

Opinion: These kids in Kenya get to experience the wildlife

By Paula Kahumbu, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.27.17

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Several reticulated giraffe pictured at a reserve in Africa. Photo by: Wikimedia Commons

In 1984, E.O. Wilson wrote about "biophilia," the idea that humans have an instinctive bond with other living systems and vice versa. It explains why nature tourism is such a rapidly growing global business and why millions of people around the world raised an outcry after the killing of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe and Satao the elephant in Kenya.

The idea suggests that conservation concerns could be addressed if we re-establish the connections between people and nature that have been lost in modern times.

Kenya has a proud tradition of citizen involvement in wildlife conservation. Wildlife clubs have played a key role in developing a culture of conservation among young people. However, they have been unable to keep up with the growth of schools, and most children in Kenya today are growing up with little understanding of nature.

Our efforts to save the country's wildlife tradition will depend on our success in reconnecting young people and nature.

A Tall Order For Students

One of the best ways of arousing children's interest in an issue or problem is to involve them in finding the solution. This was our thinking when we invited school children ages 10 to 13 to the Mpala Research Center to count reticulated giraffes in Laikipia County. Reticulated giraffes are known for their coats, with brown spots separated by cream-colored lines. We called the event the Kids Twiga Tally. Twiga means giraffe in the Kiswahili language, which is spoken in the eastern and southeastern parts of Africa.

The high plains of Laikipia have a wealth of wildlife, which has thrived in part due to innovative management approaches developed by private landholders that combine cattle ranching and wildlife conservation. Giraffes are native to Africa, and the reticulated giraffe today is found only in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. We have only rough estimates of the giraffe population numbers. These suggest there are about 140,000 giraffes across Africa, of which about 25 percent are reticulated.

The Kids Twiga Tally was organized by WildlifeDirect, the Mpala Research Center and the Laikipia Wildlife Forum. Scientists from Princeton and Columbia universities and researchers developing the Image Based Ecological Identification System (IBEIS) also were involved.

The idea of giving children the opportunity to contribute to science had been suggested by children at a workshop at Brookhouse School in Nairobi. The young participants were invited to discuss "How we together can create a generation of wildlife warriors in Kenya." Among the hundreds of suggestions was one to make trips to wildlife areas an opportunity to "do something meaningful."

Zebras To The Forefront

It appealed to us because earlier in the year we had invited the public to join us in a photographic survey of zebras in Nairobi National Park. Typically, visitors to the park take zebras for granted and search for more "prized" animals such as lions and rhinos. After a few hours, the participants had become passionate about zebras and spoke excitedly about watching them.

The survey used IBEIS, a digital technology that allows identification of individual animals in a herd of thousands. IBEIS can read zebra stripes like a bar code and distinguish individuals from each other to create a database of individual animals. It can also read the markings on other species, including a giraffe.

More zebra counts were organized in other parts of the country in 2015 and 2016. At these events, we noticed that children often used their parents' cameras, and this alerted us to the potential of IBEIS as a classroom tool. We thought this could be a way to get children hooked on nature.

On March 4 children from eight schools from a range of backgrounds arrived at the Mpala Research Center.

Tall Tales

We started with a session where we encouraged the 70 children to describe their interests and talk about giraffes. We invited them to write their questions on a board and try to work out the answers for themselves. Just five of the students said they were interested in science and only a handful of questions were asked.

However, the children displayed some knowledge of conservation issues. They predicted that there would be more giraffes on protected conservancies than in the landscapes of group-owned ranches.

Later we trained the children in using the cameras. Then we split them up into groups before letting them loose with the scientists and university students. Each vehicle had two or three cameras, and the job of the children on board was to take photos of giraffes.

While looking for giraffes, the children also saw elephants, leopards, wild dogs, impalas, kudus, zebras and many other species. Some children watched hippos; others examined whistling thorn acacias, where they discovered that what looked like fruit pods were, in fact, ant homes, full of young larvae.

Photo Finish

At the end of the day, we had over 1,300 photographs of giraffes, as well as photos of many other species. The children gathered at the research center and played a game of pairing photos of giraffes on eight cards. It took the winning team 15 minutes to figure out the pairs.

Then we showed them how the computer running IBEIS could do it much more quickly. The children were in awe, and a flood of questions followed. By the end of the day, the children knew what giraffes ate, how long they lived, how much they weighed and who their predators were.

All 70 children said they wanted to be scientists, and most said they did not want to go home or that they wanted to come back again.

First results of the survey indicate that, as expected, more giraffes are found on conservancies than ranches.

More Science Involvement

The Kids Twiga Tally showed how doing real science is a magnet for engaging children's minds. Many other schools have expressed an interest in future activities.

We hope that the Tally will be the start of something much bigger. Other programs already are getting children involved in science.

Citizen science has the potential to transform attitudes. We hope it will lead people to demand cleaner cities and less polluting industries and insist that leaders pay more attention to environmental concerns.

Quiz

- 1 Complete the following sentence.
- The central idea of the article is developed by ___
- (A) descriptions of Kids Twiga Tally participants.
 - (B) evidence that shows how the Kids Twiga Tally was effective.
 - (C) explanations of theories that support the Kids Twiga Tally concept.
 - (D) details of how the Kids Twiga Tally was organized and implemented.
- 2 Which of the following details from the article would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) However, they have been unable to keep up with the growth of schools, and most children in Kenya today are growing up with little understanding of nature.
 - (B) Reticulated giraffes are known for their coats, with brown spots separated by cream-colored lines.
 - (C) The Kids Twiga Tally was organized by WildlifeDirect, the Mpala Research Center and the Laikipia Wildlife Forum.
 - (D) The idea of giving children the opportunity to contribute to science had been suggested by children at a workshop at Brookhouse School in Nairobi.
- 3 Which of the following pieces of evidence is MOST relevant to the author's argument?
- (A) Millions of people were outraged after a hunter killed Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe.
 - (B) Wildlife clubs have contributed to children's conservation involvement in Kenya.
 - (C) Zebra counts have proved to be a useful tool in engaging citizen interest in wildlife.
 - (D) Every child who participated in the giraffe count wanted to be a scientist following the event.
- 4 Which paragraph in the section "Tall Tales" supports the author's claim that events like the Kids Twiga Tally are needed to spark children's interest in wildlife?