



**Assessing Maasai Attitudes  
towards vultures:**  
An interview with Eric Ole Reson

## CONSERVATION

### **What is your project about?**

My project looked intensively at how the Maasai people near the Maasai Mara perceive vultures.

### **What is the past relationship of Maasai towards vultures and other raptors and has it changed recently?**

The Maasai are one of the few communities in the world that have a strong attachment towards nature, through their culture, medicinal values and aesthetic importance. These attachments are well demonstrated in their relationship and interactions not only with raptors but all birds. Specific to raptors, species were stratified based on gender with some raptors associated with women for example Hooded Vulture and Marabou Stork. Others are seen as charismatic, brave and strong, for example Lappet-faced Vulture (*ormotonyi loormuran*- meaning the vulture of the warriors), African White-backed Vulture and the Ruppell's Vulture were associated with men, especially warriors, for their feathers and naming purpose (In the Maasai community, warriors or people of the same age group are not allowed to refer to each other by name. This was a form of respect and dignity. Therefore,

warriors refer to each other by creature for example a lion, a vulture, an ostrich etc depending on which one the warrior has killed for his entitlement or recognition. The Augur Buzzard has a profound cultural significance to the Maasai people. It is important in such cultural ceremonies as *Olng'eshar*, a ceremony to legally transform warriors to junior elders. In this ritual, a white substance (*maa. enturoto*) is smeared to all the graduates from their neck to their legs, representing the whiteness in the front of an Augur Buzzard, signifying its importance to the Maasai community. The Augur Buzzard is also used to predict the outcomes of various situations. For instance, when warriors are going for a raid, the position of the Augur Buzzard is fundamental. In the event that one spots an Augur Buzzard showing the white belly, the Maasai believed that the raid will be in their favour. However, if the Augur Buzzard has its back towards the warring party, the outcome is believed to be a loss. In other occurrences when the Augur Buzzard is in motion, flying the opposite direction, this will mean that the opponents will likely retreat along with their cattle and vice versa.



### **Are vultures important in the religious beliefs of the Maasai?**

Not much is reported regarding the Maasai religion in relation to vultures.

### **Vultures often take the remains of animals killed by lions, leopards, cheetahs or hyenas. What is the attitude of the Maasai towards those carnivores?**

My study showed that they had mixed attitudes a greater percentage (above 60%) having poor attitudes towards carnivores. When asked to rank these carnivores from the most problematic to least, most respondents ranked hyena as the most problematic. They often referred to a hyena as a witch that kills more than it can consume. Lions were cherished in most instances and were often referred to as a gentleman who only kills when hungry. I found that the poor attitudes towards the carnivores were attributed to the poor relationship that most respondents had with the wildlife authorities and conservancies, which invariably resulted from livestock depredation and lack of benefit, accrued from tourism in the area.

### **Do Maasai use poison to kill those carnivores and how does this affect vultures and other raptors like Bateleur or Tawny Eagle?**

The Maasai respondents I interviewed have adapted the use of poison as a retaliatory attack to carnivores that kill their livestock. They are well aware of the environmental risks associated with the use of this poison. However, because of their strong attachment to livestock as the sole livelihood source, they have resolved to use poison baits to eliminate carnivores. This has adverse effects to both mammalian and avian scavengers with vultures bearing the greatest risk of this situation. More than 100 birds have been reported poisoned at one laced carcass.

### **What are the difficulties for the Maasai people to live with carnivores? Do they suffer from economic losses or even lose their lives to some carnivores like lions?**

The biggest challenge is how to stop carnivores coming into contact with livestock. Research has shown that

livestock is an easy prey and therefore carnivores will always kill either at night in the manyattas or during the day. Livestock depredation frequency increases during periods of prolonged rain. Initially, the Maasai coexisted with carnivores until the introduction of new policies that advocated benefits (economic) and compensation of property damaged. As a result, people have turned to killing these carnivores because of the government failure to honor and implement the policy requirements. In addition, the issue of ownership of wildlife is a big problem in the country with most rural communities especially the Maasai viewing them belonging to government and have nothing to do with them and therefore should be confined to protected areas or else killed when found prowling settlement areas.

**What can be done to help Maasai to coexist with carnivores?**

One is compensation; two is education and awareness on the importance of these wildlife and lastly benefit sharing which should be on an equitable manner.

**How do you explain to Maasai the importance of vultures and raptors?**

I have been approaching this from an awareness angle. Because the community is diversifying, and most of the cultural attachments or values to raptors are declining, the younger generation should be taught the cultural importance of raptors. In addition, educating the Maasai on the environmental and ecological importance of raptors is very important. This has been done through outreach programmes carried out by the Raptor Working Group and The Peregrine Fund amongst other organizations through elementary school programmes and community outreach and we are seeing some encouraging results.

**What can we learn from Maasai about living and coexisting with carnivores and raptors?**

That there is much more than the economic gains from wildlife. The Maasai are known to be the healthiest community in the world. This can be attributed to their healthy environment, which is presumably because of their respect for the environment and therefore fewer



disturbances of ecological processes.

**How should society and the government help the Maasai to live their lives and coexist with carnivores and raptors?**

I think if wildlife is managed in a way that fully embraces the local peoples' needs and aspirations, it would be easier to address the problems of wildlife declines, but if the trend continues where wildlife is managed by a military-like form of management, then the communities will eventually view wildlife not belonging to them and therefore will not support conservation interventions. The government should fully acknowledge the local people in the management of wildlife and natural resources. This can be done by recognising the Maasai ways of livelihood -- for example pastoralism -- and compensation programmes should be established to help address the problem of retaliatory attacks to carnivores due to livestock loss.

**How do you see the future of the Maasai and their coexistence with carnivores and raptors in Kenya?**

If the trend continues, the future of wildlife in the country is at risk. I foresee a situation where wildlife will only be found

in big fenced ranches like in Laikipia area and raptors will also be found in these areas alone. This will form zoos in the country. There is a worrying trend however in that in my study, I found that the younger, more tech-savvy generation of Maasai is losing their connection with nature. Also I found a strong inverse correlation between educated Maasai and their ability to relate to the wilderness. ●

Eric Ole Reson hails from Narok county and recently completed a Masters degree in Wildlife Biology from Clemson University in the USA. He also holds a BSc. In Wildlife Management from Moi University, Eldoret. In this interview, Eric interprets the results of his field research on assessing Maasai attitudes towards vultures in trying to find solutions towards preventing poisoning of this highly threatened group of birds. His field research was funded by The Peregrine Fund and he acknowledges Dr William Bowerman of the University of Maryland for supporting his studies.