

Conservation efforts might encourage some to hunt lions, study finds

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East Africa's Maasai hunt for lions in Kenya. Some conservation initiatives designed to save lions from being hunted have either failed to work or in some cases appear to have incited East Africa's Maasai are shown on the hunt for lions in Kenya. Some conservation initiatives designed to save lions from being hunted have either failed to work or in some cases appear to have incited Maasai to hunt more lions as a form of political protest, a team of researchers led by a University of Colorado Boulder geographer report. Maasai to hunt more lions as a form of political protest, a team of researchers led by a University of Colorado Boulder geographer report. Credit: Joana Roque de Pinho

Conventional wisdom holds that East Africa's Maasai pastoralists hunt lions for two distinct reasons: to retaliate against lions that kill livestock

or to engage in a cultural rite of passage. But that view reflects mistranslations of Maasai terms and a simplification of their cultural traditions and their relationship with wildlife, a team of researchers led by a University of Colorado Boulder geographer has concluded.

Further, some conservation initiatives including those designed to save lions from being hunted have either failed to work or in some cases appear to have incited Maasai to hunt more lions as a form of political protest, the researchers report.

Such nuances are important, because it's harder to control the hunting of lions unless society knows precisely why lions are hunted, the researchers contend.

Many populations of *Panthera leo*—African lions—are falling, and the species is classified as "vulnerable" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources' Red List.

Lion hunting is outlawed in Kenya and in Tanzania is limited to mostly tourists hunting with permits, unless the hunt is to eliminate a lion in defense of life or livestock. Still, lion hunting regularly occurs in both countries, usually without the hunters' following the law.

"We saw an inaccurate representation of the exact reasons for why Maasai hunt lions, and we had a lot of ethnographic background to correct that," said Mara J. Goldman, the assistant professor of geography at CU-Boulder who led the study.

Goldman collaborated with Joana Roque de Pinho, a postdoctoral researcher at the Instituto Superior de Ciencias Sociais e Politicas (Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, Portugal), and Jennifer Perry, a CU-Boulder geography alumna now studying law at the university.

Goldman and her fellow researchers conducted 246 in-depth interviews of Tanzanian and Kenyan Maasai between 2004 and 2008. They found that Maasai hunt lions for multiple overlapping reasons, some relating to predation on livestock and some not.

In some cases, Maasai said they hunted lions to prevent the potential killing of livestock, especially by lions that had killed livestock before, rather than just as retaliation.

And while Maasai still celebrate successful lion hunts and the prowess of the warriors who hunt, that cultural tradition can be less of a motivation to hunt than political discontent.

In Kenya, for instance, conservation programs aim to curb Maasai lion hunting by financially compensating Maasai for livestock killed by lions. In Tanzania, suggestions have been made by some to start such 'compensation' programs, but the Maasai themselves explain why this strategy has limitations:

"We cannot agree (to compensation) because we do not have cattle to be killed every day," an elder Maasai told the researchers. "If they pay money today, then tomorrow, they will pay every day because the lion will keep coming back to eat cattle until all the cattle are gone. And then what will we do with the money?"

These sentiments were expressed in a village bordering the Manyara Ranch, a Tanzanian conservation trust on which hunting is prohibited but over which Maasai from neighboring villages are meant to share governance. In the beginning, the elders kept the warriors from hunting lions, the researchers found.

But after Maasai representation in ranch governance was diminished, the Maasai felt disenfranchised. Lion hunting increased in frequency and

severity and was no longer discouraged by elders, the researchers said.

"We have no reason to follow the rules," one elder told the researchers.

Goldman researches human-environment relations with the Tanzanian and Kenyan Maasai, one of the most recognizable ethnic groups in Africa, known for their distinctive, colorful dress and social customs, and most recently for their lion-hunting practices.

Although the primary motivations for lion hunting differed somewhat between Tanzania and Kenya, the researchers emphasize that Maasai have multiple, overlapping reasons to hunt lions: to reaffirm the protective role of young warriors, to help select brave leaders among warrior groups, to allow individual warriors to gain prestige, to eliminate lions that prey on livestock and to prevent lions from becoming habituated to eating livestock and sometimes harming people.

The multiple reasons illustrate the limitations of explaining Maasai lion hunting "as either a cultural manhood ritual or a retaliatory act," the researchers write.

"Participatory conservation interventions that respect Maasai knowledge and promote full engagement with management processes are likely to have far better success in persuading Maasai to change or moderate such behaviors themselves," the research team states, adding that "[lion](#) conservation projects rarely address such complex politics."

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