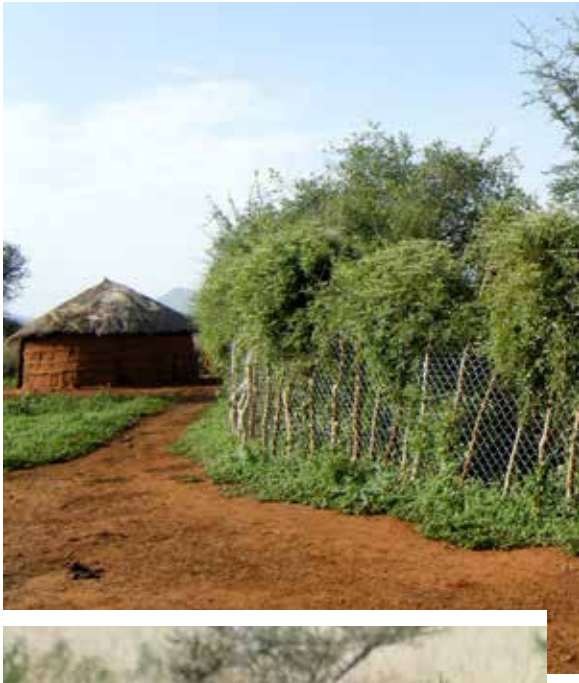
Laly Lichtenfeld – African People & Wildlife Fund, Bernardsville, USA

Maasai Steppe Big Cats Conservation Initiative

WAZA Project 13003



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Cheetahs in the Maasai Steppe.

The African People & Wildlife Fund's Big Cats Conservation Initiative in the northern Maasai Steppe of Tanzania is working to save the country's most threatened lion population as well as important populations of cheetahs and leopards. In this vast and magnificent landscape (20,000 km2), big cats depend on community lands for their persistence, moving well beyond the borders of two small protected areas – Tarangire National Park (2600 km2) and Lake Manyara National Park (330 km2). Partnering with local communities, our holistic conservation programme integrates big cat research, big cat–livestock conflict prevention efforts, community environmental education and the protection of big cats, their habitat and prey via the support of local teams of "Warriors for Wildlife".

Working from the organisation's rural environmental centre, Noloholo, our large team of Tanzanian scientists, conservationists, educators and community members effectively conserve big cats by preventing conflicts, protecting prey species and habitats, raising awareness and interest in big cats and wildlife conservation, and developing the means for rural people to benefit from their natural environment and wildlife populations. Notable and unique features of our programme include:

Living Walls: This project represents the largest, environmentally friendly effort to prevent lion–livestock conflicts in Tanzania. We construct Living Walls by planting native trees and weaving the growing branches through chain link fencing. Once planted, the trees take root and grow into an impenetrable, natural livestock enclosure. Developed by our Maasai team, Living Walls are a proven, highly successful technique for preventing lions and other large carnivores from attacking cattle, goats and sheep in their corrals. More than 200 Living Walls are currently in place across 3600 km2 of lion habitat and protecting approximately 50,000 head of livestock on a nightly basis. Importantly, this has eliminated the need for retaliatory killings of lions; no lions were killed at homesteads with effectively installed Living Walls since the beginning of this programme and the lion population is showing early signs of recovery in the project's focal area.

Warriors for Wildlife: This project trains and deploys local Maasai community members into their own villages as community-based conservationists. Their work covers a wide range of community-based wildlife and habitat conservation activities – patrols to prevent illegal deforestation, bush fire management, poaching prevention, lost livestock searches and, of course, the construction of lion-proof, Living Wall livestock enclosures.

…integrates big cat research, big cat–livestock conflict prevention efforts…

Environmental Education and Noloholo Environmental Scholars: Our education team is busy building enthusiasm and commitment to the natural world with a variety of activities for local youth – including wildlife clubs, national park field trips, the very first environmental summer camps in Tanzania and our highly popular scholarship programme – as well as adult education seminars in natural resource management, environmentally friendly business development and watershed protection. Currently, we support 16 Noloholo Environmental Scholars with guaranteed full tuition over a period of six years to a well-regarded, private high school (secondary school) on the edge of the Maasai Steppe. These are the future conservation leaders of the Maasai Steppe.

Mauro Lucherini – Andean Cat Alliance, Bahía Blanca, Argentina

The Soul of the Andes

WAZA Project 13004

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A Living Wall.

Emerging efforts of the programme include the establishment of communal protected areas that provide ecological and/or financial benefits to local people while protecting critical big cat territories. Through our strategic partnerships, educational and capacity building opportunities and on-the-ground community environmental protection teams, the African People & Wildlife Fund is fostering the real engagement of local communities in sustainable and adaptive natural resource management. With our comprehensive and holistic big cat conservation programme, we are successfully spearheading a unique conservation model that can be applied widely in Africa where integrative community approaches to managing landscapes for the benefit of people, livestock and big cats are required. ■

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The volcano Granada, in the core of the Soul of the Andes project study area.

The Andean Cat Alliance (AGA) is the only organisation specifically aiming to ensure the survival of the Andean cat (*Leopardus jacobita*) throughout its entire range. This small felid lives almost exclusively in the high-altitude deserts of Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina and is the most endangered feline species in the Americas. The primary threats to the Andean cat are habitat loss and hunting. It is also sometimes killed under the misconception of being dangerous. Its rareness and strong habitat association make this felid suitable as a focal species for the conservation of the ecosystems that it inhabits. However, no Andean cat has ever been kept in captivity and until 15 years ago, when AGA was created, almost no information was available on this species.

AGA members work collaboratively to design coordinated actions for the protection of this beautiful cat. The Soul of the Andes team is led by Mauro Lucherini (a carnivore biologist and member of both the IUCN SSC Canid and Cat specialist groups) and has been working in the remote regions of north-western Argentina at over 4000 m of elevation since 2005 to support the conservation of Andean cats and their habitat.

This project aims to: (1) improve our understanding of the ecological requirements of the Andean cat and the threats to its survival; (2) increase local people's awareness of the ecological role and delicate conservation status of the Andean cat; and (3) favour local community engagement in wildlife conservation.

Until present, our project has produced a lot of specifically designed environmental education materials, delivered awareness activities to hundreds of children from local schools and conducted extensive research on population densities and other ecological aspects of the local Andean cat population, which peaked in the first radio telemetry-based research on this species. The continued efforts of this team have produced a great deal of information on the food and spatiotemporal niche of co-occurring Andean cat and Pampas cat (Leopardus colocolo) populations that enabled us to co-author eight papers in peer-reviewed journals. Live trapping is currently ongoing and, also thanks to veterinarians from San Francisco and Denver zoos, we have succeeded to radio-tag three Andean cats and three Pampas cats.