

**east africa
newsletter**

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Photo: Paolo Torchio/©IFAW

chiefs' visit amboseli

In December 2021, traditional leaders from East and Southern Africa met in Amboseli, Kenya, to share ideas and experiences for helping people and wildlife thrive in the places where they live together.

Senior Chief Felix Lukwa of Kasungu, Malawi and Chief Siphoso, Alphius Msindazi, of the Tsholotsho community in Zimbabwe met with Chairman Daniel Leturesh of the Olgulului-Ololarashi community, Joseph Sayialel, Chairperson of the Kitenden Community Wildlife Conservancy and Jackson Mwato, Executive Director, Amboseli Ecosystem Trust (AET).

Traditional leaders play a vital leading role in convening and facilitating transparent and collaborative processes anchored in indigenous culture, norms and values.

“Between them, these local leaders represent well over 100,000 people who live alongside wildlife,” said Azzedine Downes, IFAW President and CEO, who led the gathering.

“We believe the meeting to be the first of its sort—a trailblazing opportunity for the Chiefs to discuss the real-life challenges faced by their communities and to explore solutions that will pave the way for successful human-wildlife co-existence.”

IFAW supports projects in each of the three countries with strong community engagement elements. Amboseli’s Kitenden Community Wildlife Conservancy takes a land-lease wildlife conservation approach. In 2013, IFAW secured 16,000 acres of wildlife habitat from 1,600 landowners and another 10,000 acres from 1,000 land owners in 2017. There are intentions to lease another 29,000 acres in the same ecosystem.

“IFAW’s conservation model is to link fragmented landscapes which will allow elephants and other migratory species room to roam safely and the communities sharing these landscapes space to live and thrive alongside them. Our intention is to stop

poaching, support communities, as well as rescue, rehabilitate and release animals back into the wild,” said Downes. “We cannot do this without community support. This meeting of influential Chiefs might be the first, but it will not be the last. We want to create lasting connections—and even long-term friendships across Africa that lead to happy co-existence between both communities and the wildlife with which they share their lives.”

The Kitenden Conservancy lease provides clean water to leased lands, creates a conservancy for tourism investment and provides infrastructure such as roads. The local community also benefits from a scholarship program. Job opportunities such as community wildlife rangers are also available.

room to roam

IFAW’s vision is to secure connected and healthy ecosystems across large landscapes for animals, especially elephants and large carnivores such as lions and wild dogs, to roam freely.

The conservation approach of our Room to Roam initiative is forward-looking in considering the potential effects of climate change on elephants and other species, biodiversity and livelihoods with climate adaptation and resilience planning at the core. IFAW is working with many partners and stakeholders including government, private sector, communities, academia, wildlife authorities, women and youth, to prioritize future conservation efforts that account for the anticipated negative effects of climate change and anthropogenic pressures on species persistence and human wellbeing.

Conservation efforts and partnerships (such as wildlife protection, land use planning and restoration, community engagement and research) will result in effective management of wildlife and their critical habitats, enabling elephants and other species to roam freely from Southern to East Africa.

statement

African Traditional Leaders Meet at Amboseli
Following the IFAW-facilitated look, learn and share visit to Amboseli and, having engaged with traditional leaders, landowners, women and youth groups.

We the traditional leaders from: Malawi- Kasungu; Zimbabwe- Tsholotsho and Kenya- Olgulului-Ololarashi Group Ranch (OGR)

RECOGNISE THAT:

1. Local communities are front and centre of successful wildlife conservation and sustainable community development.
2. For people and wildlife to coexist and persist, communities should derive tangible benefits from natural resources under their domain.
3. Policies and legal frameworks governing wildlife conservation must explicitly empower and devolve decision making to the communities living with wildlife.

4. Traditional leaders play a leading role in convening and facilitating transparent, collaborative multi-stakeholder visioning and planning processes anchored in indigenous knowledge (culture, norms and values).
5. To achieve large-scale landscape connectivity for wildlife to roam freely and safely outside protected areas, a network/platform of traditional leaders should be established and capacitated.
6. Community and ecosystem resilience is key to addressing the threat of climate change.

We, the traditional leaders here present:

- ▶ Senior Chief Lukwa- Kasungu: Malawi
- ▶ Chief Siphoso- Tsholotsho: Zimbabwe
- ▶ OGR Chairperson- Daniel Leturesh

AFFIRM the urgent need to operationalize the Room to Roam (R2R) initiative.



Photos: Daniel Boyer / iStock



how to **protect** elephants and communities in africa?





Photo: Donal Boyd / © IFAW

**create room
to roam**

working with communities to conserve wildlife



In mid-2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of more than 150 women in Amboseli, in southern Kenya, were busy doing what local women from the Maasai community do best—bead work. The women used beads to design and decorate 11,000 coin purses requested as gifts for IFAW's long-term supporters in the U.K. Using traditional skills passed down from generation to generation, women use beading not only to decorate everyday items such as belts, stools, key holders and more, but to also make intricately woven traditional ornaments worn during special events such as weddings and rites of passage ceremonies.

The women each received a share of the income for their time and effort decorating the purses. From the proceeds one of the women, Ngeno Rinkoine, purchased a bed and installed solar lighting in her home. The mother of nine children says that the installation of the solar lighting helps her youngest children study and do their homework. She says the bed she purchased helps her sleep better and wake up feeling rested and ready for her busy days running the home and taking care of her family. Previously she slept on a dried cow's skin placed on small pieces of wood. "The traditional bed was not comfortable and I would wake up with a hurting back," Ngeno said.

The money from the beading project also helped the women purchase cows. Cows are the mainstay of the Maasai, providing milk and meat to feed one's family; when money is needed, they are sold to provide school fees and pay for medical bills. The remaining proceeds from the women's group also provided fees for school supplies, books and tuition for some community children who lacked the means to pay for their education.

The possibility to generate income has made the community increasingly willing to help better protect wildlife and wildlife habitat, as well as supporting new solutions for coexisting with wildlife.

11,000

beaded coin purses created by 150 Maasai women.

Photo: Paolo Turchio / IFAW

wildlife through our eyes



Photo: Paolo Torchio / @IFAW

Sonja van Tichelen, IFAW Vice President–International Operations, visited Amboseli in August 2021 and described her experiences.

Driving out of Amboseli National Park in Kenya, through the Kitenden Conservancy, our car is soon covered in a layer of dust. The rainy season is on its way, or so it is hoped by animals and people alike because all around us we see dryness and sand.

We arrive in Esiteti village and approach one of the traditional homesteads known as boma where we will meet the Osotua women group.

I realize quickly that I need to forget what I had in mind when I thought of a village, as this is a collection of several homes, large round structures with clay huts protected by a wall of shrubs and bushes to keep wildlife out. Several kids come out to look at us, curious to see the visitors of the day.

Our Kenyan colleagues Daisy, Bernard and David who work closely with the community introduced us to the women and men living in this boma, and members of the women's group.

▲ A woman in Amboseli, Kenya carries firewood on her back.

We are visiting their homes, huts made by women using dung and soil on a frame of wooden branches; there are spaces where cooking and sleeping happens in the same room.

The kids continue to follow us and curiously watch us, giggling and running away when I turn around to speak to them.

We are told that the cooperation with IFAW has changed the lives of the women and their families. For example, [IFAW's Team Lioness](#) is a group of female rangers recruited from local communities who are trained and work alongside their male colleagues. As Team Lioness are gainfully employed they provide financial assistance to their families. IFAW has also supported scholarships for more than 120 youngsters, creating opportunities for education and jobs. Soon, 60 women will get training and support for starting up their own business. IFAW also provides women with materials to make beautiful bracelets and chains they sell to tourists. All proceeds are shared, so the income benefits the community.

We were proudly shown the cows, beds and solar lights which were purchased with the proceeds from beading work, purchases which make a significant impact on their daily lives. Another new initiative is the delivery of more efficient cooking stoves. Traditionally, food is prepared by balancing pots on three stones, with fire underneath. These stones are placed in the hut but are unstable and cooking pots and burning sticks are a hazard for small children crawling around. Moreover, the fire consumes a lot of wood and the smoke in the hut is not healthy. The new stoves need much less wood, which is good for the environment and means that women do not need to be away

from their family to collect wood. Additionally, the new stoves are much safer and produce less smoke.

We are invited to a meeting of the women "under the tree", a colourful gathering of women of all ages. They share how grateful they are to work with IFAW and discuss their concerns. The meeting ends with prayer and dancing. I am deeply impressed by their commitment to protect wildlife. As one of the women said, "If one of our cows was killed by a lion, the young men in the community would retaliate and kill the lion. Now we do not as we know the lion is worth much more than the cow."

As we tourists admire the lions, elephants and cheetahs from the safety of safari jeeps, these women have to live with dangerous animals on a daily basis, knowing that their livestock could be attacked, their crops eaten, their children injured or killed on the way to school.

IFAW and the local community work on finding solutions to these challenges so that animals and people can thrive together.

Conservation and development cannot be sustainable nor successful if we do not listen to the stories of the local community and try to see the world through their eyes.

equal employment opportunities and participation

sixty women from Amboseli have joined a trailblazing project to train them for careers as small business owners. The Jenga Mama (Swahili for "Empower Women") education project provides three-year vocational skills training, with professions such as hairdressing, dressmaking and catering proving popular choices among the candidates. The Margarete-Breuer Stiftung (MBS) Foundation will provide full funding for the next three years.



Photo: Jacqueline Nyagah/© IFAW

◀ Women in Amboseli, Kenya with the cows they purchased from proceeds received from decorating coin purses with beads as gifts for IFAW's long-term supporters in the UK.



Photo: Jacqueline Nyagah/IFAW

📍 Amboseli

45

kilometres of roads constructed.

improving security for wildlife

▲ Local community members level murrum in the Kitenden Conservancy.

If you live in a highly developed area or within a city or town in a developed country, well-paved roads and sidewalks are commonplace, and generally not given much thought. However, in wildlife conservation areas like Amboseli's Kitenden Conservancy, roads did not exist before IFAW arrived.

The lack of roads to and within the wildlife-rich area hampered accessibility for security patrols, tourists and investors. To operationalize Kitenden into a functioning community-owned wildlife conservancy required infrastructure development, including roads.

Together, in the nine years since IFAW began collaborating with the Kitenden landowners, we have constructed 45 kilometres of roads. These provide access to tourist attractions and enable the Olgulului Community Wildlife Rangers (OCWR) to provide effective vehicle and foot patrols.

the ripple effects of accessibility

Creating accessible roads is resource intensive. It requires a survey on foot, based on rich culture memory from years of livestock herding in the area, to identify drivable areas. Then the surveyed road is marked with white paint, indicating where to clear bushes, remove stones and level the ground. Then, tons of murrum (a gravel-like soil commonly used as a road surface in the area) is trucked to the area, spread and levelled on the road. IFAW does this in close collaboration with local community members, which not only gives them ownership of the conservancy and the infrastructure, but also provides them with income.

How does this protect wildlife? **The primary role of these roads is to provide access to all areas of the conservancy for surveillance and daily security patrols for the protection of both wildlife and visitors.** The access roads facilitate community rangers' rapid response to human-wildlife conflicts, which helps prevent death

and or injury to both wildlife and people. The access roads also provide clear, wide views so that when community members travel in the conservancy they are better able to avoid dangerous encounters with elephants and lions.

Roads also make the conservancy open to wildlife viewing and therefore attract paying visitors who bring in much-needed revenue that supports the rangers who protect wildlife. The road network to various tourist attractions and wildlife viewing opportunities has attracted investors interested in the long-term conservation of the area and protection of the wildlife therein. Roads enable investors to further develop infrastructure, including the construction of lodges, hotels and picnic sites, all of which provide job opportunities for people from local communities. The incomes they earn improve their families' living conditions, making them less dependent on the environment. For example, if people can install and use renewable sources of energy, such as solar, or use energy-saving options, they will have less need to cut trees for firewood. Road networks also make it possible to easily access hospitals, schools and markets.

Wildlife conservation is a multi-pronged collaborative affair and IFAW is proud to be a part of it.



▲ in the foreground, a motor-able road in the Kitenden Conservancy constructed by the local community members and partners with funds from IFAW.

solace for wildlife rangers



Photo: Jacqueline Nyagah/© IFAW

83

number of community wildlife rangers with medical insurance provided by IFAW.

Jacqueline Nyagah, Communications Manager IFAW East Africa, met Musa Munke to learn about his experience with IFAW-provided health insurance.

Musa Munke is a sergeant with the Olgulului Community Wildlife Rangers (OCWR). He has been a community wildlife ranger all his working life. Musa and his fellow rangers not only patrol the landscape to protect wildlife, they also play a vital role in engaging the local community and sharing insight into how people and wildlife can co-exist, for the greater benefit of all. To help ensure the health of the rangers, to provide motivation and to add family security, IFAW provides medical insurance for all 83 OCWR rangers.

When I meet Musa he is seated outside his home under a tree that provides shade in the mid-morning Amboseli sun. His wife

Mary and daughter Catherine are with him.

Musa fell ill in October 2021 and had to be admitted into hospital for four days. Several tests were done to identify the cause of his discomfort, after which he received a diagnosis and treatment for his illness. When time came for him to be discharged, all he did was pack his bag and head home with no costs incurred.

He describes the experience of leaving hospital without having to personally pay for the costs as something that brings him peace of mind. Previously he would have needed to sell several goats to get enough money for the hospital bills. The medical insurance provided by IFAW helped Musa recover and return to his important work, with the peace of mind that health issues would not impact his family's financial situation.

▲ Musa Munke, one of the Olgulului Community Wildlife Rangers (OCWR) in Amboseli, Kenya.

A wildlife security operation in Western Uganda along the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) netted six suspects and led to the confiscation of wildlife products including hippopotamus meat, buffalo meat, buffalo horn, elephant ivory, serval cat skin, hippo teeth, leopard skin and colobus monkey skin.

The operation, which took place in December 2021, was part of a project funded by the US State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) and implemented by IFAW in partnership with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature National Committee of the Netherlands (IUCN NL) and Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN). The project supports law enforcement officials in Uganda and DR Congo to build knowledge and skills to fight wildlife-related crime.

In the December operation, surveillance teams were deployed on suspected routes and mounted mobile and snap roadblocks at select checkpoints. The teams monitored suspected persons, conducted searches at premises identified through intelligence and checked specific cargo.

Operations like this one are key to gathering information on wildlife crimes, arresting suspects and seizing wildlife products. It's also an important way to identify key individuals and companies involved in transboundary wildlife trafficking, map out smuggling routes and increase the visibility of the participating agencies within the community and their efforts in combating wildlife crime. Arrests and seizures also help increase public awareness of wildlife crime, while reducing the illegal supply and demand of wildlife in the region.

The operation was led by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) supported by other security forces in Uganda including Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF), Uganda Police Force (UPF), Uganda Revenue Authority (URA), Internal Security Organization (ISO) and the External Security Organization (ESO).

combatting wildlife crime across borders



Photo: Donal Boyd/IFAW

In Amboseli, a semi-arid area in southern Kenya, water is a scarce, much-needed and cherished resource. It is required for domestic use and by cattle, an important domestic animal for the local Maasai community. Despite the hardy nature of the Borona breed of cattle in the area, scores of cows perish in the dry season when there is no rainfall.

For their domestic use, the local community sometimes walk great distances in search of the precious liquid. Amboseli also teems with wildlife that can go to great lengths, through no fault of their own, including destruction of property and more, to acquire water.

ifaw's role in making water accessible

Since July 2013 IFAW has leased 26,000 acres of land from 2,600 local community landowners in the Kitenden Community on the Kenya-Tanzania border. The goal is to secure the acreage as wildlife habitat.

The long-term vision is to operationalize into a conservancy for wildlife and for the local community to improve their livelihoods through tourism revenue.

Water provision was a top priority and in 2019, the first water borehole was sunk in Kitenden Wildlife Conservancy at the Lemomo area. The global pandemic slowed down the process of installing pipes to take water to various installations in and around the conservancy. When activities could begin again a generator house was constructed in 2021.

The soon-to-be installed generator and water storage tank will be a game changer, ensuring an alternative source of water for wildlife and hopefully reducing human-wildlife conflict. Wildlife and people will have better access to water, so elephants will not need to visit human homesteads to take a "sip," or trek some 20 kilometres into Amboseli National Park to freshen up. The wildlife in Kitenden will attract tourists, increasing revenue by providing job opportunities for the local community – a win for all and, most importantly, lifesaving for wildlife and people.

water for neighbourhoods

- ▶ Evan Mkala, Program Manager Amboseli, Tsavo, Kilimanjaro Landscape, walks to the house that will accommodate the generator that pumps water from a borehole to the Kitenden Conservancy.



scarcity of water

Worldwide, the growth of the human population has led to a decline in wildlife numbers and, sadly, the degradation and destruction of their habitat. A consequence has been an increase in human-wildlife conflict (HWC). Amboseli in southern Kenya is a classic example. Touring the Amboseli ecosystem and engaging with community members, one hears many stories of wildlife destroying crops or causing injury, and even death, to cattle and people.

IFAW has employed and equipped 83 Olgulului Community Wildlife Rangers (OCWR) spread out in eight ranger bases and one mobile unit. One of these bases is Ilmarba ranger base in the heart of the 26,000-acre IFAW-leased Kitenden Conservancy. Except for community boreholes and Amboseli National Park, there are no permanent sources of water around the area. The scarcity of water can drive elephants into areas inhabited by people, not because they are searching for conflict, but because they need water. Scientists have discovered that elephants have a highly sensitive sense of smell and can detect water from almost 20 kilometres away.

For example, a lone bull elephant visited Ilmarba ranger base and carefully broke off the topmost part of the base's water tank and drank to his fill, before graciously and quietly sauntering away without a sound, leaving the tank intact, half full and without injuring a soul. This is a rare case where fortunately loss of property was minimal with no wildlife or people injured. In other words, the elephants come in peace, but if they cannot find water it could lead to human-wildlife conflict.

Despite being victims of human-wildlife conflict, the OCWR at the base camp continue to safeguard wildlife and their habitat. We salute their commitment and zeal.

Read more about [IFAW's work with rangers](#).



▲ Evan Mkala, Program Manager Amboseli, Tsavo Kilimanjaro, and a community member assess the damage caused by an elephant to a water storage tank at the Community Wildlife Rangers base in Ilmarba, Amboseli, Kenya.



Photo: © Jacqueline Nyagah/IFAW

leveraging technology to protect wildlife and people

▲ Leonard Moonka, Lairumpe Lekutuk and Daudi Shururuai learn how to use a mobile phone to aid in gathering data during their wildlife security patrols.

IFAW is providing new tools and training to aid in efficiently gathering data that can help save both wildlife and people. When analysed, data provides information that can be used in amongst other ways, deployment of wildlife security personnel to areas identified as high-risk for possible bush meat hunting, poaching, habitat destruction and human-wildlife conflict.

As data is a critical component in wildlife security, simple-to-use and efficient data collection tools are important. While on patrol for instance, the Olgulului Community Wildlife Rangers (OCWR) have been collecting wildlife-related data using hand-held GPS devices, pens and paper.

The process when using these tools is relatively manual and time consuming. It requires a Database Officer based at the OCWR Operations Centre to collate all the radio and WhatsApp messages sent in from the eight OCWR patrol bases. The collation involves keying in the messages manually. The messages are then sent to another individual who converts them into a spreadsheet. The data is then sent to the IFAW Geographic Information System (GIS) expert for mapping and analysis before it is finally shared for use in wildlife management.

Recently, IFAW East Africa trained 39 community wildlife rangers on how to use an efficient, web-based data collection, visualization and analysis tool. This comprises a customized version of a mobile application known as ArcGIS Survey 123 from the Environmental Systems Research Institute (Esri).

The rangers will collect data related to security incidents, such as poaching, trophy recovery, arrests for community crimes and intelligence. They will also gather wildlife conservation data, such as wildlife sightings and habitat destruction and data about human-wildlife conflict incidents, such as crop raiding, livestock attacks, property damage and human injury or death related to wildlife.

In addition to the regular data, the app also can capture photographs. This is very useful for critical incidents such as those of human injury or death, elephant mortality, trophy recovery and observation of species.

The data collected via the app will be stored on a cloud-computing platform on IFAW's server. A copy of the data will also be available at the OCWR Operations Centre at Lemomo, Amboseli. From the server, those with permission can access information at the touch of a button and, if they wish, conduct in-depth analysis.

The app has already been installed on eight rugged CAT S52 mobile phones which have been deployed to each of the eight OCWR patrol bases.

When asked how they feel about the new way of working, one of the OCWR staff, Leyian Shakuya, was appreciative of the app. "The notebooks we have used easily get drenched when it rains and what we write rubs off, the phones will store the information for a long time with an option to reference past data. It is also easy to lose a pen and paper unlike the phone. It will be faster to use the mobile app and I feel empowered as I have learnt something new today," he said.

Another OCWR staff Jackson Legus said in Kiswahili "Hii simu itarahisisha kazi ya wote. Kazi ya ground ni ngumu. Itarahisisha kazi ya ground. Kuna wengine hawajui, lakini wakifundishwa watajua." ("This smartphone will make work easier. Fieldwork is tough. It will make fieldwork easy. There are those that don't know how to use the app, but after they are taught, they will know.")

The leader of the OCWR mobile team also put in a few words on the new way of working. In Kiswahili he stated, "Hii system inasaidia watu wote wawe pamoja. Sababu hata mtu akiwa Nairobi ataipata ripoti. System itatuunganisha tuwe community." ("This app will unite us – even those based in Nairobi will have easy access to our patrol data.")

As the IFAW GIS Expert, I believe the solution will allow faster and easier data collection, visualization and analysis. The app also has the potential to be opened for use by ordinary citizens, which would add even more useful data. In addition, the solution could be rolled out to other landscapes where IFAW is working. Data collection and analysis can play a key role in saving the lives of wildlife and people.



▲ Wycliffe Mutero, Senior Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Analyst IFAW East Africa shows Olgulului Community Wildlife Rangers (OCWR) how to use a mobile app in data collection.



Photo: Jacqueline Nyagah/© IFAW

meet team lioness's youngest member

Nine-month-old Beatrice is a happy baby. She laughs and giggles with her mother Ruth Sikeita and the other members of IFAW's Team Lioness, almost like she understands what they are talking about. Beauty, as her mother fondly calls her, is the first child to be raised at the Olgulului Community Wildlife Ranger (OCWR) base in Risa in Kenya's Amboseli. When she was six months old, her mother Ruth who is member of Team Lioness, resumed work after her maternity leave and brought along her baby and a nanny to raise Baby Beauty. Three months down the line, Beauty is thriving and she and her mother have adjusted well to life at a ranger base.

Ruth, who is also mother to an 11-year-old girl and a three-year old boy, goes about her daily routine knowing her youngest child is close by and well taken care of. Her daughter and son are in the care of Ruth's mother-in-law. Just like any mother, she does have fears of raising her child away from a normal community setting. She wishes that there were other toddlers around to keep Beauty company and for her to play with – her wish may just come true as other Team Lioness members who are on maternity leave should be coming back to work soon with their little ones.

With financial support from the Margarete-Breuer Stiftung (MBS) Foundation, IFAW hopes to construct a crèche for these precious little ones who accompany their courageous Team Lioness mums to the ranger bases. IFAW is proud to support them realize their dreams and ambitions to be mothers and protectors of wildlife.

▲ Team lioness wildlife ranger Ruth Sikeita with her baby Beatrice

the land of the tree climbing lions



Photo: Paolo Torchio/© IFAW



a group of lions unlike any other

With the sun still well below the horizon, the savannah is nothing but darkness and shadows. Impatience no longer allows me to wait and I start the off-road vehicle. With headlights that poorly illuminate the path to follow, I begin the search for one of the world's most marveled groups of animals: Uganda's tree-climbing lions.

After a few kilometers the sky brightens, allowing me to distinguish the great African figs silhouetted against the weak light of dawn. These are the big trees that can help me find what I am looking for. I feel excitement growing in me despite the awareness of the scarce chance of my mission being successful.

Suddenly two large shadows move in the tall grass. My pulse quickens. I hold my breath, highly aware of my surroundings as time seemingly stops. In one swift motion, the shadows emerge into the light. It's the legendary "climbing lions of Ishasha," the very ones I was looking for but doubted to find!

They are two large males, not at all intimidated by the presence of the off-road vehicle. They proceed decisively towards their destination a few hundred meters away, a gigantic African fig tree.

I position the vehicle at the base of the large tree, in the most favorable position to safely view the action that makes these lions unique and famous all over the world.

After a few minutes the two large lions reach the base of the large trunk, and without hesitation, one after the other, they climb up to the first fork of the tree. The lions nimbly settle down at the end of the sturdy branch that will probably house them for the rest of the day—an amazing performance for this kind of heavy feline. An adult male lion can weigh as much as 230 kilograms.

Lions in the rest of Africa are generally able to climb, but they do it in an awkward way, and only in cases of special needs. Those of the Ishasha sector of Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda—which locals refer to simply as "Queen"—learn to do it from an early age, following their parents in daily acrobatics and soon becoming excellent climbers. But why are they doing it here? Probably due to the simultaneous combination of three environmental factors: the hot humid climate (which can be alleviated by the elevated position granted by the branches of a tree), distance from annoying tsetse flies on the ground, and finally, the large African fig trees which are relatively easy to climb and give an aerial view of potential prey below, like grazing antelope.

A rare sight. A show to be studied and protected because of its uniqueness—the Ishasha lion population is no bigger than 35 individuals and unfortunately at risk like all unique and rare things.

In fact, the thin strip of the territory of Ishasha, where this very particular population of lions lives, is bordered to the west by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), while to the east, lays territory mostly dedicated to sheep and cattle farming.

Rampant poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking between Uganda and the DRC significantly threaten the biodiversity of the western Great Rift Valley, in particular Virunga National Park in the DRC and Queen in Uganda. On top of this, lions also face the threats of human-wildlife conflict and retaliatory snaring and poisoning.

▲ Lions on a tree in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park in Ishasha.

joining rangers on patrol

During my visit to Queen, I have the opportunity to meet the ranger teams that protect the park's lions and patrol the bush in search of poachers.

I join one of the heavily-armed ranger teams on one of these missions. We follow small paths traced by gazelles, buffaloes and hippos among thorns, brambles and muddy marshes. The rangers proceed in silence, guided by experience and a strong sense of direction. They move fan-shaped, often out of sight of one another but in constant contact thanks to short, subdued conventional whistling. They check the paths, the base of the bushes and the watering points, looking for even the most insignificant trace—and in the end, they discover the first snare.

I can't locate it even when the lead ranger patiently points it out to me with his finger. The only trace is a small piece of wood planted deep in the mud. He cautiously removes it and reveals the invisible steel cable with its noose that would inexorably capture any animal that was trapped there.

Having neutralized the first snare, the rangers begin the search for others. In fact, they explain to me that poachers always place four or five in the same area, to facilitate their recovery. It takes no time to find two other poachers' snares similar to the first, and two others that are much more robust and heavy, probably destined for buffalo and hippos. All this in fewer than three hours of patrol.

After this mission we return to the camp, where they show me the container of all the traps recovered in the bush. The heavy door opens to reveal an unimaginable number of laces, steel cables, nets, spears and snares of all kinds and shapes, including heavy snap traps. An amazing arsenal they've collected over the

last five years. The rangers' work often seems endless: one day the poachers set the traps, and the next day rangers remove them, repeating the actions day after day. Despite these challenges, they remain determined to build a better future for Uganda's wildlife.

I am moved by the simple comment by one ranger who, smiling, says to me: "Well, even today, five fewer dead animals," based on the five snares they have removed.

Funding for this initiative to counter wildlife trafficking is provided by the U.S. Government through a grant from the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), and is supported in its implementation by IFAW. IFAW collaborates with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature National Committee of the Netherlands (IUCN NL) and has partnered with the Ugandan Wildlife Authority (UWA) and the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN) to combat cross-border wildlife trade between the two countries. This consortium works with local community members to tackle and prevent wildlife crime. It also supports rangers with the skills and tools needed to protect endangered wildlife like the Ishasha lions, pangolins and elephants.

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