

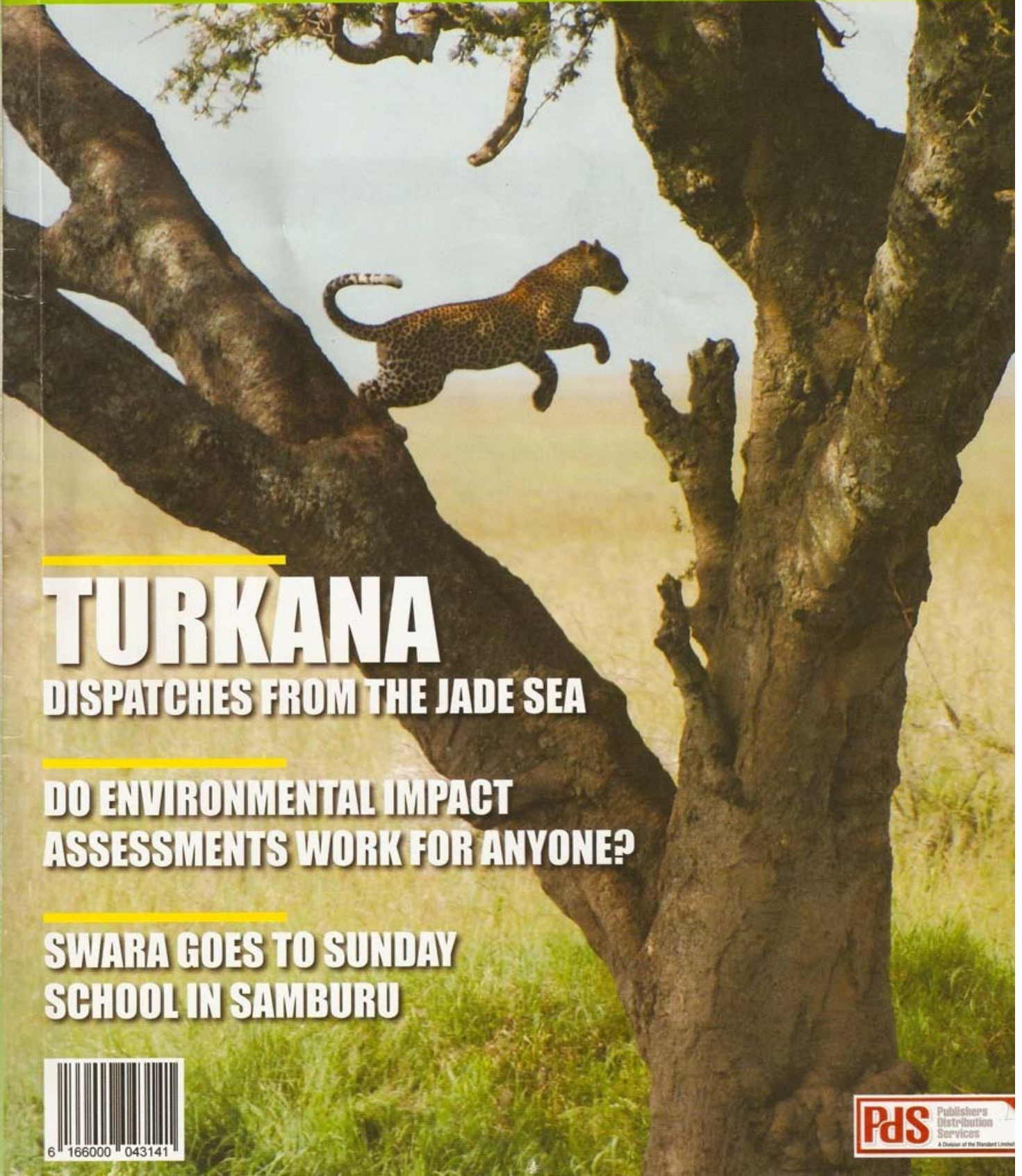
# swara



THE EAST AFRICAN  
WILDLIFE SOCIETY

THE VOICE OF CONSERVATION IN EAST AFRICA

www.eawildlife.org VOLUME 35 NUMBER 2 APRIL - JUNE 2013



## TURKANA

DISPATCHES FROM THE JADE SEA

DO ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT  
ASSESSMENTS WORK FOR ANYONE?

SWARA GOES TO SUNDAY  
SCHOOL IN SAMBURU



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PHOTOS BY: JOHN ALPORT

# NO BIBLES AT A SAMBURU SUNDAY SCHOOL

BY ANDY HILL

*Sunday schools simply attempt to offer meaningful instruction concerning Christian doctrine and keep little or no record of performance for any given week. Attendance is often tracked as a means of encouraging children to attend regularly, and awards are frequently given for reaching attendance milestones. (Wikipedia).*

There's not a bible in sight at the Ewaso Lions Sunday school. Not a hymn is sung. But there is, in the stillness of the classroom and the scent of the savanna outside, a feeling of reverence for a doctrine. Its name is conservation – the sound management of people, wildlife and the habitat they share.

Welcome to the Ewaso Lions Sunday school for Samburu warriors. The students are young men who are swapping the killing of wildlife as a display of manhood to the conservation of the environment as a tool of social

and economic advancement for their remote and poor community.

It's a striking sight: a dozen or so warriors dripping in red ochre and elaborate finery, perched around desks meant for children a third of their age – and learning the alphabet in a dusty village in the Westgate Community Conservancy in Kenya's Samburu region.

Their teacher, Shivani Bhalla, lays a word in front of some students and asks one of them to match the letters to an animal picture. You can see the name being strung together on the lips and





ACING PAGE LEFT: Samburu Warriors Dancing.  
 OP: Jeneria works with Ewaso Lions Warriors.  
 NSERT: Lemeen, a Warrior from Naisunyai, practices writing animal names.

in the mind of Lpuresi. O-S-T-R-I-C-H.  
 OSTRICH! He jabs the picture, the right  
 one, and triumph beams from his face,  
 and from every other face around the  
 tiny table.

"We teach them to recognize animals  
 and spell their names. It's the first time  
 they have learned to read or write. Then  
 we teach them how to use a GPS to track  
 animal movements. They are becoming  
 our park rangers and the eyes and ears  
 of the community," she says.

It's her idea of getting the local  
 community involved in conservation,  
 the central tenet of the Northern  
 Rangelands Trust (NRT) philosophy.  
 This patchwork of 16 locally managed  
 conservancies covers some three  
 million acres of land and a population  
 of around 60,000 pastoralists. Each  
 guest who visits the many lodges within  
 the conservancies donates \$50.00,  
 which supports the community through

**"WE TEACH THEM TO RECOGNIZE ANIMALS AND SPELL THEIR NAMES. IT'S THE FIRST TIME THEY HAVE LEARNED TO READ OR WRITE. THEN WE TEACH THEM HOW TO USE A GPS TO TRACK ANIMAL MOVEMENTS. THEY ARE BECOMING OUR PARK RANGERS AND THE EYES AND EARS OF THE COMMUNITY," SHE SAYS.**

school-building, awareness-raising,  
 education and health clinics.

Bhalla is "headmistress" at the  
 Sunday School, founder of the Ewaso  
 Lions Project and as dedicated a  
 conservationist as you will ever meet.  
 Tiny in size, she is huge in influence and  
 her flamboyant students clearly think  
 the world of her.

There are, in truth, few lions about  
 in Westgate these days but that's in

line with the depressing national trend.  
 There are perhaps 2,000 lions in Kenya  
 today, and about 100 are dying each  
 year because of poisoning, hunting and  
 persecution.

She became interested in them while  
 working with Iain Douglas-Hamilton's  
 Save the Elephants foundation and  
 realised that little study had been done  
 on lions in the Samburu region. It  
 became the subject of her doctorate,





PHOTO BY JANE THOMPSON



PHOTO BY SHIVANI BHALLA

**TOP:** Collaring Lguret, maneless male lion in Samburu.

**BELOW:** Jeneria Lekilele, Ewaso Lions' Field Officer (on the left) teaches Lpuresi Lenawasae how to use a GPS.

much of which is committed to keystroke in one of the tents which serve as her home – one to sleep in, one to work and eat in. These are pretty basic army tents, not the cocktail lounges with tent pegs you will see at some of our more luxurious encampments.

With the help of the warriors and scouts, Bhalla is monitoring and tracking the wildlife in and around Westgate, ticking off a lot of statistical boxes for her forthcoming doctorate and, in the process, blending traditional Samburu pride and a hunger for change into a force for conservation.

“The warriors were a neglected entity in wildlife decision-making within this Conservancy,” says Bhalla, while the students change groups, feathers rustling and beads clicking, to work on another exercise.

“But they shouldn’t be neglected. It’s part of their culture to grow up alone in the bush, so they are the eyes and ears of the community. They see everything, every significant movement of people

or wildlife or weather. So instead of excluding them I thought, let’s involve them.”

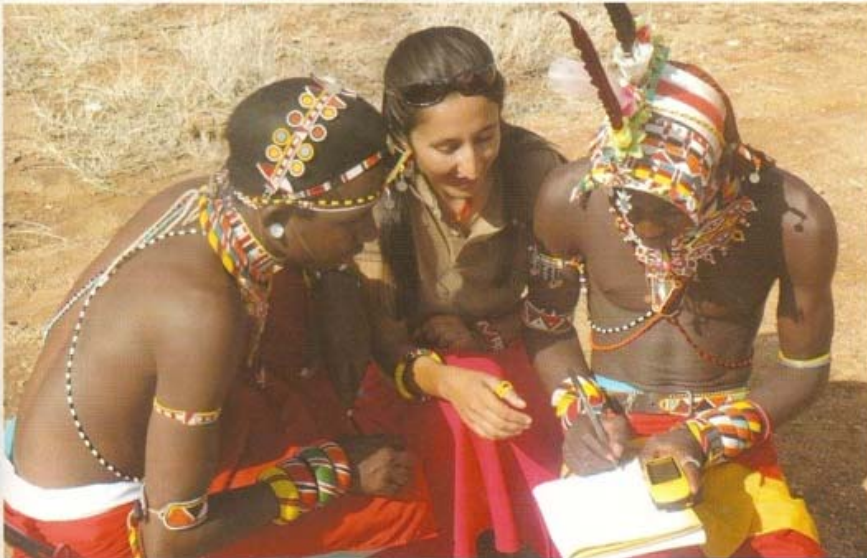
And involve them she has. A key problem, not one faced in Samburu alone, is the war between livestock owners and lions. With discussion and guidance, Bhalla has brought the warriors – avenging angels for lost livestock in the past – to become apostles of sensible herding.

“One of the key problems here is the number of unattended livestock roaming around, or the fact that the people left to herd this are just kids. The warriors have come to realise that this is just asking for lion trouble. So now when they spot unattended or vulnerable herds, the message comes back to the community, and action is taken.”

“These guys, (as she speaks there is an eruption of laughter – someone has been caught cheating at a memory game) are spreading the word about how to protect your livelihood and your



CREDIT: EWASO LIONS



TOP: Shivani with one of the students in class.

BELOW: Shivani and Jeneria work with Lpuresi on how to use a GPS unit.

livestock. They love to learn. To get to this class today, some of them left their own villages yesterday, and walked all the way.”

Westgate is on the key Kipsing corridor that links the National Reserves of Buffalo Springs, Shaba and Samburu to the private and community conservancies in Laikipia. Elephants, Grevy's zebras, wild dogs and other game move up and down this corridor. Visitors to Westgate often include groups going to the neighbouring National Reserves and to overnight at Sasaab, an airy lodge overlooking the Ewaso Nyiro and its processions of bathtime elephants.

Westgate comprises the Ngutuk Ongiron Group ranch covering

87,000 acres and some 3,500 people, most of whom depend on tourism to supplement their traditional livelihoods from herding cattle, sheep and goats. The Lodge is pivotal in directing donors towards funding projects in the conservancy such as school building and finding bursaries for students. “We've been lucky to have a lot of generous donors, especially Americans. They come here and see what is going on and they want to be a part of making change,” says Tony Allport, until recently the manager of Sasaab.

And are the warriors making a change in perceptions and behaviour, to use NGO-speak?

“We selected 15 engaged and influential warriors for this

programme,” says Bhalla. “And they are spreading the message, making changes. Before, if a lion or wild dog or cheetah were spotted, they would go off to kill it or chase it away. Now, instead, they spread the word and the herders avoid that area,” Bhalla says. “And they are teaching each other. The message is spreading. Conserve, don't kill.”

It's clearly fun for the warriors, too. One of the learning games used is Pelmanism or Memory games in which a few dozen cards picturing animals are turned face down on a desk, and each warrior is allowed to turn over two cards, and then replace them, in the hope of memorizing where a pair lies. The winner is the one with most pairs.

The fun is just the catalyst to learning. By being able to read and write the names of animals, and more, the warriors can communicate with conservancy scouts and NRT teams and enter information into a GPS and Ewaso Lion's monitoring system and data bank.

“Before I came here, the only letters I knew were A, B and C. Now I know them all and I know how to write them,” says Lpuresi. He has somehow planted artificial flowers in his headdress and has the top of a suntan lotion bottle protecting the handle of his Simi or sword. Adornment is all, but conservation is also becoming part of the culture too.

“Wildlife has brought many people together for the good of all people. Many of us now look after and protect the wildlife. It was never like that before. It was a struggle before. Now we are a team, and I am part of that team and I am very happy,” he says.

“When I was younger, I would walk in the bush and I would see a dead animal and I would ignore it. Now I know so much. If I see a dead animal now I understand what killed it and why and I can tell the others and prevent more deaths. We are warriors, but we are all helping each other.” ●

For more information:  
[www.nrt-kenya.org](http://www.nrt-kenya.org)  
[www.ewasolions.org](http://www.ewasolions.org)  
[www.sasaab.com](http://www.sasaab.com)