

Speared lions in Kenya incite outrage, while locals suffer lion depredations

By Daniel Stiles, Consultant

Richard Bonham, Executive Chairman of Big Life Foundation Kenya, announced recently that: "Six lions have been killed on Mbirikani Ranch, in the Greater Amboseli Ecosystem of southern Kenya, on the morning of Saturday May 13th. The incident unfolded after a group of nine subadult lions broke into a livestock enclosure near Mbirikani town on the night of May 12th, killing 12 goats and a dog.... The lions then moved into Big Life's fenced headquarters nearby. Big Life staff were able to push three lions out of the premises during the night and they moved away from the town to safety, but the other six remained inside the compound overnight.... Over the course of the day, a crowd continued to build, and tensions spilled over as dozens of people broke through the compound fence, spearing all six lions."

The six speared lions, which had been lying peacefully in a bushy part of Big Life's compound, somehow morphed into the killing of [10 lions](#) and a "[night of terror](#)" in press reports, with "[conservationists](#)" decrying the killing. Several of the perpetrators were arrested, which raised the ire of [Kajiado Governor Joseph Lenku](#), who demanded the immediate release of the suspects. The governor said the Kenya Wildlife Service should be applauding the community for coexisting with wildlife and setting aside 60 percent of their land for conservation, rather than blaming them for an "accidental incident that led to the death of the lions".

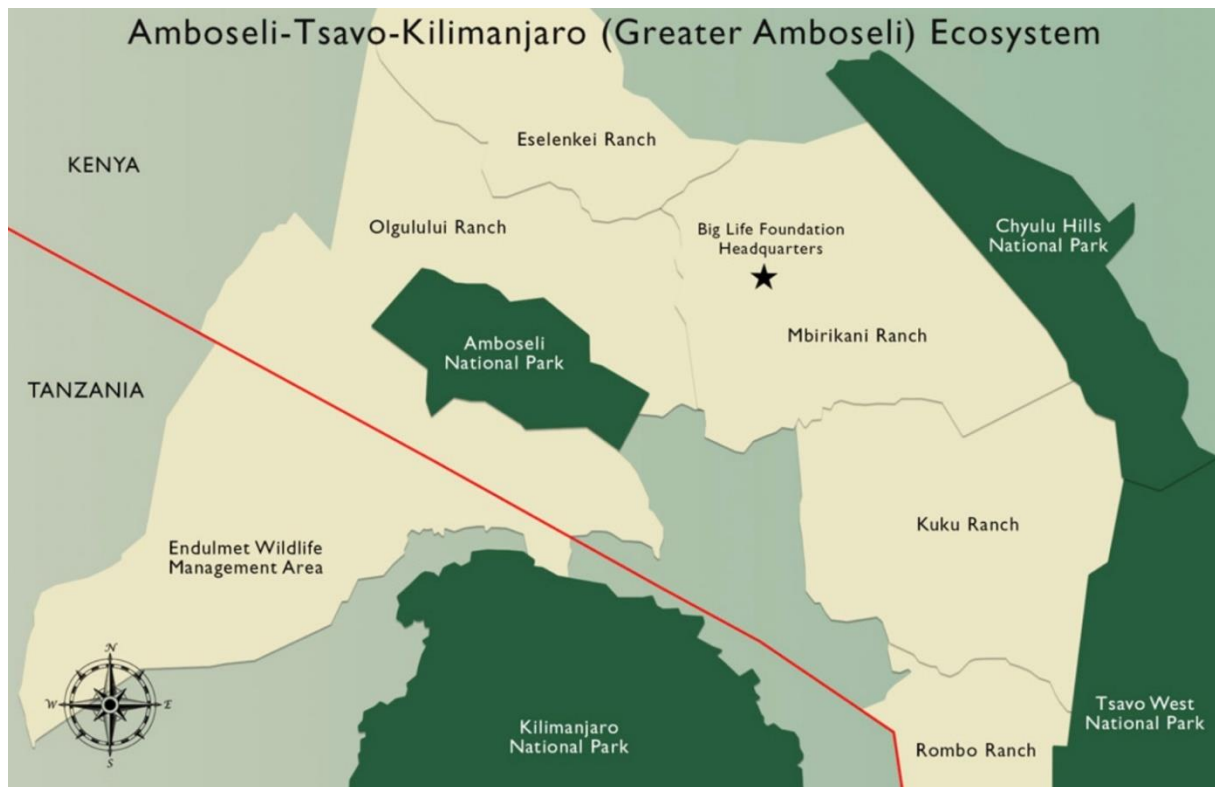
Kajiado Senator Samuel Seki accused KWS of failing to respond quickly to the plight of pastoralists when wild animals attack, but acting swiftly when an animal is killed. "We want a prompt response when a person has been attacked or animals preyed on by wild animals. We demand compensation for our people," he said. His views were echoed by the leaders present.

In the last year, cases of human-wildlife conflicts in Kajiado County have risen. To illustrate the seriousness of the issue, on June 2, 2022, four demonstrators were shot dead and eight others injured by Kenyan security forces at Masimba Trading Centre along the Nairobi-Mombasa highway during a demonstration against the increasing deaths and destruction of property by marauding wild animals.

A Kenyan from the area commenting on the lion killing on Facebook wrote, "I attended a meeting in which locals feel like they are getting zero from the so called wildlife and they wished to look after their animals without those lions. Elephants killed them yearly we have been losing people so far over 28 and with zero compensation."

In a crisis meeting prompted by the lion killings, Tourism, Wildlife and Heritage Cabinet Secretary Peninah Malonza confirmed the Facebook user's comments. Ms Malonza said the [ministry owes the victims](#) of wildlife attacks Kenya shillings 5.6 billion (over USD 4 million), accumulated since 2013. They are looking for the money. People are tired of empty promises.

In the Big Life operations area of 550,000 acres (2,226 km²), however, their Predator Compensation Fund does function. Every two months those who lost livestock to predators are paid a certain amount depending on the number, type and age of the animals that were killed. No compensation will be paid if the predator is killed in retaliation. In addition, the killers are fined seven cows for each lion killed.



When the Fund started in 2003 the lion population was down to 15-20 in the entire ecosystem. Today it has grown to around 250, considered a big success story. But [48,648 livestock lost](#) to predators in the Big Life area since 2003 has been the price.

Unfortunately, the person who lost the 12 goats will not receive compensation for their loss since the lions were killed. In spite of the severe penalties, the current dire situation in Kenya after four years of drought, which has killed thousands of livestock and wild animals alike, made the killing of 12 goats the straw that broke the camel's back. Anger erupted amongst the young Maasai moran and they spoke with their spears. They will be fined [42 cows, once they are identified](#). They may even be charged with criminal offenses. On top of that Big Life has stopped funding for all community programs in Mbirikani until the killers are brought to book.

Goats are the main source of subsistence now, so the loss of 12 to that one family was a disaster. And it was not an isolated incident. Following the onset of the rains and the dispersal of game with the renewed grass and leaves flush over the area, lions are heading where they know easy pickings are – pastoralist kraals.

A few days before the Mbirikani killing, reputedly the oldest lion in Africa, 19-year old Loonkito, was [speared to death](#) in a village bordering Amboseli after he preyed on livestock. Loonkito received an [obituary](#) worthy of Nelson Mandela.

None of the people killed or injured by lions or elephants have received such media attention, as pointed out in the [IWMC eNewsletter](#) of September-October 2021 after three Maasai children were torn apart by lions near Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. The family was not compensated by the [Tanzanian government](#) and the standard practice there is to translocate offending lions out of the area, sparking complaints that governments, "conservationist" NGOs and the media take lions more seriously than people. "Conservationist" is put in quotes because often the most outspoken individuals and NGOs critical of local communities protecting themselves from wild animals are animal rights campaigners, not genuine conservationists.

Lion Guardians, the group that produced the obituary worthy of Mandela, was [quoted](#) as stating, "the killing of Loonkiito was a tough situation for both sides, the people and the lion", and eulogised him as "a symbol of resilience and coexistence".

If the symbol for human-wildlife coexistence was the speared carcass of Loonkito, obviously the current model is not working. Incentives for communities suffering wildlife depredations will have to be raised, with community sustainable use activities contributing to livelihoods being the most practical.