



# Lion Guardians Annual Report 2008

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## General Summary

The Lion Guardian program on Mbirikani Group Ranch, in southern Kenya, has just completed its second year and continues to prove a successful alternative to more mainstream conservation approaches. Due to the commitment and efforts of the Maasai community, Maasailand Preservation Trust, and the Lion Guardians program there have been no lions speared on Mbirikani for the past two years. In the past year, the Guardians have continued to monitor resident lions on the ranch, and GPS collars have been fitted on newly established lions in the area. Also, the Lion Guardians have been assisting their communities; by finding lost livestock in the bush that would have otherwise been killed by carnivores, educating and providing awareness about improving husbandry and herding techniques to communities, reinforcing bomas, and helping young herders return livestock safely to homesteads. Although Lion Guardians began as a pilot project two year ago, we are now in the process of expanding this successful model to neighboring group ranches where lion killing has escalated in recent years.

## Background to conservation on Mbirikani Group Ranch

Conservation is not new to Mbirikani Group Ranch, a communally-owned Maasai land of 1,200 km<sup>2</sup> (300,000 acres). In 1992 the Maasailand Preservation Trust (MPT) began its work on Mbirikani, providing "wildlife" scholarships and building schools. MPT has grown steadily over the years and expanded its scope considerably. Today MPT employs 67 game scouts on Mbirikani to prevent game-meat poaching and facilitate all other local conservation programs. In April 2003, in an effort to prevent the near-certain local extinction of lions, MPT initiated the Predator Compensation Fund (PCF) that pays owners for livestock killed by carnivores, and in turn increases local community tolerance towards carnivores. Since the launch of PCF there has been a dramatic decrease in lion killing, while lion killing has continued unabated outside the ranch boundaries.

The foundation that MPT has built has allowed for the growth of additional conservation efforts on the ranch. The Lion Guardian program was initiated in January 2007 with the intent of complementing the conservation efforts of MPT, and provides employment and training to the *murr*an (warrior) age group - those who are primarily responsible for killing lions. While the rules and penalties of PCF strongly discourage lion killing and provide compensation after depredation has taken place, Lion Guardians works to prevent conflict before it happens in its own unique and synergistic ways. Both approaches, working together, are needed to increase tolerance towards predators. The Living with Lions project administers the Lion Guardians program but works in close collaboration with MPT to ensure that lions and other wildlife are conserved.

## Monitoring Lions

On Mbirikani the Guardians spend about half their time (~3 days/per week) monitoring lions and other carnivores. All lion tracks and sightings are marked with a GPS point. Figure 1 below shows the various carnivores recorded by the Guardians in the past 10 months. These 'spoor' counts that the Lion Guardians carry out weekly are essential to monitoring carnivores on an ecosystem level. 'Other carnivores' includes jackal (primarily), bat eared fox, genet, civet, and other small carnivores.

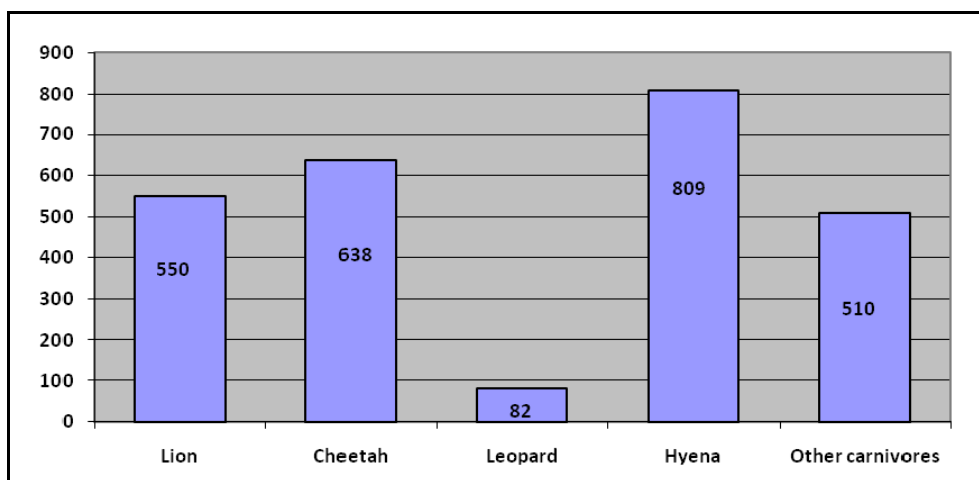


Figure 1. Carnivores monitored: January – October 2008

We have eight collared lions that are tracked and monitored by the Guardians. One collared male lion, Ndelie, has recently been fitted with an Iridium GPS collar. This enables us, and the general public, to monitor his activities via the internet: [www.abycats.com/maps/catmap.html](http://www.abycats.com/maps/catmap.html). Melubo, the Lion Guardian at Oltiasika has been monitoring Ndelie, whose name means “cooking pot” in Maasai, named this because the Guardians think his paws are the size of cooking pots. Through his Maasai name, Ndelie is receiving additional awareness in the area, and increasing feelings of ownership by the local community.



*Lion Guardians track collared lions. Photo Tom McCarthy*

One of our female collared lions, Nemasi, has given birth to three male cubs. They are currently residing close to our camp and have been here for the last two months.



*Two of Nemasi's cubs feeding, in July this year*



Since the rains, the lion population has tripled on Mbirikani; we estimate that there are currently between 13-16 lions on the ranch. Many of these lions are moving here from Amboseli National Park, and the group ranch surrounding it, and from the southern border of the ranch from neighboring Kuku Group Ranch.

This year we began collaborating with solar specialists to build solar-powered tracking devices, which will track the Guardians when they are working. The data we receive from these devices will allow us to analyze how accurate Guardians are at monitoring lions and other carnivores, and will also answer questions about Lion Guardians effort and time use. We will compare these data with spatial data layers from GPS lion collars, spoor counts, and camera traps. We are very excited that lion data, critical to understanding lion behavior outside protected areas, are being collected by Maasai themselves.

### **Conflict and Killing**

When lions and other wildlife share the same resources as people and their livestock, conflict is inevitable. Mbirikani ranch is no exception; livestock-carnivore conflict is high. However, due to the commitment and effort of Maasailand Preservation Trust, the Maasai community, and the Lion Guardians program there have been no lions killed in the past year. Our data shows that the Lion Guardians (working with the MPT game scouts) have stopped over eight hunting parties this year alone. This is contrary to what is happening on other nearby ranches. On Olgulului and Eselenkei there have been a minimum of seven lions killed in the past year. We are in the process of starting up the Lion Guardians program in these areas, in the hope of reducing lion killing.



*Lion Guardian Kapande with a cow killed by a lion on the ranch*

Last year on Kuku (a neighboring group ranch to the south) one of our male collared lions (Sangale) and a collared female (Birdie), pregnant with five cubs were killed through poisoning. These lions moved between Kuku and Mbirikani ranch, and were being monitored by the Guardians. The man who poisoned the lions was arrested by MPT scouts and paid a fine of approximately 80,000 Kenyan shillings (US\$1000). Though we are happy that the killer was arrested and fined, the amount paid can never replace the life of these lions. It was one of the first times we witnessed the community and Lion Guardians mourn the death of any animal. Koikai, a Lion Guardian who often tracked and protected Sangale was devastated by his death and he named his new born son, who was born two weeks after the poisoning event, Sangale in his honor.

In August two *murrans* from a neighboring ranch were charged in a Kajiado court with killing a lion. The court found them guilty of being in possession of 11 lion claws that they were intending to sell on the coast for approximately 250,000 Ksh (US\$3000). Each man was sentenced to either 36 months in jail or a fine of 100,000 Ksh. It is encouraging that lion killers are now being tried and sentenced. The news of this case was published in Taifa Leo (a Swahili newspaper in Kenya) on 4<sup>th</sup> August.

### Community Assistance

The Lion Guardians spend the other half their time helping their communities and reducing conflict with carnivores. These duties, shown in Figure 2 below, range from helping people reinforce poorly built bomas to finding lost livestock, and even sometimes lost children. In September Lion Guardian Mokoi was celebrated by his community for finding a child that was lost in the bush. She was found by Mokoi three days after she had gone missing. Mokoi got a great deal of respect from the community, and when the family held a cleansing ceremony for the child, he was invited as a respected guest and a sheep was slaughtered for his efforts.

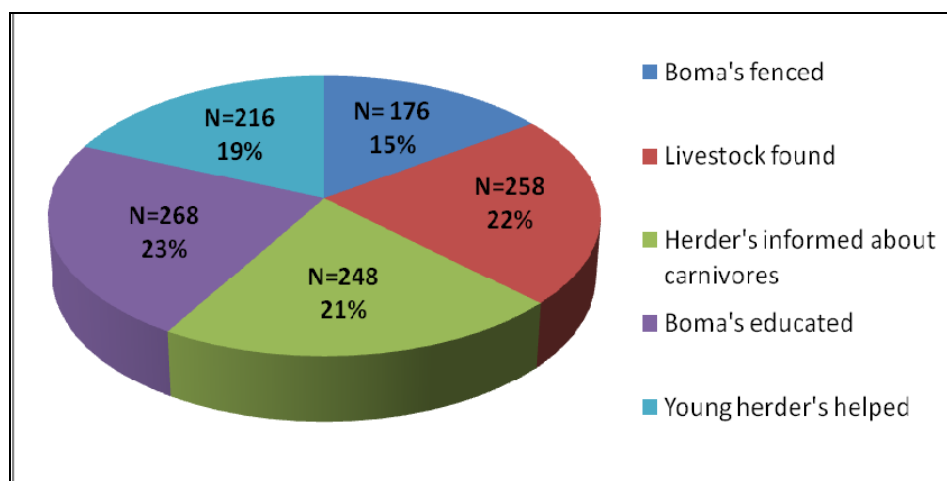


Figure 2. Community Assistance: January – December 2008

In the recent years, lost livestock has become an increasingly big problem on Mbirikani. In the past year, the Lion Guardians have found and safely returned 258 livestock to their bomas. These livestock would have likely been killed by carnivores if not found. Finding lost livestock and preventing depredation by carnivores is one

of the major ways that the Guardians reduce conflict between humans and wildlife, and thus minimizing the likelihood of retaliatory killings.

Though Lion Guardians focus their efforts primarily on carnivore conflict, they also deal with broader human-wildlife conflict issues. During the year, Lion Guardians were asked to assist various communities who had problems with wildlife that had migrated during the dry season. Elephants dominated most of the conflicts, breaking water points and worrying communities. The Lion Guardians warned people of the presence of potentially dangerous animals, and called upon the game scouts from MPT to help attenuate the conflicts. Even with all the efforts to provide elephants with permanent water, in August a relative of Lion Guardian Koikai was killed by an elephant. Though this saddened the community, they did not retaliate but rather sought help from conservationists to learn about additional mitigation techniques.

In the past year, poaching has increased on Mbirikani, likely due to major road construction in the area. The Guardians have been reporting signs of poaching that they encounter, and Lion Guardian Masarie who works in the north of the ranch, reported a number of cases of herbivores being poached for meat. MPT game scouts have been able to arrest the poachers and prosecute them in court.

### **The Guardians**

The Guardians have had a fantastic year. In May we hired a new Guardian for the Ol Donyo Wuas area. Solonka joined the group of dedicated and enthusiastic *murrans* to help his local community and track the lions that have been frequenting the area.



*Koikai and Lenkina teach Solonka how to track collared lions*

In March, Lion Guardian Kapande was admitted to St. Mary Hospital, Nairobi with appendicitis. He underwent surgery and is now well. We are grateful for the donations Kapande received to help pay for his treatment.

Antony Kasanga has submitted an application for the Postgraduate Diploma in International Wildlife Conservation Practice at the University of Oxford, UK. This course is aimed at providing opportunities for native conservationists, to equip them with the necessary professional and scientific skills to work in conservation in the developing world. If Antony is accepted to the program he will spend seven months at Oxford gaining invaluable skills which will allow him to making a lasting contribution to the Lion Guardians, lions and to community conservation.

Antony has also been giving weekly presentations to tourists about the Lion Guardians program at the nearby lodge - Ol Donyo Wuas. This promotes the program to the guests, and helps with our fundraising efforts, as we also take out guests to track collared lions, in exchange for a donation to the project.

### **Expansion of Lion Guardians program**

As mentioned above, lions continue to be killed on the ranches surrounding Mbirikani. We are planning to start the Lion Guardians program on both Olgulului and Eselenkei Group Ranches to address the continued lion persecution. On recent visits to these areas we met with the group ranch committees, who have expressed great interest and support for this program. They have offered us a piece of land at no cost where we will set up a Lion Guardians camp, which will be a training base for the new team. Our aim is to double the number of Guardians in this area to approximately 18, since these ranches are larger in size and have shown to be much less tolerant of carnivore presence.

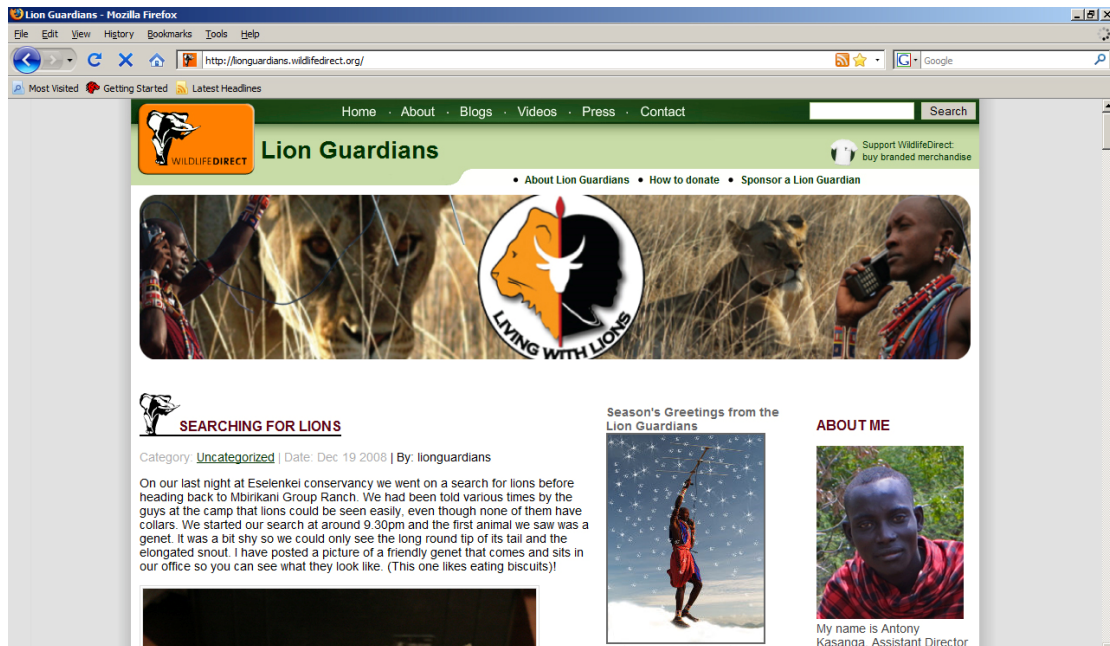
A recent worrying development is the emergence of a new motive for lion killing. The trade of lion teeth and claws has increased substantially in recent years, especially around Amboseli National Park. With a new economic incentive for lion killing, the need to start up Lion Guardians around this area is more urgent than ever.

### **The Lion Guardians blog**

Our Lion Guardians blog through WildlifeDirect, has been running for over one year now. Through the blog we have raised over US\$18,000, which has allowed us to increase the Guardians' wages, buy and replace broken equipment, and pay for maintenance and fuel for our motorbike. The blog has also initiated various fundraising events for us - we have received donations from a school in the UK who ran a cake sale to raise funds, and from a zoo and visitor attraction in the UK (Africa Alive!) that has now raised over US\$4500 for the Lion Guardians.

In May we launched the 'Sponsor a Guardian' campaign, to provide wages and maintenance costs (phone airtime, transport costs etc) for a Guardian for a year. Through this initiative, five Guardians have been sponsored for one year. We are also advertising our Christmas gift certificates on the blog. Donors are emailed a certificate saying how they have helped us with their donation, which they can print out and give as a gift for Christmas. We would like to send our thanks to WildlifeDirect, and to everyone who has donated to us online. Your support has allowed us to continue our conservation endeavors.





The Lion Guardians blog <http://lionguardians.wildlifedirect.org>

## Media

A number of film crews have visited the Lion Guardians in the past year, which has helped to raise our profile worldwide. In March we were visited by National Geographic who filmed a piece for *Wild Chronicles*, which aired on PBS in the US in June. The Canadian broadcasters CBC filmed a news piece on the Lion Guardians, which was aired in July, and the BBC TV series *Changing Planet* filmed a piece on Lion Guardians, to air on BBC2 in the UK and worldwide on satellite in early 2009.



Some of the Lion Guardians are interviewed by the BBC



In June 2008 we had a visit from Alex Chadwick of National Public Radio, who will be doing shows on both the Laikipia Predator Project and the Lion Guardians in late 2008. The Australian production company Beyond filmed a segment for *Nature's Deadliest* on human-wildlife conflict in December, which included the work of the Lion Guardians. This will be aired on the Discovery Channel in March 2009. CBS *60 Minutes* also visited us to document the use of the poison Furadan, and included a segment on Lion Guardians. This is likely to air in early 2009.

### **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost we would like to thank the Panthera Foundation, for their support throughout the year, on Mbirikani and for their continuing support towards the start up of Lion Guardians on Olgulului and Eselenkei. They have been instrumental in making the Lion Guardians program successful. Additionally, the Rufford Small Grants and the Institute of Environmental Sciences, Leiden/the Foundation Panthera Leo have provided support for the Lion Guardian expansion.

We would also like to thank the Maasailand Preservation Trust for their collaboration and support, as well as WildlifeDirect for their advice on how to improve our blog. Last but not least, this project would not be possible without the support and "umbrella" of the Living with Lions project.

Ashe Oleng Pookin and Happy Holidays!!