CGF UPDATE

From Spears to Cell Phones
Resolving Human-Carnivore Conflict in Tanzania’s Ruaha Landscape

By Amy Dickman

Tanzania’s little-known Ruaha landscape supports some of the most important carnivore populations left in the world, including over ten percent of all remaining wild lions, the world’s third biggest population of endangered African wild dogs, and one of East Africa’s largest cheetah populations. However, these carnivores rely heavily upon village land, where they cause significant problems by attacking local stock. Such attacks cost people around 18 percent of their annual income – a huge amount when most people live on under two dollars per day. The situation is worsened by the fact that villagers see very few or no direct benefits from carnivore presence – in fact, the only benefits recognised were that young men from the Barabaig tribe received local accolades and cattle if they speared lions. Additionally, people were not aware of the global significance of the Ruha area or any reason to conserve large carnivores, and were unsure of the best methods to protect livestock. Therefore, villagers frequently speared, snared and poisoned these threatened species – in 2011, in just one small village close to Ruaha National Park, over 35 lions and other large carnivores were killed due to conflict with local people.

Effectively resolving this conflict is an urgent conservation goal, so in 2012, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Conservation Grants Fund (CGF), supported by Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund (DWCF), granted $17,600 to our team at the Ruaha Carnivore Project (RCP), in order to improve the situation. RCP found it extremely hard at first to gain the trust of the Barabaig tribe, who are traditionally very secretive and wary of outsiders. After nearly two years of doing all the ‘right’ things, like community meetings and approaching elders, we were almost ready to give up as we seemed to be getting nowhere. However, then we installed a solar panel at camp – and suddenly the Barabaig approached us, as they wanted to charge their cell phones. We would never have imagined that such a modern invention would be the bridge between us, but it enabled us to slowly communicate with the Barabaig, learn more about their situation and develop plans to improve it.

To reduce attacks, we used CGF funds to help predator-proof over 100 livestock enclosures, with 100 percent success at preventing attacks. Villagers who predator-proofed their enclosure received access to high-quality veterinary medicines, as disease kills more stock than depredation does, so this improved household economic security. In addition, we provided training on best-practice livestock protection to over 400 households, and held educational workshops about carnivore ecology, kill identification and conservation. We held DVD nights and took villagers into Ruaha National Park – as everyone at zoos will know, seeing animals first-hand is incredibly important for changing attitudes. We also developed community benefit programs, such as the ‘Simba Scholarships’, so that pastoralist children could attend secondary school, twinned village schools with international ones through the ‘Kids 4 Cats’ program, and equipped a local healthcare clinic focused on maternal and infant care.

By late 2013, carnivore attacks had reduced by 70 percent, significantly more people recognised direct benefits from wildlife presence, and most importantly, there was a reduction in carnivore killings by over 75 percent in the core study area. This shows that this kind of program can have really important impacts, and now we need to continue the work and extend it over a wider area. AZA CGF support has made a huge difference in Ruaha, and has significantly improved the situation for both people and predators, so thank you all for helping make it happen.

For more information please see www.ruahacarnivore-project.com or www.facebook.com/pages/Ruaha-Carnivore-Project/16258238442772

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