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ETHIOPIAN WOLVES

GUARDIANS OF THE ROOF OF AFRICA

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Ethiopia is a land of wonders. From the Danakil depression, to the mystic lakes of the Rift Valley, the rock churches of Lalibela to their wild spaces harbouring many endemic plants and animals. While the country is often remembered by the droughts and famines of the 1980s, it contains vast expanses of fertile highlands, once covered by forests and now sustaining one of the highest human densities of rural Africa. Over 80% of its population, now exceeding 90 million, live in the Ethiopian highlands. It was there where, at the peak of the last glaciation, the ancestors of the Ethiopian wolf became successful rodent hunters, the dominant mammals in the open Afroalpine landscape. With the warming up of the continent, and more recently the expansion of agriculture, the marvellously adapted Ethiopian wolf was pushed into mountain relicts where we found them today, Afroalpine islands in a sea of cropland and villages.

Living and working in the country for many years exposed me to the many dimensions of the concept of uniqueness. Ethiopians have their own alphabet, a different calendar (the ancient Coptic calendar, ticking along seven years behind ours), a different way to count the hours of the day, a 'bleeding heart' gelada baboon, and a red wolf that eats only rodents –the beautiful Ethiopian wolf. I had the opportunity to study these exceptional animals, which combine solitary foraging with intense family life, putting to test the evolutionary meaning of sociality. In pursuing this my research, I became forever committed to protect these rare wolves from extinction. The Ethiopian wolf is a flagship for the conservation of the Afroalpine ecosystems and the services they provide to the Amhara and Oromo people that share the mountains with the wolf.

The plight of the Ethiopian wolf.

Our early research revealed the fascinating life of this poorly known canid. In doing so he became acquainted with many wolf families and knew all the wolves by name. But in 1992 rabies decimated our beloved wolves. The perilous status of the species was then fully acknowledged, with

the species formally recognized as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List. As a result in 1995 I funded the Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme (EWCP).

By 1997 the Bale population was slowly recovering and, in a more stable political context, we embarked on a countrywide search for other wolf populations, confirming the presence of wolves in mountains enclaves where they had been historically reported, but also described new populations and, sadly, some local extinctions. We estimated a global population of 500 adult and subadult wolves, distributed in six populations –Bale, in the Southern Highlands, is the largest with some 300 wolves. With the recovery of wolf numbers in Bale the species was down-listed to Endangered, but our extensive surveys had shown that the conversion of Afroalpine habitats to agriculture was putting the smaller populations at serious risk of extinction. In response to this crisis, EWCP expanded its operations to the northern highlands of Ethiopia at the turn of the millennium. Here human pressure is higher and as a result the habitats for wolves degrade at a steady pace.

What can we do?

How can we save the world's rarest canid, and Africa's most threatened carnivore? We hope the answer is simple and unequivocal, which is rarely the case in wildlife conservation. The main pillars of the EWCP are monitoring, disease control, education, outreach, capacity building and habitat protection, with a mission "to secure viable and ecologically functioning Ethiopian wolf populations and habitats, and to emphasise its role as a flagship for the conservation and sustainable use of the Afroalpine ecosystem, on which present and future generations of Ethiopians also depend". In 2011 experts, governments, conservationists and members of the local communities gathered in the city of Lalibela to delineate a strategic plan for the conservation of Ethiopian wolves, which guides our work for the next 10 years.

Managing the threat of rabies remains a cornerstone of our work, as recurrent epizootics continue killing wolves

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in the Bale Mountains. We vaccinate domestic dogs in and around the National Park, conduct education campaigns, and also vaccinate Ethiopian wolves when an outbreak is detected. By creating a *cordon sanitaire* of protected wolf packs, we have contained disease epizootics from spreading widely across the Bale population. Our next challenge is to develop a more pro-active approach to managing disease, involving the oral vaccination of wolves - pilots to test the delivery and efficacy of the oral vaccine were very promising.

Protecting the smaller wolf populations, where anthropogenic threats are greatest and wolf behaviour poorly understood, remains a main priority. With the support of Born Free USA, important research and conservation work is unravelling in north Ethiopia. We set about to evaluate the drivers of habitat loss and degradation in remote areas, and to gauge the needs and attitudes of local peoples, persisting knowledge gaps that were constraining the conservation options available to those with a vested interest in Afroalpine conservation.

Central to our work are our 'Wolf Ambassadors', our eyes and ears in remote wolf ranges, building links with their communities and informing of serious problems as they happen – such as epizootics in dogs nearby wolf habitat and illegal encroachment. Also the work with communities to assess, by themselves, the condition of natural resources in their localities – including Afroalpine pastures, sources of firewood and water. This exercise led to important discussions about the environmental consequences of unregulated uses of Afrolapine resources, which are typically in communal land, and facilitated outreach activities that we are now implementing.

Our research is also contributing to understand how human disturbance, grazing and other forms of land

uses are affecting wolves and their prey. An extensive study of rodent populations in South Wollo showed how prey species respond to different management practices, and where habitat degradation is reaching unsustainable levels. We hope to start a long-term monitoring programme of rodents in this region and to assess the potential for habitat/prey restoration. A detailed study of Ethiopian wolves in North Wollo showed that their foraging behaviour is being influenced by the timing and presence of people and livestock in wolf range. For a solitary forager of small mammals, any change in the foraging budget can be energetically costly. Shifting to killings lambs can in such cases become particularly tempting... We are also gathering information on livestock predation and have identified where conflicts between people and wolves might escalate if they go unchecked. Sometimes the task of saving the Ethiopian wolf seems enormous, but the longevity of our programme is bearing its fruits, as we get to know the wolves better, learn from our failures and successes, and work with a more diverse range of partners and collaborators.

EWCP is a University of Oxford endeavour, working under an agreement with the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority and the Regional governments. A dedicated team of over 40 Ethiopian nationals implements all project activities in Ethiopia. The programme is funded primarily by the Born Free Foundation (UK), the Wildlife Conservation Network (USA), Born Free USA and private contributions/donations.

For more information, or to make a donation, please go to: www.ethiopianwolf.org

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About Ethiopian Wolves

Scientific name: *Canis simensis*
Common names: Ethiopian wolf, Abyssinian wolf, Simien fox, Simien jackal, ky kebero (red jackal in Amharic), jeedala fardaa (horse's jackal in Afan Oromo).

Distinguishing features: a specialist rodent hunter endemic to Ethiopia, with long legs and long muzzle, and a distinctive bright tawny rufous coat with black and white marks; 14-20kg in weight.

Habits: Solitary, diurnal foragers of small mammals with an intricate social life. They live in families of up to 18 animals which together defend a territory and help raising the pups of the dominant pair.

Life history: Typically long-lived, females tend to disperse, dominant females synchronized their oestrus and give birth to one litter of up to 7 pups.

Habitat and distribution: Very localized endemic species, confined to Afroalpine grasslands and heathlands above 10,000 feet in Ethiopia.

Status: IUCN Red List: Endangered - Protected by law in Ethiopia. Global population estimated at less than 500 adults and subadults in 6-populations.

No animals exist in captivity.