

CONSERVATION NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK

Big cats roaring back into Nairobi park

The resurgence in the population is the result of a successful Consolation Scheme now administered by conservationists and fans of the park, who were jolted into action in 2003, when 11 lions were killed by pastoralists for eating their animals. *A Correspondent reports*

Today, there are a number of lodges on what were once elephant migratory corridors, forcing the megaherbivores to look for alternative routes. In many cases, the elephants are forced to pass through farms, destroying everything in their way.

In other cases, lodges have been built in lion breeding areas directly affecting the survival of the pride and the species at large. The pride either moves out or does not breed at all. Lions are also very territorial.

For the cats outside the protected areas, there is no space inside because all the territory is taken up. It usually also means when there's no other recourse, lions will fight to the bitter end in order to claim a territory or to defend it.

Environmental impact assessments fall short of many requirements in deciphering animal behaviour or issues of fragile lands; when it is a question of money versus wildlife, money almost always becomes the deciding factor. It is not that construction cannot happen elsewhere where it would impact less on wildlife — it can. Unfortunately, from the point of view of investors, the "best" sites are where the animals are — which unfortunately drives the animals away.

THE EWASO NYIRO IS A KEY dry season refuge for all animals. Yet there are far too many lodges along its shores. The droughts of 2002 and 2006 were devastating for all the animals, leaving thousands dead and lying everywhere. Upstream developments affect the water level and with more horticulture farms coming up, there's less flowing downstream. Where once the Ewaso Nyiro flowed all the way to Lorian Swamp, it now disappears way before that.

"We need to strengthen our conservation efforts," says Daniel Lotefo, the manager of West Gate conservancy, who is starting on his master's degree on hyena populations in the conservancy. "Nobody likes them," he laughs, "but they are very important for the ecosystem. And that is why I chose to do research on them."

"We also have almost 1,200 Grey's zebra here," says the manager. "Our long term plan is to improve the conservancy. During the drought, there's no pasture outside, so everyone comes into the conservancy. We then have to work with the committee of elders to talk to the community because, in our culture, the elders word is respected. We need to work on a proper land management plan where pastoralism and conservation are compatible."

"Our traditional ways are changing because children are now going to school. We need to merge both the modern and the traditional to move forward."

"Research and heritage," chips in Lekurajo, "are very important for survival."

Wildlife research is not an inexpensive affair. The Ewaso Lion project runs into millions of shillings, which means much of Shivani Bhalla's time is spent writing proposals and looking for donors. The West Gate conservancy is for now being supported by a San Diego zoo. The long-term plan is to be self-supporting. Bhalla's hope is that the Ewaso Lion Project will attract more researchers and eventually enable her to open a research institute in Samburu.

ONE OF THE EWASO LION Project's supporters is the African Wildlife Foundation, which supports the lion research by awarding her a Charlottes Fellow scholarship.

Driving through the conservancy, we stop by one of the schools where Bhalla has set up a tree planting project. For the young Roy Juma, who is in Standard Four at Lpus Leluai, guarding his tree is a way of bringing rain to the land in future. He is the face of the next generation in conservation.

THE KENYA WILDLIFE SERVICE and Friends of the Nairobi National Park (FoNNAp) staged a ceremony on August 21 at the main gate to the Nairobi National Park to celebrate the return of lions and other big cats to the Nairobi National Park.

The resurgence in the big cat population is the result of a successful Consolation Scheme now administered by FoNNAp. Conservationists and fans of the Nairobi National Park were jolted into action in 2003, when 11 lions were killed in the park.

According to Inge Burchard, the chief scientist from FoNNAp for the park and the Kitengela ecosystem, this was because the pastoralists whose livestock had been killed by lions were not compensated when the Lion Endowment Fund ran out.

Acting on her appeal, Alan Donovan, a co-founder of African Heritage, offered to organise the First African Heritage Day at his house overlooking the park, to raise funds for the Call of the Lions.

In 2004, 600 people arrived at his house on the original Kenya-Uganda steam train, with US ambassador Mark Bellamy and Carmelo Cocuzza of the European Investment Bank as special guests of honour. Since that time, there have been two more successful fundraisers held at the African Heritage House for the benefit of the lions and other big cats who inhabit the park.

Last year, Rift Valley Railways provided one of its new diesel engines with newly painted passenger cars for the several hundred guests who made the trip to the Athi Plains.

German ambassador Walter Lindner assisted in providing entertainment (by Eric Wainana and Ayub Ogada) for the occasion, and US Ambassador Michael Ranneberger was the guest of honour. He expressed his government's support for the park and other projects in the wildlife sector amounting to \$10.4 million between 2006 and 2010.

The Kenya Wildlife Service received \$2.5 million last year to implement, over the next four years, management actions in support of its 10-year strategic plan. Some of these funds are invested directly in the park.

IT IS ONE OF THE FIRST PARKS IN the KWS system to benefit from the SmartCard system. KWS is also implementing the Nairobi National Park ecosystem management plan, which includes linkages with new US support for the Kitengela wildlife dispersal area, including another grant of \$1.6 million this year.

KWS and FoNNAp are chief stakeholders in the current planning of activities under this project, the goal of which is to maintain open space on private lands that are wildlife migration corridors in to and out of the park.

If the park is to retain its unique character and biodiversity, it is essential



that migratory routes continue to run through it.

Mr Donovan uses a photo he took in 1994 from his house overlooking the park as the cover photo for invitations to his African Heritage Days. It shows thousands of wildebeest seasonally migrating through the park. He says this proves that the migratory corridors were not corrupted decades ago as is often claimed.

This year, however, the flood of animals has become a mere trickle and the migration is no longer a spectacle in the park.

FoNNAp has set a goal of Ksh50 million (\$714,000) for a new Lion Endowment Fund to make it self-sustaining — it will utilise only the interest on the fund to make compensation payments. However, it will take much more than that to restore the wildlife corridors.

There are many potential donors willing and able to assist as is exemplified by the wide support for the Call of the Lions. Among the top donors are Coca-Cola East and Southern Africa, African Heritage Estates, Safaricom, East African Breweries, Kenya Airways and KLM.

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African Heritage Day at the African Heritage House, hosted by Bill Lay, CEO of General Motors

General Motors, Rift Valley Railways, Kenya Litho, Daniel and Catherine Salapaak (Fairview Hotel), the US embassy and USAID, and the German embassy.

A considerable amount of preliminary support has been coming from the Dutch embassy even before the current programme of fund raisers since 2004.

Capital FM and *Going Out Guide* have provided publicity for the events. Proceeds from the African Heritage Days also go to the Lion Endowment Fund.

US ambassador Mr Ranneberger says the Call of the Lions is a model programme as it involves both public and private sources as well as individuals who may offer their support while they pay homage to the rich environmental, wildlife and cultural heritage of the African continent.

AT THE LAST AFRICAN HERITAGE Day, Mr Ranneberger underscored the continuing US commitment to help preserve Kenya's rich wildlife heritage and, in particular, the Nairobi National Park. He urged everyone to enthusiastically support this effort, adding, "I am sure that, one of these days, we will hear the lions roar their approval."

The next African Heritage Day, said Mr Donovan, who is also the chairman of the Murumbi Trust, will combine the public opening ceremony of the Murumbi Peace Memorial at City Park with the opening of a new gate to the Nairobi National Park by the Kenya Wildlife Service on Mombasa Road.

The present Cheetah Gate in Athi River, long degraded, is scheduled to be closed.