

EVALUATE THE STATUS OF LARGE CARNIVORES USING CITIZEN SCIENCE AND A PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

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The Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) Carnivore Conservation Programme, in collaboration with the UNESCO Waterberg Biosphere Reserve, has embarked on two key initiatives: the first being a citizen science trail camera survey and the second a photographic project, with the aim of better managing the human-wildlife conflict in the area.

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The citizen science trail camera survey seeks to gather data on the numbers, distribution and habits of large carnivores living in the Waterberg area.

“Leopards, Brown Hyenas, Cheetahs and African Wild Dogs are found throughout the Waterberg in farmland as well as in protected areas and while some people consider them a scarce and beautiful feature of nature, others view them as a danger to their livestock and livelihood. In order to make sound decisions about conserving, managing or utilising carnivore populations, it is critical to first have an understanding of how many animals there are and where they range,” commented Dr Michelle Thorn, a post-doctoral researcher with the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Carnivore Conservation Programme and the University of Pretoria.

Carnivores are notoriously difficult to survey because they are naturally elusive. They blend in well with their surroundings, travel over large areas and often avoid contact with human beings. Camera trapping, using remotely triggered trail cameras, overcomes many of these challenges and has been successfully used to survey carnivores like Tigers, Jaguars, Leopards, bears and hyenas all over the world. Trail cameras sense heat and motion so passing animals trigger the camera and a photo is taken. Scientists can then use those photos to map where carnivores are found and to count how many there are. The main advantage of camera trapping is that the cameras can collect data all day and night, whatever the weather or terrain, and without disturbing the target animals. The main disadvantage is that counting carnivores requires a lot of cameras, particularly in an area as big as the Waterberg, and cameras are very expensive.

Said Michelle Thorn: “A growing number of private citizens in the Waterberg own trail cameras. This offers a new and exciting opportunity for the public and scientists to work together and answer questions that are of interest to both.”

If you have a trail camera and would like to do your part for science and conservation:

- Put your camera out from the 1st of May 2012 and leave your camera in the same place for as long as possible - one to two months would be ideal.
- Don't forget to set the correct date and time before you put the camera in place.
- Be sure to choose a place for the camera that you think will maximise the chances of photographing carnivores
- Record the GPS location of the camera, the dates when it was there, and which photos were taken at each location. If you don't have a GPS, you can use Google Earth to find the

coordinates.

- Send us a copy of all your photos – not just the ones with carnivores in them. If we have all of your photos we can look at other biodiversity-related questions too. From late April, there will be drop boxes at Spar Vaalwater, Spar Modimolle or Pick n Pay in Lephalale, where you can leave CD's or DVD's of your photos for us to collect. Otherwise, photos can be posted to us at: Carnivore Conservation Programme, Endangered Wildlife Trust, Private Bag X11, Modderfontein, 1645, Johannesburg, or e-mailed to: census@ewt.org.za
- If you don't have a trail camera you can still take part by sending us any photo of a carnivore taken in May or June. We will just need to know the approximate GPS location and date for each photo.

Running in parallel to the citizen science trail camera survey is a photographic project with amazing prizes including a seven night stay for four in a luxury cottage at the Waterberg's Izintaba Private Game Reserve, a two night stay for a couple at the award winning, luxurious Makweti Safari Lodge in the Waterberg's Welgevonden Game Reserve, and a Reconyx trail camera. Anyone who sends us trail camera photos as part of the citizen science trail camera survey will automatically be entered into the running for the prizes, but Waterberg visitors and residents can also enter by sending in photos from hand-held cameras.

“The project closes in April 2013 and we encourage as many people as possible to enter in order to help us to manage and conserve these amazing species of carnivore. Images that show the animals in profile are particularly helpful but all pictures, even if they only partially show the carnivore, are very welcome. Once the project is done and we have a far better understanding of the numbers, range and impacts of predators in this area we will be able to put far more efficient, non-lethal strategies in place to manage the carnivores and their interactions with human beings,” concluded Dr Thorn.

The Waterberg Citizen Science Project is kindly sponsored by Land Rover Centurion, Camera Traps CC, the Izintaba Private Game Reserve, the Makweti Safari Lodge and Knowsley Safari Park.

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