

Snubbing lion hunters could preserve the endangered animals

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a Tanzanian lion dancer does the lion dance, which captures the adventures of the lion killer. (Adi Swami/photo)

For hundreds of years young men from some ethnic groups in Tanzania, called "lion dancers" because they elaborately acted out their lion killing for spectators, were richly rewarded for killing lions that preyed on livestock and people. Now when a lion dancer shows up he might be called a rude name rather than receive a reward, according to a new UC Davis study.

Some villagers are snubbing the lion killers, calling them "fakers" and contemplating punishing them and those who continue to reward them, said Monique Borgerhoff Mulder, anthropology professor at UC Davis. That's because the lion hunters are killing lions that are not a threat to people or livestock and live in a national park.

This surprisingly rapid change in a long-standing cultural practice has positive implications for efforts to save lions, said Borgerhoff Mulder, lead author of "From avengers to hunters: Leveraging collective action for the conservation of endangered lions." The paper was published in the May edition of the journal *Biological Conservation*.

Traditionally, after killing a predatory lion using only a spear and shield, the hunter would travel from village to village, perform the dance and be showered with gifts including livestock and even a night with young women in the village.

"This change in behavior offers an intriguing solution to the problem of illegal hunting insofar as the community is policing itself," Borgerhoff Mulder said. "It is a real opportunity to work with a community that is changing its customs in a way compatible with a conservation goal."

A change coming from within the community will also be more long-lasting than rules and regulations from the outside, she said.

The study interviewed 198 households with 73 reporting being visited 128 times by dancers between 2001 and 2010. The households rewarded 96 dancers (75 percent) and did not reward 33 (25 percent). Although most households are still rewarding the dancers, 96 percent stated that the nature of [lion](#) killing had changed, and 72 percent said that the young men were killing lions just to acquire wealth.

"The hunters are going deep into the [national park](#), the border of which

is 8 to 10 miles away," Borgerhoff Mulder said. "People are saying they are cheats and are not going to give them gifts any longer. The community has found a reason for policing itself. This is a rare instance of wildlife conservation and community actions working in tandem."

Provided by UC Davis

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