

Bertram, B. 1984. Felids in East Africa. In Jackson, P. (Ed). Proceedings from the Cat Specialist Group meeting in Kanha National Park. p. 14.

Keywords: 1Afr/1KE/1TZ/1UG/Acinonyx jubatus/cheetah/East Africa/felidae/felids/leopard/lion/
Panthera leo/Panthera pardus/poaching/status

FELIDS IN EAST AFRICA

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In general conservation in East Africa is well organised. A significant part of the country is included in National Parks, and wildlife is protected in most areas outside them too.

In Kenya, the National Parks are based primarily on tourism, which currently brings in a great deal of money. Tourism, however, is a fickle industry, and should not be counted on too heavily -- political or social unrest, changes of taste overseas, and the economies of other countries could all weaken the basis for having National Parks. The motivation in Uganda is similar. In Tanzania, on the other hand, National Parks are seen primarily as the national heritage, with money from tourism a desirable extra. This is a more difficult philosophy to convey to unsophisticated people, but if it can become accepted it may provide a stronger basis for wildlife protection.

Although the organization of wildlife protection is well established, its implementation has failed in certain respects. The civil disturbances in Uganda resulted in huge reductions in certain wildlife populations. And poaching in Kenya in the 1970's decimated rhinoceros and elephant populations, and greatly reduced leopard numbers.

Looming above wildlife conservation in East Africa is the fact that the human population is increasing at a tremendous rate -- in Kenya about 4% per year. Many of the wildlife areas are in habitats which are suitable for agriculture or rearing cattle, and the pressure from the human population to take over some of these areas will increase.

The generally open habitat in East Africa makes most mammals, including cats, relatively easy to observe. Partly because of this, the majority of research projects on East African cats have been mainly observational studies of predation and of behaviour. Funding for studies more directly relevant to conservation, such as species distribution surveys, is relatively difficult to obtain.

Lions have been studied by Schaller, Bertram, Hongy and Bygott, and Pocker and Pusey in the Serengeti, by Rudnai in Nairobi, by Elliot in Ngorongoro, and by Van Orsdol in Ruwenzori. There are probably several thousand lions in East Africa, the population being unpersecuted, reasonably stable, and likely to decline as the spread of agriculture removes their prey base. Viable populations will survive in protected areas of reasonable size.

Leopards have been studied by Bertram in Serengeti and by Hamilton in Tsava. Hamilton's Kenya-wide survey estimated the leopard population at 10-12,000, with probably fewer in Uganda and more in Tanyania. Their numbers have declined sharply through poaching. The species should be able to persist because it can occupy such a wide range of habitat types and feed on such a wide range of prey species.

Cheetahs have been studied by McLaughlin in Nairobi, by Frame and Caro in Serengeti, and by Burney in Masai Mara. Although their total numbers in East Africa are believed to be fewer than 3,000 and declining, with rather poor prospects, the density recently found in bush country in northern Kenya gives hopes of a higher population than was otherwise thought. It is not known whether this is a recent population increase in bush country (perhaps caused by the recent wiping out of leopards from such areas) or whether cheetahs have always been abundant but unobserved there.