

THE ATHI_KAPITI ECOSYSTEM BIG CAT INITIATIVE

Goal: Support retention of big cats in the ecosystem by building capacity in the local communities to manage predators, support innovation, share knowledge, transfer ideas and create opportunities for sustainability through nature based enterprises.

These are National Geographic Big Cat conservation projects run by Wildlife Direct and FoNNaP; monitoring and addressing cheetah and lion trends and conservation needs in the Athi Kapiti (Nairobi National Park, Kitengela, Isinya, Kipeto and Athi plains) Ecosystem.

The projects aim to establish the numbers and distribution of cheetah in the area, and past occurrences of lions, probable places that they may move to come the rains and suitable areas that can be used to extend the Amboseli, Shompole and Nairobi park lion population ranges. Both lions and cheetah are critically endangered species in Kenya and they are also flagship species for tourism in the country.

These projects aim to find solutions for the management and conservation of these two big cats particularly in relation to human wildlife conflict.

The Athi-Kapiti Plains is part of the greater Kaputei ecosystem which extends over a vast area of southern Kenya. These plains are especially important to cheetah, lion and other wildlife because they are the greater part of the ecosystem encompassing Nairobi National park and Amboseli National Park in the south. These two parks' major role is as dry season havens for some of the wildlife.

THE FoNNaP LION COMMUNITY PROJECT

Nairobi National Park in the Capital City of Kenya is home to one of the world's highest density of wild lions with more than 30 known adults in an area of only 117km². The park lions often leave the park through the southern corridor and often attack livestock from the local pastoralist communities who live largely in harmony with wildlife. However, intolerance to lion attacks is on the rise due to drought related poverty. Lions are often killed with spears and poison after an attack on livestock. Efforts to resolve the human wildlife conflict outside of the park have involved the TWF managed consolation schemes in which the victims of lion attacks on livestock are paid a 75% compensation for the loss. However this scheme is in dire straits due to costs including verification of incidents over an area of over 3,000km².

The FoNNaP project has taken a prevention approach with rewards for safeguarding lions rather than compensation for livestock losses as a sustainable way of living with large predators.

We are working on strategy that enlists community and private land owners in conservation and rewards them for the protective services that they provide.

What the Maasai community want is to maintain a lifestyle of pastoralism while supporting conservation. They want to prevent lion related losses of livestock so that they can earn the full value of their livestock at markets. To achieve this, they must be empowered to manage the situation themselves.

This project begins the capacity building by identifying conflict hotspots, weak bomas, designing predator proof bomas, and monitoring community and wildlife interactions. We look to enlist community and private land owners into conservation of land for big cats which will protect the Nairobi Park and ecosystems lions, cheetah and leopards. We aim to help create a series of linked conservancies and we seek to ensure that legislation supports this land use in this area through incentives, rewards and benefits.

We work with community leaders, private land owners, KWS and other government organizations to solve conservation challenges that threaten the big cats especially lions in the Athi Kapiti Ecosystem.

Currently we have **3 community officers** who live and work in each of the Kajiado triangles, these are namely; T1- Kitengela- Nickson Parmisa, T2- Isinya- Joseph Tuleto and T3- Kipeto- David Sorimpan.

They are young leaders in the local community and photograph, video and map the incidents of predation and assess the risks facing all livestock stockades, through triangle-wide boma surveys that are consequently mapped. They will also design a lion and predator proof stockade that is cost effective and culturally acceptable in the area and test the predator proof stockades while keeping records as a model for the future.

We are also working with landowners on the Athi and surrounding ranches in preparation of the wet season lion dispersal into the ranches. We want to ensure livestock is protected, the lions do not take to stock raiding and ultimately if some wish to remain that they will be accepted to stay in the ranches

Paula Kahumbu is engaging on the legal and policy level to ensure that the new policies and legislation that are currently under review lead to lasting benefits for people and wildlife.

Forecasted project outputs

- A comprehensive predator management plan for the communities in the Nairobi Park wildlife dispersal area.
- Reports and information to raise awareness, involve the community and build relations with FoNNaP and KWS.
- Design and test predator proof stockades.
- Fund raising for the implementation of the management plan
- Contributions to improve the Wildlife, environmental, water and forestry legislation
- Participation in finalization of the report on Vision 2030 particularly regarding highways and infrastructure
- Participation in working groups for Metro2030 for the planning of Nairobi City

ATHI KAPITI CHEETAH PROJECT

Over 80% of the national cheetah population exist outside of protected areas. Located less than 50 km from the city of Nairobi, and within a few kilometers of the industrial town of Athi River, the Athi-Kapiti ranches are increasingly being purchased for housing development, mining, and construction of factories. The still viable populations of cheetah

are under threat here due to urban development, persecution, habitat loss and loss of prey base.

The ranches within the project area include; Portland, Machakos Ranching, Game Ranching, Kapiti Estate, Lisa Ranch and New Astra Ranch; a total of roughly 90,000 acres. Significant adjoining areas are also included.

This project aims to keep the Athi-Kapiti plains open for cheetah and many other wildlife species. We are working closely with key land owners and Kenya Wildlife Service to develop a strategy to conserve and manage the land.

We are involving the local communities in wildlife monitoring and conduct community conservation education. We also conduct research and monitoring of key species especially cheetah in collaboration with Action for cheetah Kenya (ACK), including game counts and individual monitoring of the cheetah.

We have trained, equipped and deployed 3 **Cheetah scouts** with an understanding of the area and who live within their assigned zones, which are; Konza/Kapiti area- Kalinge Kingola, Pota/Kyumbi area- Patrick Mulinge and the Kitengela/Stony-Athi area- Pius Maato. We are working on getting a fourth scout for the major part of Portland and Game ranching.

The cheetah scouts are assigned to; liaise with ranch staff and the adjacent communities which includes; collecting reports on cheetah, lion and leopard sightings from herdsman and other ranch staff and peripheral communities – verifying these reports and getting GPS coordinates, visiting sites of livestock loss to big cats and collect verification data and helping to advice and assist ranches and communities on livestock loss prevention.

They also: seek out and record big cats on the ranches; record sightings, tracks and fecal matter/territorial markings for mapping; photograph or film big cats encountered and any unique wildlife phenomenon; assist in the creation and maintenance of a cheetah, leopard and possibly lion databases; collect research materials e.g. scat for prey/hormone/DNA analysis etc; conduct regular game transect counts and record wildlife distribution and assist in anti-poaching and intelligence.

The scouts have been equipped with; mountain bikes, cell phones, binoculars, digital cameras, GPSes and data collection sheets.

They received training in the use of GPSes, Digital cameras, binoculars and their care, they learnt how to identify different spoor how to record different data including public relations and predator conflict liaising. They also learnt line and point transects and scat collection.

The scout training was kindly donated by Action for Cheetah Kenya and conducted at the ACK-Salama camp by Cosmas Wambua and their team of community liaison officers in September.

We thank you Mary, Cosmas and the entire ACK team.

We are also liaising with communities in the Isinya/Kajiado area and machakos area; educating them on the status of cheetah and their conservation and involving them in developing cheetah conflict mitigation measures and their implementation.

The benefits of this project will be to individual land owners, the communities and the government. The ultimate goal is to aid in the creation and proper management of a wildlife conservancy, which will halt property subdivisions and prevent further loss of wildlife range, and a critical habitat for cheetah.

Michael Mbithi 0724 220244 *olaro43@hotmail.com*