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Exploring Lewa

Renewed hope for the Pancake Tortoise

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For the longest time, Suberi Letoki, a member of the Leparua community that sits just north of the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy paid little attention to the Pancake Tortoises (*Malacochersus tornieri*) living within the rocky outcrops in and around the village. As a young man, he grew up seeing the little tortoises, but dismissed them as undergrown Leopard Tortoises (*Stigmochelys pardalis*). He, and many others in the community, did not regard them as anything special, but that has since changed. They now realize that they are highly endangered, valuable members of the ecosystem, and can hold much allure from a tourism perspective.

Suberi recalls how, as a boy, he would be lucky to come across the tortoises now and then next to a rock outcrop, especially after a downpour. “I would see the tortoises venture out of their hiding place within the rocks and cliffs momentarily, sometimes resting in little puddles of water.” Fast forward forty years and Suberi is now a ranger protecting rhi-

nos and other wildlife inside Lewa and has recently learned about the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Critically Endangered status of these tortoises. Suberi now has been recruited as a critical member of a multi-agency survey team trying to find remaining pockets of Pancake Tortoises in protected areas. He uses all his ranger skills and his deep memory of where he has seen the tortoises in the past to help guide the surveys. He recalls how long ago he once came across 30 in a single day. The team has had much success because of rangers like Suberi. With his expert assistance, the current survey efforts have found 116 tortoises over two field seasons around Lewa and the neighboring Leparua and Il Ngwesi communities.

Pliable and fast, the Pancake Tortoise is a morphologically and behaviorally distinct turtle. It is small in size, at approximately six inches when mature, and possesses a thin, flat, and flexible shell. Numerous holes in the bones under the scales make it lightweight and agile. Thus, the Pancake

Clockwise from left: Suberi Letoki holds a juvenile Pancake Tortoise. The team wears gloves when they touch a tortoise to reduce the chances of introducing any diseases; Data is systematically recorded from a vibrant adult tortoise; Dominic Maringa (Head of Conservation—Lewa) and Suberi Letoki search for a Pancake Tortoise in a rock crevice.

is arguably the fastest tortoise species, its morphology allowing it to flee swiftly from predators rather than sheltering in its shell as other tortoises do. The Pancake Tortoise's flexible shell also helps it to live within tight rock crevices.

Pancake Tortoises spend most of their time in these cracks between rocks. They are mostly solitary, but these crevices can be inhabited by pairs or small groups. They have a life expectancy of more than 40 years and have limited reproductive potential, laying only one or two eggs per year. Because of overexploitation by the pet trade, this species is now rare and classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Surveying for the tortoises is difficult work. Appropriate habitat is not common or widespread. Surveys are conducted on foot, from sunup to sundown where terrain is hilly and craggy and the equatorial sun is relentless. The tortoises push themselves deep into the rocky crevices, so Suberi and the team must lie across the hot rocks and gently pull the tortoises out of their hiding places. Team members must investigate these dark crevices where there is the constant threat of "bumping into" other denizens of the cracks searching for a cool resting spot, such as Ashe's spitting cobras, scorpions, and lizards. The rocky habitat is also home to an abundance of much larger wildlife; the survey team has encountered grumpy rhinoceros, stand-offish African buffalo, aggressive elephants, startled hyenas, and angry bees.

Lewa Wildlife Conservancy sits on the flanks of Mount Kenya and its location sits between historic tortoise populations in the north and isolated populations in the south. The conservation department at Lewa has taken a keen interest in studying the Pancake Tortoise. In 2019, 2021, and 2022, Lewa, together with the National Museums of Kenya and the Kenya Wildlife Service, have been exploring hillsides looking for the Pancake Tortoise. Lewa is a world-renowned black rhino sanctuary and is heavily guarded against potential poachers. Because these tortoises have been found in such well protected areas, poaching, the major threat to their long-term survival, has been removed there.

The discovery of Pancakes within Lewa and neighboring areas extends the distribution range of the species, both in that these tortoises are in previously undocumented areas but also at higher altitude than expected. This newly discovered tortoise population has benefited from 40+ years of protection offered to the megafauna in this area. It has been undisturbed by poaching or by changes in the landscape due to human development. It offers us the chance to study



a pristine population, better understand dispersal patterns, and protect a critical corridor that would link the tortoises of northern Kenya to the ones found in the south. 🐢

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