

# East African cultures and wildlife conservation

by Daniel Stiles

*Could a re-awakening of traditional cultural beliefs about animals help make modern man more appreciative of the wildlife in which so much of East Africa still abounds?*



Wildlife and people in eastern Africa have lived intimately together since time immemorial. The wild animals and birds of the forests, plains and mountains have always been an integral part of eastern African cultural and economic life. There is no place on earth where humans still live so closely with large numbers of free-roaming animals, which is both a curse and a blessing for the governments and people concerned.

Survival of wildlife in Africa depends on peoples' attitudes towards conservation, which is largely based on traditional values regarding wildlife. It is also based on practical considerations of making a living. Both of these factors need to be understood and used well by conservation organisations and governments to create the necessary conditions that will at least give wildlife a fighting chance against people.

Cultural attitudes towards wild animals by any particular East African group vary depending on the group's historical background and current situation. The region is culturally very complex, but things can be simplified by classifying the groups according to their 'profession'. The oldest profession is that of hunter-gatherer, followed by livestock pastoralist and agriculturalist, and finally the modern town and city dweller.

## **Hunter-gatherer**

Hunter-gatherers, not surprisingly, have a very positive attitude towards wildlife. There are no pure hunter-gatherers surviving in eastern Africa, but there are many groups that until recently depended on game and wild plants for survival, and they still retain many of the traditional cultural attitudes and beliefs – including the occasional hunt, which today is illegal in most eastern African countries. These people never threatened any animal species with

*This Dorobo from the Mathews Range of Kenya, here out to collect honey, views wildlife as an integral part of his society's existence.*

Daniel Stiles

## ... cultures

extinction, however. Wild animals were never killed indiscriminately *en masse* by hunter-gatherers as they are by poachers today.

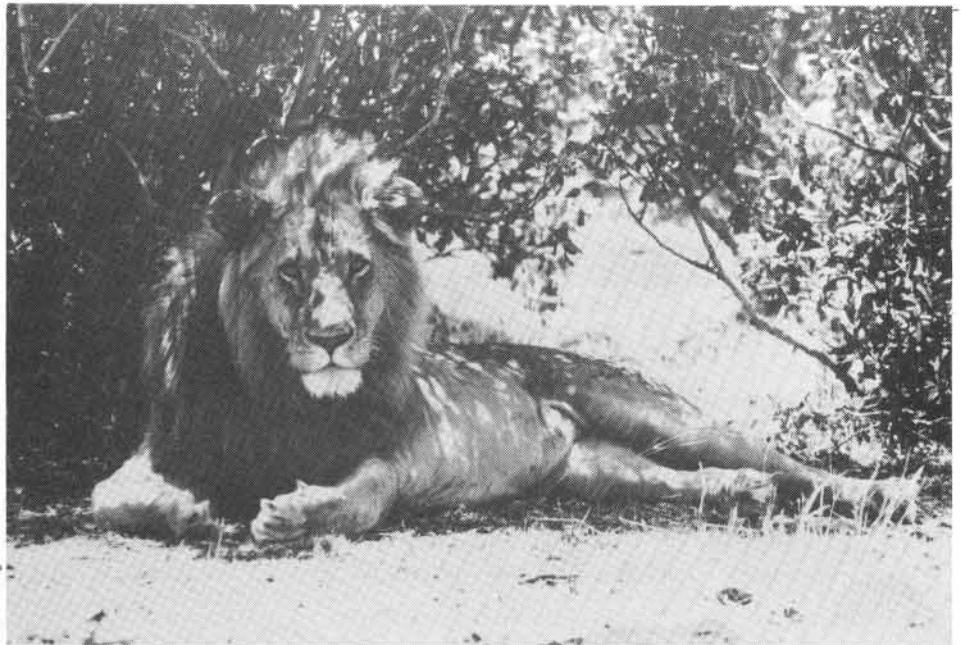
Traditional hunters killed animals for a reason, whether it was for food, ritual or a product to sell. Each species of animal or bird represented something unique and valued in an interlinking cosmology of the natural and spiritual worlds, and to kill an animal with no reason would be to violate all which was sacred. The hunter lived in nature as one small cog in the ecological machine, operating in small bands, and living an existence that fitted in with everything else.

This is not to say, however, that traditional hunters were not effective in killing game. In the 1950s in Kenya the warden of Tsavo National Park, the late David Sheldrick, launched an anti-poaching campaign against the Waliungulo (Wata) hunters. A survey in the park showed that large numbers of tuskless elephant bodies had been killed with poisoned arrows. The Waliungulo poaching seems tame by today's standards, but it alarmed the wildlife authorities of the time. Many hunting groups with connections to the coast have been highly effective elephant and rhino hunters for centuries, supplying Swahili coastal towns with ivory, horn and skins for the overseas trade. They have never posed a serious threat to population survival, however.

Up to about 5,000 years ago everybody in eastern Africa depended on hunting and gathering. Then groups began to migrate in from the Ethiopian Rift Valley and the Nile Valley, bringing cattle, sheep and goats and domestic crops with them (sorghum and millet). The migrations continued for thousands of years, displacing and absorbing the hunter-gatherers. The immigrants were the ancestors of today's pastoralist peoples – and some who have since disappeared – the Pokot, Somali, Rendille, Maasai/Samburu, Turkana, Boran, etc.

Hunter-gatherers, once the egalitarian occupiers of the land, now became subservient to the more powerful newcomers. Over time a kind of caste relationship evolved in many parts of eastern Africa, with the hunters occupying the lowest rungs, sometimes along with potters, iron smiths and tanners. They developed a symbiotic relationship with the pastoralists, or in some cases, as in Zaire, with agriculturalists. They provided certain services (some ritual) and wildlife products in exchange for protection and milk products. For example, hunter-gatherer men are commonly used in ceremonies to butcher animals, as the spilling of blood is considered ritually impure, and gatherer women will oil and braid the hair of pastoralist or agriculturalist women. Hunter-gatherers will also tan hides, make pots, work scrap metal into ornaments, and wash and bury the dead.

All of the hunting groups have strong cultural beliefs and practices regarding



Joe Cheffings

*The lion is one of the traditional Big Four, along with elephant, rhino, and buffalo, and to kill one with traditional weapons and human courage makes one a man in many hunting and pastoralist societies.*

wildlife. Wild animals and birds were important in ceremonies such as initiation, marriage and prayer, divination and prophecy, medicine, clothing and, of course, for food. Without wildlife these cultures would have no meaning and they could not exist.

For example, with the Aweer of Lamu District, Kenya, and southern Somalia, animals are divided up into small ones (*busha*) and large ones (*dua*). They have different arrow types and hunting techniques for different animals, and until a man kills a *dua* (elephant, rhino, buffalo or lion) he is called *munese*, meaning inexperienced hunter and, by implication, not yet a man. When he first kills a *dua* there is a ceremony called *kerar*, in which songs of praise are sung, oil is poured into his hair and on to his shoulders by older women, and he is decorated with ornaments. He now becomes a *miso* and is considered a man. A good hunter is called a *hargon*, or *guwe* in some areas, and is highly respected in the community. With the banning of hunting the Aweer culture is changing – some would say dying.

### Pastoralists

The herding peoples of eastern Africa also tend to have a benign attitude towards most wildlife species. Unlike their European or American counterparts, African livestock herders accept the right of animals other than cattle, sheep and goats to share the range and water resources. Many pastoralist peoples even recognise the Cape buffalo, eland and some of the antelope and gazelle species as honorary cattle. Most other animals, and especially birds and fish, are disdained as not being fit for human consumption.

Just as many of the pastoralist groups have a caste system for people, they have also established one for animals. The 'Big Four' of most of these groups are the

elephant, rhinoceros, buffalo and lion. The Boran of southern Ethiopia and Kenya, for example, put on a great ceremony for a man who kills one of these animals single-handedly for the first time, similar to the *kerar* of the Aweer. Maasai warriors organise formal lion hunts in which one warrior tries to spear to death a cornered lion. The mane of the dead lion would be worn in the war head-dress of the jubilant spearsman. Success results in great prestige for the killer, though this practice is becoming very rare today.

In normal times, pastoralists did little hunting; the livestock were expected to satisfy all needs and it was a loss of prestige to have to resort to wild animals for subsistence. Also, the associated hunting peoples were supposed to be the ones to defile themselves in hunting activities, which were regarded in most cases as being ritually impure. Following large livestock losses due to drought, disease or raids, however, pastoralists had to resort to the wild for survival. Some speculate that elephant and rhino were practically wiped out in the late 1880s in northern Kenya as pastoralists sold tusks and rhino horn to traders coming from the coast in order to rebuild their livestock herds with the proceeds.

Wildlife is important to pastoralists both culturally and economically. Birds and feathers are particularly significant in ritual and dress. Maasai and Samburu boys, for example, make stuffed bird crowns which they wear after circumcision (see *Swara* July/August 1984), and ostrich feathers are worn in ceremonial head-dress by many different peoples.

### Agriculturalists

People who grow crops have a very different attitude towards wildlife from the hunters and herders. Wild animals have a bad and seemingly incurable habit of eating



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Wildlife is used in many cultural practices. Here birds are stuffed and made into a head-dress by Samburu boys going through the circumcision ceremony, and ostrich feathers adorn it as well.

and destroying crops. Farmers, not unnaturally, fight back to protect their food supply. They are generally not allowed by the local governments to benefit from wildlife through legal utilisation, so the answer is to get rid of the pests. The clearing of new land for fields also affects wildlife as this destroys habitats. Wildlife have been losing the war on the more watered agricultural lands of eastern Africa.

The first agricultural peoples to reduce wildlife populations to 'controllable' limits were the highly structured states found amongst the Amharic and Tigrinia speakers in highland Ethiopia. From the time of the Axumite empire (300 BC - 1,000 AD) to Emperor Menelik II in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, high population density, deforestation, and lastly firearms, resulted in wildlife annihilation. Internal and overseas trade also stimulated localised extinction of certain species. For example, ivory, rhino horn and leopards skins were being traded overseas through Ethiopian ports as early as the first century AD, as recounted in the *Peryplus of the Erythraean*

*Sea*. This long-term trade, along with increasing population pressures, eradicated these animals from most of the central highlands.

The same fate met most wildlife in highland Rwanda and Burundi, though the highest areas on the volcanoes of Rwanda today provide the last refuge of the mountain gorilla. Until serious tourism and conservation actions were taken, gorillas were rapidly disappearing overseas to zoos, curio shops, or into the cooking pots of the local people. Some lowland gorillas, and quite commonly monkeys, still end up in gourmet meals in eastern Zaire. Colobus skins were very popular in traditional dancing or war attire, and can still be seen in Kenya with people such as the Luo or Kikuyu at 'traditional dancing' events.

As the higher altitude, higher potential agricultural lands have become overpopulated, agriculturalists are now moving into the drier lowland areas, particularly in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. This is putting increased pressure on wildlife, and it is in these ecosystems that most of the game parks and reserves are located. Without habitats, wildlife cannot survive.

### Urban Man

The city dweller is perhaps an even bigger enemy to wildlife than the farmer. The urban rich finance poaching and the landless poor carry out the work. There is no sense of empathy with, or responsibility towards, wildlife in the average modern man burdened with urban concerns of making a living and getting ahead in the world. Often in Africa he also has a farm back home, and he does not want to hear that a herd of elephants has just destroyed his maize crop that he put a good part of his salary into. What happens out in the rural area or bush is of little concern, and if a bit of money can be made from ivory, rhino horn, or skins - why not?

There are now encouraging attempts being made by indigenous African wildlife clubs and conservation organisations to create awareness and respect for wildlife, but without the traditional cultural value and with the increase in human population numbers the future for wildlife in eastern Africa looks precarious.

### Strategies

For the people who were or are hunter-gatherers or pastoralists, an approach stressing the old cultural values could have an impact. These people have to feel that their old ways are not to be denigrated but, rather, are to be respected and supported. For the agriculturalist or urban dweller, however, stronger medicine is needed. If he cannot benefit in some way directly from wildlife, he will think 'why bother keeping the destructive things around?' People who own land on which wildlife live, or invade, need to be able to benefit from these animals. This approach has had rewarding results in Zimbabwe, where landowners can hunt and sell the products from animals. It is in the farmer's interest to manage this resource well and not over-exploit it.

Tourism is a way that the government and, through revenues, the urban population can benefit from wildlife. There needs to be a way of advertising how tourism revenues reach the people, however. Making parks more accessible to the local people can be another way to sensitise them to the aesthetic beauty of their own landscapes and wild animals. Eastern African governments need to develop the policies and programmes that can change rhetoric into actuality. Much has been said recently about allowing people to benefit directly from wildlife, but nothing has actually been done in terms of legislation or implemented policies. Let's hope that the 1990s opens up a new era in wildlife conservation.

(This article was written before the Kenya government announced that from April this year, 25 per cent of the revenue at all park entrances is to be given to rural development throughout the country - see the interview with Richard Leakey in the March/April issue, page 16. Editor.)

Daniel Stiles first came to Kenya in 1971 and again in 1972 as a student assistant on the excavations at Koobi Fora, Lake Turkana. He began living in Kenya in 1977, first as a lecturer at the University of Nairobi and later as a staff member of UNEP. He obtained his PhD in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, and has conducted research in several countries in Africa, Europe and Asia. He is now an independent writer and consultant.

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