreproject.com.

Students at Malinzanga Primary School cheerfully finishing their porridge.
Photo credit: Jacob David, Ruaha Carnivore Project

Lion Recovery Fund - a major boost for lion conservation... and RCP!

August 10th is World Lion Day, which aims to celebrate this amazing species and highlight the pressing need for its conservation. This year, the launch of a new initiative called the Lion Recovery Fund (LRF) heralded a great leap forward in terms of lion conservation. The LRF is an ambitious initiative between the Wildlife Conservation Network and the Leonardo diCaprio Foundation, which aims to ‘invest in the most innovative and effective projects across Africa that can recover lions and restore their landscapes’. We were thrilled to be chosen as one of the first projects to be supported by the LRF, which has made a three-year commitment to RCP to help support the continuation and expansion of our community camera-trapping work. We are very grateful to the Lion Recovery Fund for this investment, and look forward to working closely with them on wider-scale lion conservation planning.

The Lion Recovery Fund website for more information please visit https://www.lionrecoveryfund.org/

World Lion Day was also a great way to help publicize our work through partners around the world. One of our longest-standing partners is Cleveland Metroparks Zoo and the Cleveland Zoological Society, and they put together this short video showcasing our partnership to protect lions - as well as other carnivores and wildlife in general - in the Ruaha landscape: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYUadTBGNgE&feature=youtu.be

Community camera-trapping continues to deliver vital benefits

As mentioned above, one of the programmes that LRF and other partners such as the African Wildlife Foundation support is our community camera-trapping. This initiative is aimed at delivering tangible local benefits directly from the presence of wildlife on village land. Local villagers are trained and employed to place camera-traps on their land, and each animal photographed generates a certain number of points, depending on the endangerment and potential threat of that species. Villages compete against each other in groups of four, and every 3 months, the village in each group which has amassed the largest number of points receives $2000 worth of community benefits, while the second-placed one receives $1500, the third $1000 and the fourth $500. The benefits are split between education, healthcare and veterinary medicine, which were the priorities selected by the villagers. Then the points are reset and the competition starts again for the next 3 months. This is an extremely important way of demonstrating that wild animals on village land deliver direct benefits to local people, and we have already found that in this way, conservation is becoming a major positive force in local communities.

Smaller carnivores such as this white-tailed mongoose from Mapogoro (left), and the slender mongoose from Malinzanga (right), receive 5000 points each in the community camera-trapping initiative © Ruaha Carnivore Project
Carnivores generate more points in general than herbivores: this leopard provided 10,000 points for Mahuninga village © Ruaha Carnivore Project.

Something seemed to go slightly wrong with the colour settings of this camera-trap, but it resulted in a lovely sepia-tinged image of a female elephant and her young (just visible behind her): 10,000 points are allocated for elephants as they can create intense conflict, so this image generated 20,000 points for Kisang’a village © Ruaha Carnivore Project.

It is obviously vital to incentivise people to conserve prey animals as well, such as these wonderful sable antelope camera-trapped on Mahuninga village land. The female (left) is much more chestnut-coloured than the black male (on the right) © Ruaha Carnivore Project.

Every 3 months, the benefits are chosen by the villages, and the Ruaha Carnivore Project distributes them at a local celebration or ‘sherehe’. These are extremely popular events and people come from all around to hear about the project, see the benefits being distributed, and learn more about both the community camera-trapping and the other work that we do.

Villagers queuing up to take part in the sherehe in Mapogoro village © Ruaha Carnivore Project.

The Ruaha Carnivore Project team handing over village benefits, including supplies for the school and the clinic © Ruaha Carnivore Project.
Lion Defenders help elder build boma after lions attack his cattle

Responding to depredations from carnivore attacks is a critical part of RCP’s work. In July, there was a depredation incident in Mwira where a lion killed several cows belonging to a well-respected Barabaig elder, who did not have a reinforced boma (livestock enclosure). The Lion Defenders moved quickly to help the owner sell one of the cows which had been killed at a local market, and encouraged him to use some of the profit to pay for his share of a subsidized wire-mesh boma from RCP. These sturdy wire enclosures prove very effective at safeguarding livestock (as long as they are used and maintained well), and we have seen a large decrease in carnivore attacks at bomas reinforced with wire.

The Lion Defenders helping to transport a cow killed in a lion attack to the local market. © Ruaha Carnivore Project

When RCP staff explained the potential benefits to the elder, he immediately agreed to working with RCP to construct a wire boma for his large herd of cows. He told the team that he was losing up to ten cows every year and was relieved that the reinforced boma could stop the losses he was experiencing. Within one week the team returned to his home to begin construction of his boma. Lion Defender Alex Sedyokeja was on hand to assist and learn more about the construction and benefits of the boma in order to share and encourage other pastoralists to adopt wire bomas as well, and further reduce carnivore attacks as well as the likelihood of retaliatory killings.

RCP team constructing the livestock enclosure. Here they ensure that posts are straight and secure before building the wire mesh enclosure. © Ruaha Carnivore Project

Barabaig mothers visit RCP camp to express their thanks

In August, a group of local Barabaig women visited the RCP camp to express their thanks for what the project had done for their families. The women were all mothers of Simba Scholars who were in the first year of the programme, so were now graduating from secondary school. The women had put real thought and generosity into their visit: they brought a wonderful gourd which they had beaded with "RCP" and had filled with eggs (one for each of the Scholars), which is a traditional gift amongst the Barabaig. They had also made a wonderful beaded Barabaig outfit for our Director, Amy Dickman, which was very gratefully received! The whole team was very touched by their actions, and we look forward to helping many more families have a brighter future through our scholarship programme as well as many other initiatives.

Amy receiving the beaded gourd of eggs from the mothers of the first Simba Scholar graduates. © Tanur Shah, Ruaha Carnivore Project
Park drivers provide wonderful images and data

Ruaha is one of the most important places in the world for large carnivores and other wildlife, but it has been extremely understudied, and very little is still known about the distribution and relative abundance of species across the landscape. Helping to provide such data to the Tanzanian authorities for conservation planning is one of RCP’s key aims, but it is challenging to collect information on species presence across such a vast area. Thankfully, we have wonderful partners in the form of the local lodges and drivers, who are given RCP cameras and data collection devices, and provide us with wonderful images and data of wildlife each month. As well as showcasing the beauty of Ruaha’s wildlife and landscapes, this helps us build up maps of likely species across the landscape, and identify those areas and species in particular need of conservation attention.

Lions in the Park are generally unafraid of vehicles, so you can get lovely images, such as this one of a relaxed male lion.

Photo credit: Whiteman John, Ruaha River Lodge

However, Ruaha is also important for many other species of large carnivores, such as the incredibly beautiful and adaptable leopard.

Photo credit: John Whiteman, Ruaha River Lodge

Ruaha holds the third-biggest population of endangered African wild dogs left in the world, but it is still a very rare and exciting moment to spot these amazing animals.

Photo credit: Vincent Kayaga, Mwagusi Safari Camp

Obviously carnivores need a thriving population of prey animals to do well. Here, same rarely-seen Lichtenstein’s hartebeest look inquisitively towards the camera.

Photo credit: Mpinga Timanyi, Asilia Kwihala Camp
This lovely shot of a female (left) and male (right) sable antelope was taken by Vicent Kavaya from Mwagusi Safari Camp. The horns on these impressive antelope make them a formidable prey animal.

The photos are not always easy to see, but they reveal the reality of life in the bush: here, a baboon starts to eat a young impala. Baboons are omnivorous and will eat meat when they can. Photo credit: Vicent Kavaya, Mwagusi Safari Camp.

However, we are always particularly happy when we get lovely carnivore photos! Here, a leopard takes a relaxing snooze in a tree. Photo credit: Tom, Asilia Kwihala Camp.

Here a lioness and her cubs take a leisurely walk along the sand river close to Mwagusi. Photo credit: Vicent Kavaya, Mwagusi Safari Camp.
This lioness from Mbagi pride appeared to be trying to stalk a young elephant from this herd, but she was deterred by the security provided by this single-tusked male elephant. Photo credit: Tom, Asilia Kwihala Camp.

Cheetah sightings appear to have declined in Ruaha over recent years, although we are not sure why. These two were seen in the Lunda area, and were rather shy around the vehicle. Photo credit: Abdillah Hussein from Kichaka Expeditions.

Dancing events prove a popular way of engaging pastoralists

Traditionally, one of the benefits of killing a lion within pastoralist communities was that it led to a celebration, where young men and women could meet and dance together. Therefore, RCP has been working closely with the communities to develop ways in which people can have those dances without needing to kill a lion. We hold a monthly dancing event in a community which has not had a hunting event during the last month, and encourage both Maasai and Barabaig pastoralists to join in.

The events have become very popular, and provide an opportunity for our community liaison staff to explain to people in remote communities all about our work and how we could help them, for instance by helping safeguard livestock and providing benefits linked to wildlife. The dances are held at a respected elder’s house, so it is also an opportunity for village elders to talk to the younger tribe members about the positive impacts that the project is having.

Recently RCP supported a dancing event in Malinzanga, which was well attended by both Maasai and Barabaig pastoralists, with over 40 of each group attending. The two groups held dances both simultaneously and separately, with some of the Maasai later joining in with the Barabaig dancing. Stephano, Mathew and Benjee all gave short speeches talking about the project and encouraging coordination and partnership between the pastoralists, and between them and the project.

RCP Community Liaison officer, Stephano Asecheka (far right), and coordinator Mathew Bajuta (second from right) address a group of youths at the dancing event.

Species Spotlight: the caracal, or simbamangu in Swahili

Africa’s version of the lynx, the beautiful caracal is the heaviest and fastest of all the small cats. It is tawny to rufous in colour, with faint spots on whitish underparts, and the face is particularly distinctive with dark markings on the cheeks and eyes and long black tufted ears. The origin of the name Caraca came from the Turkish word “Karakulak” which means “Black Ear”. These conspicuous black ear-hair tufts, which are around 4.5cm long, act as visual communicators while caracal, like other cats, also meow, growl, hiss, spit and purr.

Caracals reach 40–50cm at the shoulder and weigh 8–18kg, with the males usually markedly bigger than the females. They have exceptional jumping ability which allows them to leap more than 3m in the air to swipe at birds in flight and they are excellent climbers, often covering a kill with leaves or caching food in trees.

© Ruaha Carnivore Project
Photos: The photogenic caracal has appeared on many stamps, including the Tanzanian 2,000-shilling stamp.

Caracals seemed to be important to the ancient Egyptians, and they have been found embalmed and were represented in wall paintings of that time. They were also valued by Chinese emperors, who gave them as gifts. Relatively easily tamed, the caracal was used as a hunting animal (much as the cheetah was) in India and the Middle East, and bets were taken on how many birds it could catch if released close to a flock of pigeons. It is thought that this practice gave rise to the term ‘putting the cat among the pigeons’.

The caracal is highly secretive and difficult to observe and for this reason there are no density estimates for the species in Tanzania. They are typically nocturnal, although its elusive nature may mean that it is more active in the day than realised. Caracals live mainly alone or in pairs and tend to prefer arid bush, only venturing into open grassland at night where they prey on a wide range of animals. Caracals can cause conflict with people by attacking smaller livestock, but will also take rodents, small birds, snakes and young antelopes. Interestingly, it has been reported that they eat grapes and grasses to clear their systems of parasites. The main threat to the survival of the caracal is habitat loss due to agricultural expansion and desertification, and they are often also killed by people due to conflict over livestock.

Left: A caracal and her cub captured on one of RCP’s camera-traps, and right, a caracal bounding through the grass in Ruaha. © Ruaha Carnivore Project

By the time they are a year old, caracals are ready to mate and give birth to litters of one to four kittens, born into a nest lined with hair or feathers, or in a burrow. Kittens’ ears are folded at birth and become erect after a month. Their eyes open at 10 days old and they start to chase prey at just 3 weeks, although they will stay with their mothers for around 10 months before dispersing and becoming independent. Here, there is a link of a hungry caracal kitten calling: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwIZORKOlRE

Staff profile: meet Daudi Kinyoka, a Lion Defender

‘Hi, my name is Daudi Kinyoka and I am a Lion Defender. My traditional name is Gidawuri which means a powerful man. I am a married man from the Barabaig tribe and I have been working with RCP as a Lion Defender since 2013. Before I knew about RCP I was a warrior and took part in traditional lion hunts, but now I defend lions. I have very good relations with the communities and they listen to me at our traditional community meetings where I have influence amongst the warriors.

Daudi monitors lion and other wildlife activity in the Zone B-Lyangolo which includes part of Kittisi village. Here he is seen recording GPS coordinates of lion spoor in the zone which has a high number of lions sighted and detected. © Ruaha Carnivore Project

For the first time when Dr. Amy visited us I was afraid to see a white woman coming to my boma. She said that she wanted to work with Barabaig to help the lions and it was my first time to hear that. I thought, how can a woman conserve the lions which were a big problem attacking our livestock and people? It was something I thought that it was impossible and for a long time I thought that she might have another hidden ambition behind the scene.

Later on I continued seeing her setting up the camp a few kilometers from my place. The agenda was brought to the community meeting and raised many questions but through Stephano, the RCP/LD community liaison officer, he used his influence and skills to explain in my detail, and finally the elders agreed to accept the white woman to be their neighbour but it was not that simple.

‘I really like my job despite of the challenges I face from my fellow warriors, especially when there is a retaliatory lion hunt. Although some of them do understand and support RCP, when it comes to the point that the lions have caused the problems then they forget all the good things done by the project to them. Through being a Lion Defender I can’t begin to tell you all the benefits and skills I have got, for instance the free education to read and write Swahili, and the use of devices like GPS and cellphones.’
Young warriors show keen interest in Park trips

Taking community members on visits to Ruaha National Park is a longstanding and effective programme of the Ruaha Carnivore Project which helps to improve attitudes to the park, conservation, RCP, and wildlife. There has always been lots of demand from local people to go on these visits, but sometimes it is hard to engage those people who have been most antagonistic towards wildlife, which are the very ones where attitude change would be most beneficial. Therefore, we were thrilled when we heard that a group of young warriors – many of whom traditionally kill lions and other wildlife – were expressing interest in going on a Park trip. The team leapt upon the opportunity to not only provide education for the group, but to also build relationships and trust with some of the younger warriors.

RCP Research Assistant Fenrick Msigwa usually provides the education on the park trips but we conducted three trips with Barabaig warriors, where he was joined by our Lion Defender coordinator Mathew Bajuta to provide translation in their local language and to also build relationships with them. Since we often see the young warriors in tense situations (such as after an attack on livestock when we are persuading them not to kill lions) these park trips provided a fantastic opportunity to share information, enable them to have good experiences with wildlife and build trust in a positive setting.

The Park trips provide a wonderful opportunity for people to see wildlife close up, such as these hippos in the Greater Ruaha River.

The river is a real hub for wildlife-watching at this time of year, and provides great sightings, for instance of these deceptively sleepy crocodiles!

THANK YOU ~ ASANTE SANA

As always, we thank all our donors for their generous and committed support. To dedicate your support, click below and find out more about our programmes:

Ecological research  RCP provides vital data on Ruaha’s little-known carnivore populations through camera-trapping and recording carnivore sightings. More than 10,000 carnivore sightings have been recorded to date.  (Read more...)

Community camera-trapping  RCP trains and employs local villagers to set up and manage camera-traps on village land in return for community benefits, directly linking conservation with development.  (Read more...)

Protecting the livelihoods  of villagers living in proximity to carnivores reduces conflict. Fortifying livestock enclosures and placing guarding dogs are proving successful in minimizing conflict.  (Read more...)

The RCP Lion Defenders  actively prevent and stop lion hunts. These Lion Defenders are chosen from amongst the bravest and most influential warriors.  (Read more...)

Kids 4 Cats  is a school-twinning programme where local schools are ‘adopted’ by international schools who raise at least US$500 annually for them, to buy essential education material and equipment.  (Read more...)

Simba Scholars  receive full scholarships for all four years of their secondary school. The cost is US$2,000 per student and RCP is keen to expand the programme to more students.  (Read more...)

Photo credit: Fenrick Msigwa, Ruaha Carnivore Project
Porridge Project – No one likes to go to school hungry, so RCP and our partners make sure that local children have full tummies when they're at school - this increases attendance and attainment, employs local women and is a major benefit in villages where there is very little food security. (Read more...)

DVD nights and Park trips provide education about conservation and species in a fun, no-threatening environment. To date more than 30,000 attendees have enjoyed DVD nights and more than 1,000 people have been on Park trips. (Read more...)

Should you wish to know more about individual programmes we will happily send you more information. Please contact our communications manager, Margaret Roestorf at margaret.roestorf.rcp@gmail.com. Should you wish to speak directly to the Director, Dr. Amy Dickman, please contact her at amy.dickman@zoo.ox.ac.uk.

To support our work, you can use one of the following channels:

If you haven’t yet browsed through the RCP wish list on Amazon, it’s a great way to get connected to the project and find needs that suit your pocket and your passion. https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/registry/wishlist/1880XADYUZXWF

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To pay via cheque please contact Amy Dickman at amy.dickman@zoo.ox.ac.uk.

Until next month - so long... tutaonana

The RCP camp looks tranquil at sunset as the team gets ready for an early night, and an even earlier morning out in the field. The camp is set up on village land, and is unfenced to the surrounding bush. It’s not uncommon to hear lions roaring and grunting and to see smaller wildlife in and around the camp, and the staff is careful when they step out at night... in case they have an encounter of the ‘uncomfortable’ kind. But with the roaming camp dogs on the alert, and the breeding dogs Busara and Poppy close by, there is little chance of anything unusual entering the camp undetected. Photo credit: Tanur Shah, Ruaha Carnivore Project.

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