



Poachers in Malawi: Camera Trap Catches More than Animals

Ecologist Alison Leslie has collected more than 40,000 photographs of the Majete Wildlife Reserve.

This mountain of data comes from camera traps: remote cameras placed throughout the reserve that automatically take and save photos of anything that moves past. While sorting through a batch of photos in search of wildlife, a job often done by Earthwatch volunteers, two of her colleagues found something unexpected: an image of two men carrying makeshift weapons. Poachers.

The Hunt for the Hunters

The camera that “trapped” the poachers faced a remote waterhole in the northwest corner of the park, which Dr. Leslie’s **Animals of Malawi in the Majete Wildlife Reserve** team had been watching for the previous eight months. While it wasn’t clear what exact animals they targeted or why—maybe for food, or for goods to sell on the black market—**Dr. Leslie** says, “My guess is that they were actually hunting or checking snares they may have set.”

The researchers passed the photos to African Parks, the organization that manages the reserve. Staff members then began circulating the photos to their connections in local villages to find out the identity of the suspects. Which meant the word was out to any would-be poachers that the Majete Wildlife Reserve was under 24-hour surveillance.

This left Dr. Leslie and her team worried for their expensive equipment. “We figured it would go one of two ways,” she says. “Either they would start trashing our cameras in the park, or they would get such a fright that poaching might be reduced. We haven’t lost any cameras, so we’re hoping that people are now just very scared that there are cameras all over the park.”



Dr. Alison Leslie and a colleague set up a camera trap.

The Questions Behind the Cameras

There are indeed cameras all over the park. Since the poaching incident, Dr. Leslie and her team have, for research purposes, increased their camera trap coverage to include the entire reserve. "Everywhere we put these things, new species are popping up," she says.

Camera traps allow researchers to watch wildlife without actually being present themselves to disrupt the natural behavior of animals. Camera traps also provide widespread, 24-hour coverage of remote areas, which would be nearly impossible to achieve through direct observation.

In Majete, where park management works to carefully balance animal populations, camera traps have revealed all sorts of surprises to the researchers: more bushpigs than they believed lived there, for example, and species they didn’t know were present at all, such as the caracal and serval (both small, cat-like predators).

Spotted hyenas gave the team one of their biggest jolts. “When we first got to the reserve, we thought there were eight or so hyenas,” Dr. Leslie says. The camera trap images, though, suggested that there were likely more than 30 individuals, each distinguishable by the unique pattern of spots it bears.

Keeping Predators and Prey in Balance

That hyena news could reshape how African Parks manages the reserve. “Having predators that we did not know we had is quite important,” says Dr. Leslie. “We were thinking of bringing in a few more lions at some stage, but we don’t want to put any extra pressure on the ungulate population. We’ve got to be very careful about if we do bring in new predators—what they might be and how many.” To help African Parks develop their management strategy, the Animals of Malawi team has added a new component to their 2014 Earthwatch teams: more in-depth hyena research. “We’re wondering what sort of competition is going to arise between the hyenas and lions—eternal enemies—that are in there,” says Dr. Leslie.

To that end, her team is investigating “how many hyenas there are, how many clans, and where they are in the park.” They are also looking at hyena diet. Already, the researchers believe that the hyenas in the park act more like hunters than like scavengers (as they do in other places)—which means more pressure on prey. “This is why it is so important to determine the actual size of the hyena population,” says Dr. Leslie. “We do not want things out of balance in Majete.”

Poachers Face the Consequences

A village leader eventually identified the two men, and African Parks called in the police to arrest them. Here, they hit a bump—the suspects would not reveal the location of their homemade firearms, which meant the camera trap images were the only evidence against them.

But the photos were ultimately evidence enough. In February of 2014, the men were tried and convicted for, according to African Parks’ report, “illegal entry into a protected area and illegally conveying firearms in a protected area.” Their punishment? Either pay a fine of 20,000 Malawi kwacha each (about 50 U.S. dollars) or spend eight months in prison. They have since both paid fines.

African Parks celebrated the conviction, which they called “a landmark decision.” But they weren’t completely satisfied: “We were extremely disappointed with the leniency of the sentence as the Wildlife Act [the 1992 Malawi National Parks and Wildlife Act] sets guidelines for a fine of K100,000 and imprisonment for a term of up to ten years for these offenses,” the organization said in a statement.

Protecting Majete’s Wildlife, Today and Tomorrow

The camera trap images certainly cracked this case, and they could help cut down on similar crimes, says Dr. Leslie: “People now assume that the cameras automatically send a picture to us, so hopefully they will help with reducing future incidents.”

But her camera traps are really about understanding the animals of the Majete Wildlife Reserve over time, not protecting them from crime. To truly deter poaching, according to African Parks, more is needed: “the backing and support of the judiciary is critical in imposing suitable sentences as a deterrent.”

They know what’s at stake. When African Parks first took over the reserve's management in 2003, nearly all of its animals—its lions, its elephants, its zebras—had been hunted into oblivion. Only a few crocodiles and a hippos remained. It took a decade to bring back the thriving wildlife population the reserve has now, and it would be a tragedy to see that work undone.

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