

WILDLIFE ACTION GROUP

THUMA TELEGRAPH MAY 2019

BY LYNN CLIFFORD



May 2019

Dear donors, friends and supporters

Welcome to the next edition of the Thuma Telegraph!

Malawi has been blessed with long rains which started in November 2018 and have just ended last month. The forest is lush and as we head towards the end of May, rivers and streams are flowing at full capacity and our wildlife population is enjoying the availability of water and food.

At the end of March, we unfortunately found a dead elephant that had been poached by a snare poacher. Three suspects have been subsequently arrested and prosecuted. Not a great end to the first quarter of the year but we continue to try and limit such tragic events happening!

On a positive front, we were awarded several new funding streams during the month of April. This vital funding will help strengthen law enforcement across the reserve, enhance Human-Elephant coexistence and strengthen community development. All proceeds are paramount to the ongoing efforts to protect the wildlife, their habitat and the goals of the project.

I also have some bad news to share, in relation to our dedicated ranger team which has shocked us to the core. Geoffrey Umali, was involved in a tragic road traffic accident and died of his injuries. Geoffrey was a senior ranger at Thuma. A brilliant ranger, with the heart of an elephant, he is sorely missed by us all.

We will dedicate our work this year, to the memory of Geoffrey. His spirit and work ethic continues in our work, and he will never be forgotten. Rest in peace, Geoffrey.

Warm regards

Lynn and the scouts



OUR FINAL RESPECTS TO A WILDLIFE WARRIOR

I met Geoffrey one day as I was driving out to town. He ambushed us :), as the car reached the main road, he flagged us down and asked for a job. This was in 2011, when we had 11 scouts, no solar electric fence, no firearms, no official ranger training. He began working for us the next day. Geoffrey quickly showed himself to be a hard worker, quick learner and was physically fit. Within six months we got an opportunity to send three scouts for intensive anti-poaching ranger training at Liwonde. Geoffrey was one of three to be sent and when he returned, something had changed! The training had a lasting impact on him – he was extremely eager, determined and committed. He was extremely proud of what he had learned and he immersed himself into protecting the forest and its wildlife.



Geoffrey was a born leader, and was very much a people person, sociable and dependant. This made him extremely successful at getting information and he was well known and liked by all who met him. He was an all rounder including being a skilled

ranger, with many excellent arrests under his belt. His hunger for knowledge made him excellent in many other aspects of our work, including fence building, community work, research and car mechanics to name a few.



In March while he was off work, Geoffrey was travelling from home to town in a mini bus.

There was a terrible accident and Geoffrey sustained fatal injuries, with a broken neck and spinal cord. Despite the best efforts of all involved, Geoffrey lived for only three weeks after the accident. He was able to speak, but paralyzed from the neck down. The last time we spoke he asked when he could return to work. It broke my heart.



Geoffrey was brought home and laid to rest close to his house. Our rangers carried his body to his resting place, in their final patrol together. Geoffrey, our brave, dedicated ranger, we carry you in our hearts forever, may you rest in peace.

ELEPHANT RECLAIM THEIR FOREST

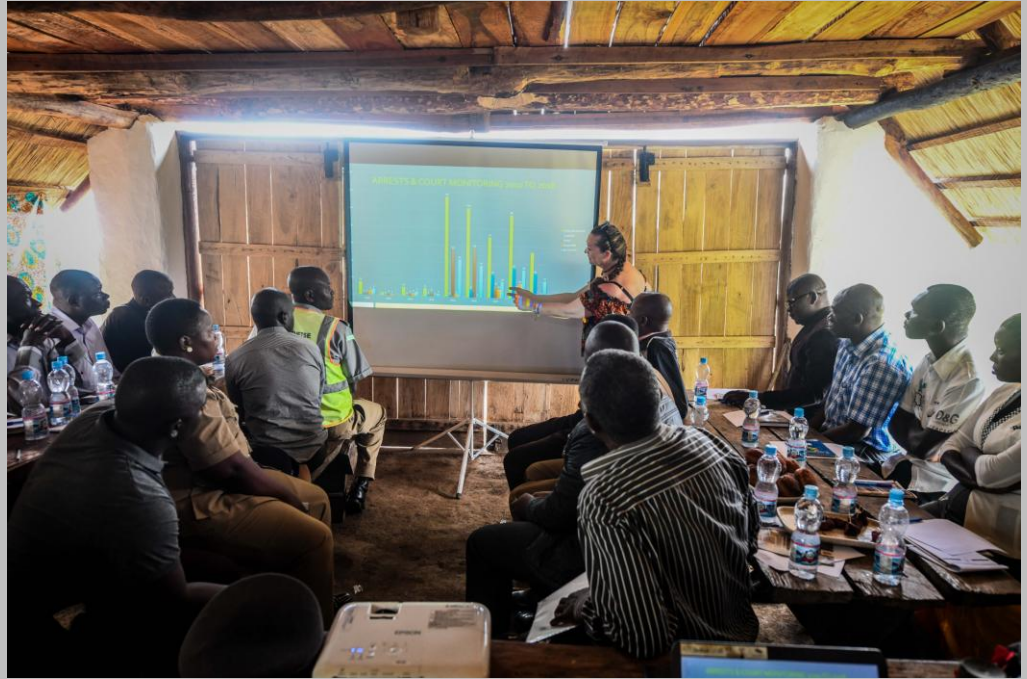
In late 2018, to further promote human-elephant coexistence through keeping wildlife within the forest and reducing illegal activities through controlling the number of people entering the forest, we extended the solar powered electric fence for 15 km on the western side of Thuma. This was made possible with funding from the African Elephant Fund and we are extremely grateful for this support.

This area has seen terrible deforestation over the years through charcoal burning. However, in late 2017 we managed to bring this illegal activity under control. Then when the fence was built in 2018 along with a camp we were able to further secure the area. The forest was already showing signs of regrowth and with the presence of a large river and some marsh areas it is reverting back into a perfect haven for wildlife. Only weeks after the fence was erected we had our first reports of elephants visiting the new camp. Since then we are delighted to say that we have many sightings of different herds in that area. The good rains have assisted us and this side of the forest is growing fast. The human elephant conflict in this area has reduced by 100%! And with the additional security and rehabilitation of the forest these giant have reclaimed their place.



LAW ENFORCEMENT WORK SHOP

April 2019 saw our fifth law enforcement workshop take place in Thuma. This is a time to sit down with our law enforcement stakeholders, a chance to share any changes and updates in national regulations, present an overview of our arrests and court outcomes from the previous year, discuss the challenges and most



importantly to find ways to work closer together to protect Malawi's environment. We were delighted to see many new faces and also the return of some old colleagues from four different police stations around both forests. Police criminal detectives (CID) who assist us when suspects are first arrested, police prosecutors who are the ones to institute legal proceedings and magistrates who administer the law. The Department of Forestry and Department of National Parks and Wildlife also attended and shared additional expertise. The day's discussions were lively and passionate, very open and all-in-all it was another successful event. We ended the day agreeing on how to work more closely together to ensure the protection of Malawi's forests and wildlife.

We thank Save the Elephants and Wildlife Conservation Network through the Elephant Crisis Fund for the funding to carry out this important meeting.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This year is our second year supporting alternative income generating activities with local people on the western side of Thuma. One of the most successful projects has been irrigation gardens, where people are supplied with seeds of different vegetables. They eat the produce themselves and sell some for cash, improving nutrition and at the same time giving people a chance to earn some money. All gardens have started transplanting from the nurseries.

The bee clubs hope to harvest honey in June and the poultry and goat projects are producing babies. The vaccination of the chickens is proving its worth with zero deaths due to new castles disease, but there have been a few losses due to predators such as mongoose.

This year we will sponsor five young people to undertake apprenticeships in motorbike mechanics, dress making and also working with tin to make items such as buckets and watering cans. All these projects are at grass root level, asked for and driven by the communities.

On the eastern side of Thuma and Dedza Salima Forest we have our bee projects to produce honey,



and we have been putting a lot of effort into the schools in this area too. Two schools had significant damage to the roofs of classrooms, so we were able to assist in replacing the roofs allowing children to sit in a class room and learn once more. Another two schools will receive assistance with building additional classrooms.

And last but not least over 250 people have so far benefited from temporary employment inside the forest, helping with infrastructure development.

All in all our relationship with our communities is strong. By working with our communities, we are seeing positive impacts on the ground and the communities are seeing benefits coming directly from the forests. A win-win for all.

SNARES

In March, we found a dead elephant, which had been tragically killed due to a snare wrapped around its trunk. The area had been littered with snares, killing and maiming wildlife unlucky enough to get trapped. Three men were subsequently arrested selling ivory and prosecuted. One received a twelve year sentence, and the other two received five years each.

Shortly afterwards, in a different part of the forest far from the dead elephant, we managed to arrest a man placing snares around watering holes. He received a sentence of two years hard labour with no option of a fine.

Snare poachers are normally very skilled at their craft and it is a way of making a living, when they kill wildlife and sell the meat in local markets. Often the



bush meat is cheaper than domestic animal meat, which also makes it desirable for many people.

Finding snares is not an easy job, especially at this time of the year when the grasses are high so it is difficult to detect. Saying that, we continue to work hard to sweep each and every area to remove as many snares as possible.

To date we have removed 51 snares this year.

BUSH HYRAX

Anyone who has visited our base camp will know our resident hyrax. They are most likely the most photographed hyrax in the world! Yellow Spotted Rock Hyrax.

If you have not met them yet, the hyrax, also called rock rabbit or dassie, is a small furry mammal that looks like an oversized guinea pig.

Would you believe that these small herbivores are actually most closely related to elephants and manatees due to several characteristics; flattened nails of the tips of their



digits, lack of scrotum and their testicles remain tucked inside abdominal cavity, the tusks of a hyrax develop from the incisor teeth as do the tusk of a elephant.

There are five species, and we always thought we only had one here, but we are extremely excited to share that we have just managed to get photos of a second species here in Thuma; Rock Hyrax. Isn't it beautiful?!



Reto, , found a new frog not on our photo data base. This handsome little fella is a Bubbling Kassina. Not sure I want to kiss him:)



RESCUE AND RELEASE

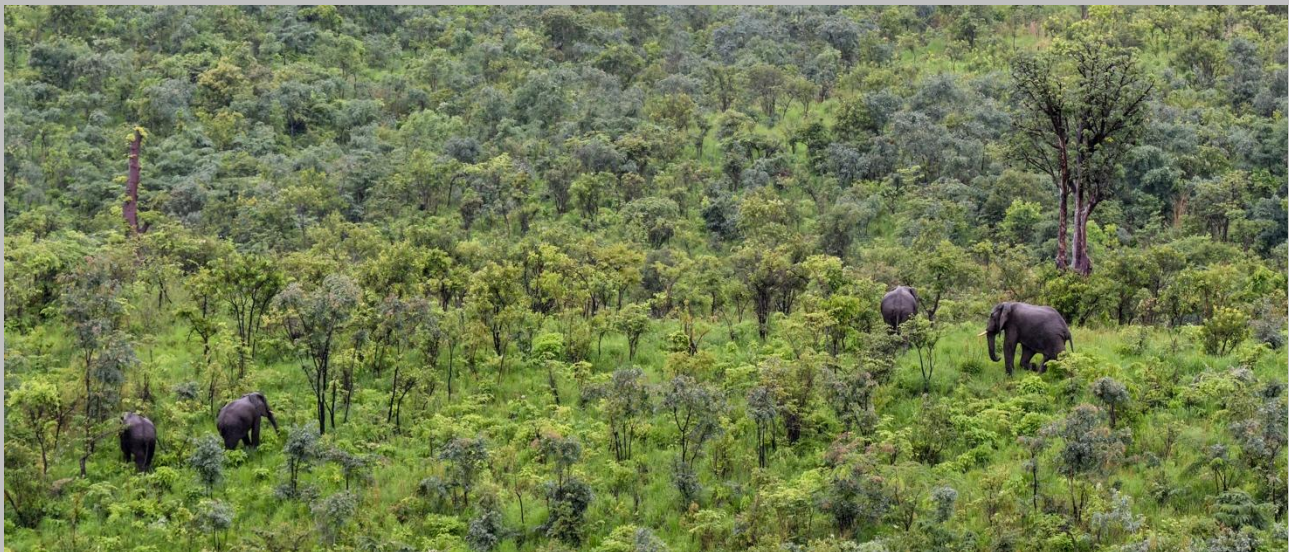
Our work is not all about big iconic species. One of our in country partners, Lilongwe Wildlife Trust rescued over 600 scorpions from illegal traders. They needed to find a good release site for them, so we collected them from Lilongwe and brought them to Thuma where we know they will be protected.. Sean one of our volunteers got up close and personal with one!

REGROWTH OF WESTERN THUMA by Reto

Time for a little bit of reflection! I remember September 2016, it was my first time to hike over on the western side of Thuma Forest Reserve. I was more than shocked to see the amount of illegal activity in the area. The degradation of the forest due to charcoal burning was massive. Everywhere we looked we could see many people busy chopping trees, others carrying bags of charcoal, and loading them onto bikes. It was scary to say the least, and I was afraid I would be attacked, which was a normal occurrence that rangers faced when patrolling there.

The history of this side of the forest is very sad. The illegal activity started way before 1996 and communities were completely reliant on this business with no thought of the future. They also moved in large numbers and fighting against scouts not only ended in people being injured but also camps being attacked and even being burnt to the ground. All the trees in an area of approximately 60 square km had been cut down and all that remained was tree stumps and grass covered hills. There was no signs of any animals living there. We even saw people digging the remaining roots of trees and shrubs out the ground to manufacture charcoal from every last scrap of the trees. I could never image that this situation would change and the forest would get a chance to regenerate without having a long, ongoing fight.

In May this year, I returned to hike around the same area, and what I witnessed has given me so much hope. It is unbelievable. Due to ongoing interventions by WAG such as continued strong law enforcement, community development and the introduction of alternative income generating activities, we are now seeing young trees covering a big part of the area, some of them reaching



already over three meters. Signs of elephants, kudus, common duikers, bush pigs, klipspringers and more can be found all over the area. In addition, there are no signs of people, no chopping, no torches at night and the only signs of people is footprints from WAG rangers!

Photos credits : Many thanks for great photos to Marcus Westberg, Reto Guettinger, Lynn Clifford



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