

DE-SNARING IN KENYA

Some years ago, near my home in Kenya's Maasai Mara, I noticed a number of animals (primarily giraffes and elephants) with life-threatening injuries caused by wire snares. In order to alleviate their suffering, I worked with the Kenya Wildlife Service to bring veterinarians to the Mara to remove these snares, thereby saving the animals from an excruciating slow death. Wanting to improve the chances for these animals, I then decided to take it a step further and received permission from the authorities to run a community de-snaring program.

The bushmeat trade has reached epic proportions throughout many African countries. TRAFFIC, the international wildlife trade monitoring program, reports that "bushmeat is as much as 75 percent less expensive than domestic meat in many countries." Free-living animals also come under even greater threat during times of economic hardship because of the burgeoning population. In addition, there is now a full-scale commercialized trade in bushmeat. Fortunately, the Maasai Mara Game Reserve and the surrounding area have a highly developed tourism industry and the local Maasai communities recognize that without the free-living animals, there would be no income. They themselves do not consume the meat from such animals, and now, through our project's conservation education, they also realize the importance of not tolerating the poachers who come in from afar.

The de-snaring team consists of five young people. The two team leaders are college graduates from Nairobi. The other members are drawn from the local Maasai youth on a rotational basis. We attempt to operate ten two-week sweeps each year, working with the armed rangers provided by the local authorities. We are able to provide the team with a vehicle and full camping and safety equipment. They are able to patrol deep into areas where poachers previously had free rein. As a result the poachers have been forced to abandon their camps, which in some cases housed up to fifty people on a semipermanent basis.

Our team spends two days of every sweep teaching the value of conservation in the local schools. The schoolchildren now collect snares on a regular basis while in the field herding their cattle. We also help the community by installing water catchment systems in areas where schools and communities have no clean source of water, or no water at all. We provide textbooks and supplies in eight schools, and we organize field trips for the children to go into the Maasai Mara Reserve so that they can enjoy and appreciate the animals from the safety of a vehicle. We encourage the communities to plant trees and develop their own nursery.

The young people are so excited about being involved in protecting their heritage that during the weeks when we do not have organized sweeps, they organize themselves into teams to keep the pressure on the poachers. In our first two years of operation, our team, along with the rangers, confiscated close to one thousand snares; confiscated hundreds of kilograms of dried meat, leopard and lion skulls, elephant tusks, skins, spears, and arrows; and assisted in the arrest of ten poachers. In the poachers' camps, and from evidence from field patrols, we documented a total of 117 animals killed by poachers' snares. Scientific estimates of the number of animals killed each year by

poachers in the Serengeti/Mara ecosystem indicate that the number could easily exceed 20,000 animals.

Snaring is indiscriminate and results in the death of many nontarget animals, such as leopards, lions, hyenas, and elephants. We have documented the startling and distressing death of twelve lions and have helped rescue six others caught in snares. We also have documented twelve elephants with trunks severed by the wire snares and have started a photographic file of these individuals in order to track their survival rate.

By removing the snares, we are helping to save many animals from an excruciating death. But although individual action is important, the problem needs to be tackled at a national level. Subsistence poaching, for example, is clearly driven by economics, and this was sadly demonstrated when we caught a sixteen-year-old boy who was snaring in order to earn money to attend school. He, like most of the poachers we encounter, is apart of a highly developed system that moves hundreds of thousands of kilos of bushmeat into local markets.

The underlying difficulty is that local people often see very little direct benefit from the existence of animals. We still have a long way to go to help people see that the animals' preservation is in the interests of everyone, including the very poor. To reinforce this point, a proportion of the money we raise through my tourism business goes to the local community. Donations come directly from visitors whom we introduce to the local people so that the latter can see a direct correlation between economic prosperity and appreciating free-living animals.

In the long term, it should be the duty of the government to make sure that the local people are themselves involved with the protection of the area and receive the economic benefits that preservation can generate. We need to find imaginative ways of generating sustainable income for the communities whose lives are impacted (often negatively) by free-living animals, so that they are not tempted to make their living illegally by assisting the poachers. It is critical that we find some long-term resolution to the conflict between a burgeoning population on one hand and the need to preserve free-living animals on the other. Whatever solution is proposed, we need to realize that human welfare and animal welfare are intertwined and, not least of all, that the cruelty of snaring should become a thing of the past.

Related articles: Animal protection in Africa; The big cats; Caring for animals and humans; Conservation philosophy; Developments in animal law; Free-living chimpanzees; Perceptions of elephants; Primates worldwide; Snares and snaring

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ANNE KENT TAYLOR