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Field Report

Sightings of African wild dogs *Lycaon pictus* in southeastern Kenya

E. Kim McCreery¹ and Robert L. Robbins¹

¹ African Wild Dog Conservancy, P.O. Box 30692, Tucson, AZ 85751, USA

Email: lycaonpictus@earthlink.net

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Introduction

The African wild dog *Lycaon pictus* is among the most endangered canids (Woodroffe et al. 1997). Recent information confirms the presence of this canid in the semi-arid region of southern Ethiopia, suggesting that the Horn of Africa may sustain a wild dog population (Malcolm and Sillero-Zubiri 2001; J. Malcolm, pers. comm.). Scant information is available on the status and distribution of this species in southeastern Kenya bordering Somalia. Several sightings dating as far back as 1976 have been reported (Fanshawe et al. 1997), but past civil strife and perceived security risks have limited access to this region. In October 2003, we visited the Ijara District of the Northeastern Province and, thereafter, requested updated information for the Lamu District of the Coastal Province inclusive of the Eastern Arc Mountains and Coastal Forests of Tanzania and Kenya Biodiversity Hotspot.

(<http://www.cepf.net/xp/cepf/static/pdfs/Final.EasternArc.EP.pdf>) (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Ijara and Lamu Districts of Kenya.

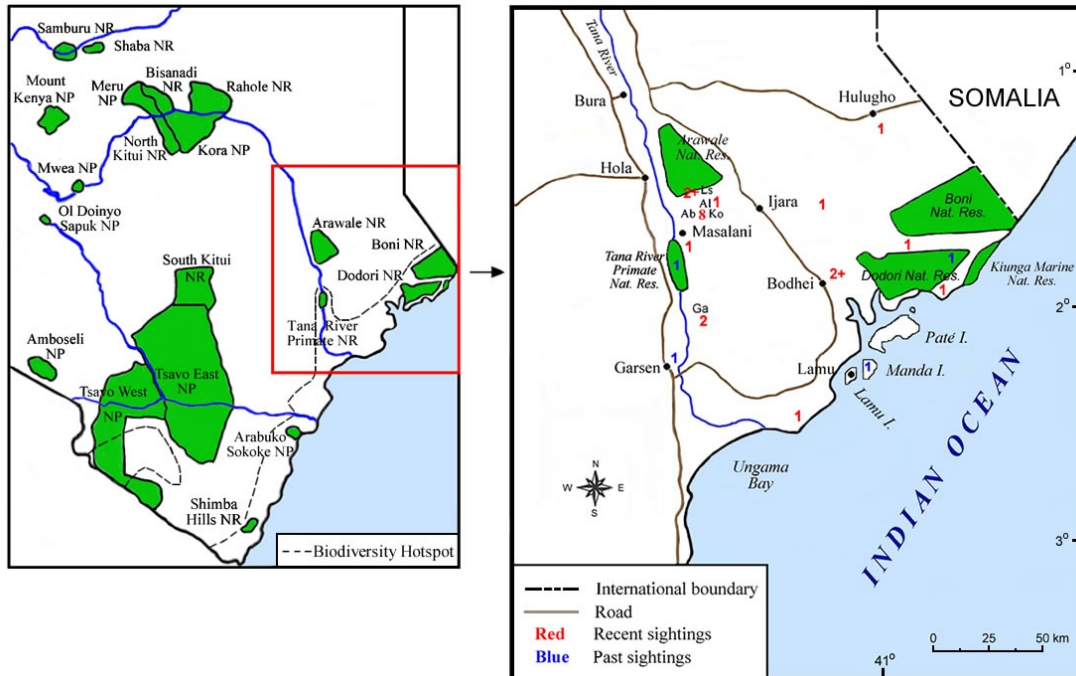


Figure 2. Number and approximate distribution of wild dog sightings in southeastern Kenya.

Here, we provide recent reports of *Lycaon* in this region and discuss some local attitudes toward this species.

Methods

The Ijara and Lamu Districts consist of community lands and small national reserves bounded by the Tana River to the west, Somalia to the east, and the Indian Ocean to the south (Figure 2). Rainfall is bimodal with long rains from April to June and short rains from November to December. Mean annual rainfall is 1000-1100 mm along the coast and decreases moving inland with a mean annual rainfall of 300 mm in the Ijara District. In the Ijara District, the Tana River is the only perennial water source with swamps (Figure 3) fed by floodwaters providing additional water near the river during the dry season.

The primary vegetation communities in this semi-arid area are *Commiphora-Acacia* and *Dobera-Salvadora*. Lions (*Panthera leo*; villager reports) and spotted hyaenas (*Crocuta crocuta*), potential competitors with wild dogs, are present. The Critically Endangered hirola (*Beatragus hunteri*) is a potential prey species (Kyaolo 2002). Somali pastoralists dominate this district. Families live in established villages with boys



Figure 3. Swamp near Tana River.

or men accompanying livestock to water daily (Figure 4), or they are nomadic setting up temporary shelters near water sources. Most people are Sunni Muslims. The Pokomo people are subsistence farmers and fisherman that live along the Tana River. The Lamu District is a mosaic of coastal forest and savanna. This area is culturally diverse with Swahili, Bajun, and Arab people living along the coast, the Orma tribe in the Tana River flood plain, and the last animist tribe found in East Africa, the Boni/Aweer, living in the central coastal forest.



Figure 4. Boys herding goats near the village of Alijarera.

Our eight-day visit was just south of the Arawale National Reserve near the Tana River with two trips to Garsen in the Coastal Province (Figure 2). Interpreters and security personnel accompanied us from the villages of Abalatiro (Ab) and Kotile (Ko) where we camped during our stay. Pictures of the *aye dur* (Somali for 'African wild dog') were shown to people during our travels. Children and men commonly gathered when we stopped in villages and small towns. Our hosts also introduced us to elders and others with possible knowledge of the *aye dur*. Groups of people numbered from two to more than ten. Usually one or more spoke English or we spoke through an interpreter. When someone reported seeing the *aye dur*, questions were asked to try to determine the validity of the sighting. A few questionable sightings are not presented here. When known, information on pack/group size, pack activity when sighted (i.e. hunting, feeding, or resting) and location were recorded. Locations were always given relative to the closest settlement where packs/groups were observed. With the exception of sightings that occurred when we were there, people did not always appear certain about when wild dogs were seen. People also were asked about their views of wild dogs, and what problems, if any, they had encountered.

Additional wild dog reports in the Lamu District were provided by people working in the field in the Biodiversity Hotspot.

Results

Wild dog sightings

Twenty one sightings were recorded including reports outside of the area visited (Figure 1). The number of wild dogs seen at one time ranged from approximately 2-30. Our first stop was Masalani, a small town near the Tana River. One man reported seeing 14 wild dogs nearby. From there, we traveled to Kotile and Abalatiro. Over the next eight days, seven sightings were recorded near these two villages. Four wild dogs were seen resting during the long rainy season in 2003. In September 2003, seven wild dogs were seen and one elder recounted seeing about 20. Another sighting of 20 was reported, but no date was given. During our stay, at least one pack was in the immediate area. On 13 October 2003, an elder saw ten wild dogs attempting to hunt his goats. On 15 October, about 20 wild dogs were seen walking in the morning between the villages. Early one evening, we received a report that women collecting firewood saw three wild dogs. After our visit, Administrative Security Police on routine patrol reported a pack of ten adults and four pups.

We traveled by car to the village of Alijarera (Al) and by foot to Lemu Swamp (Ls). One village elder reported seeing seven wild dogs resting on 17 October. As he herded his goats, the dogs unsuccessfully tried to hunt them. Three Pokomo fishermen, including one elder, were questioned at Lemu Swamp a few kilometers to the north of Alijarera near the southern boundary of the Arawale National Reserve. Two fishermen told us that groups of 3-5 had been seen. An elder reported seeing more than 20 wild dogs in September 2003. He said wild dogs were rarely seen, but when they were, it was mostly during the dry season. He commented that lions stayed, but wild dogs moved.

We visited the village of Galjel (Ga) on the southern edge of the Ijara District. One man recalled seeing wild dogs 3-5 months earlier. Another, saw a pack of eight adults kill a gazelle one week prior to our visit.

In 1996, about 20 wild dogs were seen in central Ijara District (S01 35 E040 45) during a Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) aerial survey

(Richard Kock, pers. comm.). Since then, R. Kock has received repeated reports including one sighting in August 2003 in the adjacent district to the north near the Somalia border (S00 20 E040 55). One man in Masalani also reported seeing 7–8 wild dogs near Hulugho, a village in the Ijara District near Somalia.

Five reports were in the Lamu District. In April 2004, during a survey sponsored by the Kipini Wildlife and Botanical Conservancy (KWBC), local residents of the village of Bodhei (see Figure 2) said wild dogs were seen more often during the rains. KWS Ranger Gonzana Belози, from Bodhei, also reported encountering wild dogs in recent years just to the east of the village (Tim Wachter and Sam Andanje, pers. comm.). Two dogs were seen north of Dodori National Reserve in May 2001 and on the beach southeast of the park on 20 February 2000 (Julie Church, pers. comm.). In October 2003, Adan Kor, a KWBC guide, reported a pack of approximately 30 resting in coastal thicket east of the Tana River flood plain.

Attitudes and problems

Most Somalis interviewed considered the *aye dur* to be dangerous to people and livestock, but were extremely tolerant of its presence. The mouth of the wild dog was regarded as dirty and, in fact, lethal to people, if contact were made. Most children and adults said that the tongue either had teeth or was poisonous. Everyone questioned said that wild dogs were a threat to livestock. Several cases of predation on cattle and goats were reported, but none appeared to be recent. Herders said wild dogs could be chased away. Indeed, men also chased away lions. Two elders said there were more wild dogs many years ago.

Discussion

The conservation status of wild dogs in the Horn of Africa is largely unknown (but see, Malcolm and Sillero-Zubiri 2001) due to instability throughout much of the region. The IUCN Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan for the African Wild Dog (1997) reported wild dogs were present but uncommon in the coastal region and near the lower Tana River (see Figure 2). More recent sightings indicate that wild dogs are widely distributed in SE

Kenya ranging from the Indian Ocean northward and the Tana River to Somalia. As is characteristic of many wild dog populations (Fuller et al. 1992), reported group size was variable with several sightings of large packs.

Despite negative attitudes, wild dogs do not appear to be persecuted locally. The apparent contradiction between attitudes and tolerance can probably be traced to religious beliefs and the infrequency with which livestock are taken. In the *Hadith*, a collection of religious writings derived from the *Qur'an*, domestic dogs are generally held in low regard. Although it is acceptable to have a dog for guarding livestock or hunting, the dog must not feed on kills. Forbearance from killing is extolled with the exception of five animals, including rabid dogs, referred to as “harmful” or “mischief-doers.” Although no one we spoke with mentioned rabies, this may explain the many references to the unclean or lethal mouth of the wild dog. We were told that most Somalis in the region did not have domestic dogs. Consistent with this claim, we saw only one dog during our travels.

These sightings indicate that the wild dog population in the Horn of Africa extends into the largely unprotected southeastern region of Kenya including the northern coastal forests of the Biodiversity Hotspot. This area may serve as a critical link/corridor for the Kenya population and neighboring Somalia. Wild dogs are found in the Tsavo Ecosystem to the west (Sam Andanje, pers. comm.) and range as far north as community lands near Meru National Park (Rosie Woodroffe, pers. comm.; see Figure 2).

Wild dogs are not persecuted nor does disease transmission via domestic dogs appear to pose a significant threat in those areas visited. Local people have a strong interest in protecting wildlife and the environment, and improving their living conditions. A collaborative effort is underway to establish a community-based wildlife conservation program in this region. Key objectives include local capacity building, collecting baseline data on the status, distribution, and ecology of wild dogs, including their potential impact on hirola (Kyaolo 2002), and wild dog/human interactions, and surveying social attitudes towards large predators.

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Kim McCreery and Robert Robbins studied wild dogs for nine years in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe, and as members of the HNP Carnivore Research Unit, worked with other large carnivores. They are Co-Directors of the [African Wild Dog Conservancy](#), which is currently involved in two projects: a community-based study in southeastern Kenya and a collaborative study of pack formation with the American Zoo and Aquarium Association. Both are members of the Canid Specialist Group.