

In Kenya, lion hunters become defenders

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Kenyan Maasai 'Morans' (warriors) relay the GPS coordinates of the location of two-young lionesses they have been tracking on foot in the surrounding scrub, at the Selenkay Reserve, not far from Mount Kilimanjaro

In the Maasai heartland of southern Kenya, some young men have swapped their ancestral role as lion-hunters to instead protect the big cats under a conservation scheme that also aims to help their community.

Among them is Leiyio Lengete, a "Moran"—or warrior—who wears a scarlet blanket over his shoulders, a blue one around his hips, and a multitude of fine multicoloured beaded bracelets on his forearms, ankles and neck.

Large half-moon shaped metal earrings and a beaded headband set off his long elaborately braided hair, but instead of a traditional spear, he clasps a GPS receiver.

The organisation behind the scheme Lengete works with, "Lion Guardians", has set up camp in Selenkay Reserve, not far from Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain in neighbouring Tanzania which is hidden by clouds on this warm September day.

Today the Maasai "guardians" have headed off into the bush on foot in search of three lionesses that sneaked into the camp the previous evening.

Their tracks are hard to find in the dry, potholed savannah brush although the men eventually establish the cats have separated in three directions to hunt for food.

But two hours later, one of the four silently calls a halt—the three lionesses are less than 100 yards away.



A lioness and her cubs are seen at the Selenkay Reserve in Kenya, not far from Mount Kilimanjaro in neighbouring Tanzania

Lost livestock, lost children

In a previous life, the men would have killed the animals as part of a Maasai rite known as "olamayio" which is traditionally seen as the highest act of courage, winning prestige and praise for the hunter.

Lions also were hunted in reprisal for attacks on the community's livestock herd.

But for Lengete and the other young Morans, those days are over: once the lionesses have been found and their GPS location sent to camp, a vehicle arrives carrying the scientific head and co-founder of the

scheme, Stephanie Dolrenry.

Coupling age-old Maasai know-how with contemporary science, she inventories, photographs and studies the behaviour of the lions that are now returning to the 3,684 square kilometres (1,040 square miles) under surveillance by the project.

"The whole programme is not just based on lions. Everything we do is about the community," Dolrenry told AFP.

"The guardians spend a lot of their time finding livestock, finding lost herders, even little children who got lost in the bush. The guardians are there, they are able to go tracking, they know the bush," said the 37-year-old American.



Co-founder of the 'Lion Guardians' conservation scheme, Stephanie Dolrenry,

gives an interview at the Selenkay Reserve in Kenya

Around a million dollars' worth of lost livestock was returned by the guardians to their owners last year, she said.

The work boosted the Morans' status within their community while their almost daily contact with the lions maintained their traditional aura.

When a cow is killed, for instance, they step in to dissuade cattle-owners from punitive raids against the lions, arguing that their own jobs recovering lost cattle are at stake as well as those of the Maasai community who make up almost all the staff of the two lodges in the wildlife reserve.

The project has been beneficial for local lion numbers, which have increased fourfold between 2007 and 2016 to around 150, Dolrenry said.

From hunter to guardian

Other wildlife has also benefited, with buffaloes reappearing in the reserve recently after years of absence, elephants moving in herds and the presence in the area of animals hard to find elsewhere in Kenya—such as the Cape eland or the giraffe gazelle.

"Lion Guardians", which also has programmes in Tanzania, Rwanda and Zimbabwe, works with private funding, most of it from the US. The Selenkay project runs on less than \$300,000 (269,000 euros) a year.



Kenyan Maasai 'Morans' (warriors) assemble a radio antenna to scan for a signal from a radio-collar fitted lioness in order to establish her pride's location in the surrounding scrub, at the Selenkay Reserve in Kenya

It kicked off with a mere five guardians but now employs more than 40, each of them paid the minimum monthly Kenyan wage of \$120 (108 euros).

One of the most recent recruits is Mitiaki Kitasho, who asked for a job as a guardian a year ago after twice serving a month behind bars for illegally killing first an elephant, then a lion.

"There's not a single species I haven't killed to protect the community and to gain popularity and respect," he said.

But courage no longer puts food on the table, and after being released

from jail penniless, he went to Lion Guardians looking for a job.

Now, like the Maasai warriors, he can continue to do what he loves and does best—track the [big cats](#).

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