

# Ishasha Journal

*by Mark Laxer*

In August, 2011, I traveled in western Uganda to a health clinic--the Kibale Health & Conservation Project--that serves as a model for improving park-people relations. Villagers feel anger toward the parks for a variety of reasons, including their inability to hunt or gather wood within park boundaries, and the fact that dangerous animals too often destroy their crops, livestock, and homes. The health clinic is a way to mitigate the anger. Supported in part by the Ugandan Wildlife Authority (UWA) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the clinic provides accessible, inexpensive health care to people living near Kibale National Park. My wife and I help support the clinic. I had the opportunity to meet the nurses and observe the clinic and its outreach program in action. It seemed like a great idea though my understanding of park-people relations was in its infancy and I saw none of the anger I had heard so much about. I said goodbye to the clinic staff and continued the journey south to Ishasha.

Ishasha lies at the southern tip of Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP), Uganda, bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is home to tree-climbing lions. I planned to meet a WCS lion researcher who I hoped would drive me around, show me his work, and teach me something about wildlife conservation.

I arrived at Ishasha at 2:30pm and checked into an UWA banda--a simple, round hut.

"Mustafa is expecting you," the UWA ranger told me, "but he will be delayed. There is an emergency in the village."

I left my things in the banda and ordered lunch. Thirty minutes later, Mustafa appeared. "There's a lion in the village," he said calmly. "It has attacked nine goats: three yesterday, six today. The villagers are prepared to kill it."

The UWA rangers--armed with AK-47 rifles--sought to protect both the villagers and the lion. It was not in UWA's interest to kill the lion. A good measure of Uganda's economy depends on tourism revenue and a large percentage of tourists want to see lions. In Queen Elizabeth Park, 140 of them were still alive.

The villagers--armed with spears--had a different view. "I am going to kill the lion," one villager had declared to an UWA ranger. "And when I am done, you can kill me."

Mustafa explained the situation to me. "There's not much time left," he said.

UWA had tried to locate a functional dart gun and now it was our turn to try. We called Dr. Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka of Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH), a high-powered veterinarian and conservationist whom I had met with over breakfast that same day. I was sure she could make things happen but I quickly learned that in this part of the world dart guns and appropriate cartridges were a scarce commodity. We continued making calls. We grew increasingly impatient. 140 lions left. Human lives were at risk. The park-people issue had become more than an abstract model I had come to Africa to study. My heart pounded. My throat felt constricted. Kampala, where an appropriate dart gun had been

located, was at least a seven-hour drive but we needed to act *now*. I wanted to offer to do something but didn't know what to do.

Mustafa's phone rang. The lion, which turned out to be a lioness, was dead. Come to the village, Mustafa was told, and pick her up.

Brian (who had driven me to Ishasha) and several UWA rangers got in the back of the Land Cruiser, I got in the passenger seat, and Mustafa drove about twenty minutes and pulled up beside the dead lioness who was surrounded by several hundred villagers.

"Keep smiling," Mustafa told me as the crowd closed around the car. Many of the young men carried spears. Villagers pressed against the car. UWA rangers pushed them back and a shouting match ensued.

The villagers, furious that they wouldn't be compensated for the loss of the nine goats, wanted to keep the lioness. UWA said no. The Ugandan military showed up and Mustafa, standing by the lioness, encouraged the three armed factions not to use force. Despite his calming influence, one could sense the shouting, resentment, and testosterone levels rising and Mustafa patted me on the back and said, "Please, Mark, get in the car."

From inside the vehicle, I noticed the villagers staring at me, *mzungu*, the white foreigner. I learned later that many villagers think the parks are controlled by *mzungu*. I learned that many villagers think the twenty percent of park entrance fees that are supposed to come back to the villages never quite shows up.

I spoke with some of the men through the open window. I felt bad for the villagers. Nine goats seemed like a large loss. It didn't seem fair that the parks, which generated the revenue, didn't compensate for damage caused by roaming animals. Village children, women, and men had been put at risk. I thought of my wife and two children. How would I have felt had a powerful lioness been stalking my farmhouse in northern Vermont? I felt bad for the lioness. She was a beautiful creature and now there were 139 left. How long would it be before all the lions in Uganda were killed? I felt bad for the UWA staff. Caught between an angry lion and angry villagers, one got the sense they were underfunded and under appreciated.

Mustafa climbed in the vehicle, as did Brian, a few UWA rangers, an UWA liaison officer (Warden In-Charge of Ishasha sector), and an UWA community conservation officer.

"Is it true," I asked, "that villagers don't get compensated for the loss of their goats?"

"Correct," said the UWA liaison officer. "UWA doesn't do that."

If UWA can't compensate the villagers, I wondered, what about *mzungu*?

I asked each person in the car what they thought of the idea. Each agreed that if they had the money, they would do the same.

I climbed out and stood on the rear fender of the Land Cruiser and, with the UWA liaison officer translating, spoke to the village.

“I came to Uganda,” I said, “to see the wildlife and to understand the culture. This is my first trip to Africa. I’m coming from the United States of America. I’m very sorry about what happened to the village, to the goats...and to the danger of your children, your women and your men. I salute UWA for trying to help in a very difficult situation. On behalf of my wife and I, and my four and six year olds, I would like to offer a gift to compensate the people who had the goats so that they’re compensated fairly for each goat. And to help the men who carried the lion from one place to another. I’m sorry that this happened and I hope that in the future we can have less of this sort of conflict where the wildlife is coming to your village and threatening your children and I hope that we can be very smart and come up with ways...to protect you and also to protect Uganda’s beautiful treasures--the people and the wildlife.”

I touched my heart and said, “Thank you.”

The villagers clapped, tempers cooled, and some of the men shook my hand.

That night, Mustafa, Brian, and I brainstormed over dinner ways to protect people and wildlife. Does one build fences around the parks? Isolating the park animals, genetically speaking, may not bode well for their futures. Fences can be hugely expensive and require ongoing maintenance. Multiple beehives forming an inexpensive virtual fence may repel elephants--and create honey--but would the bees repel lions? Buffalo? Hippos? Does one build fences around livestock and crops instead? The situation was complex.

Dinner was over and we had more questions than answers. Why aren’t villagers compensated for loss from wildlife incursions? Why aren’t there more dart guns accessible to villages bordering the parks? What kind of fence or virtual fence makes sense?

The next morning, Mustafa drove me around, showed me his work, and we continued to brainstorm the park-people issue. The education and the adventure had just begun.

President and co-founder of Chimp-n-Sea Wildlife Conservation Fund, Mark Laxer invented virtual ecotourism--known as vEcotourism--a real-time, interactive educational system designed to mitigate ill effects of ecotourism. Laxer is author of *The Monkey Bible*.