



Elephant Warriors

Kenya's first women rangers are advancing gender equality while saving the animals

MEMBERS OF THE CONSERVATION RANGER TEAM, CLAD IN GREEN UNIFORMS, SLIP like wraiths through the tangled Mau Forest, using wooden walking sticks to anchor each step in slippery red mud.

Head ranger Caren Cheptoo, 22, stops, peering into the emerald shadows. “Oh, this side,” she calls softly. Cheptoo has spied a snare: thin loops of metal fastened around low-hanging branches that trap animals like the dik-dik, a delicate African antelope with almond-shaped eyes that’s only a foot tall. As she parts the underbrush, Cheptoo sees two more snares. The team cuts and rolls up the metal, which would have snagged an animal and slowly strangled it until dispatched by a poacher for bushmeat.

Locating snares is one of many tasks with which the nine-person team is entrusted. As fit as athletes, the rangers patrol the Mau, the largest indigenous closed-canopy forest in Kenya. At more than 1,500 square miles, it’s larger than Rhode Island. The team, one of two whose operations are funded by the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, tracks and arrests bushmeat hunters, and also preserves the lush habitat by tracking and arresting those who illegally cut down trees for lumber or to turn into charcoal, a practice that is decimating Kenyan forests. The ranger team especially keeps vigil over the forest’s 600 elephants that would otherwise fall prey to ivory poachers, who shoot or spear them or set booby traps.

TALLAH (2)



◀ From opposite page: As female conservation rangers, Gloria Nyanga, Joy (last name withheld) and Fancy Chepkemoi are role models for Kenyan girls and teenagers; about 400,000 endangered elephants roam the African continent; Caren Cheptoo, Chepkemoi and Wesley Ngetich discover a deadly snare (foreground) in the Mau Forest.

grumbled that a woman couldn't tell them how to do their work. But Cheptoo kept her cool. "At the end of the day," she says, "they have to hear you and do whatever you've told them."

MEP began recruiting women as rangers only four years ago. Cheptoo and Chepkemoi were just teenagers when Joy, who is older, began working for MEP as an intelligence officer, developing a network of informants to track ivory poachers.

Joy, whose identity is withheld here for her safety, would pretend to be an ivory buyer—a middle link for an Arab or Asian client. With her boss, she would negotiate a price with the poacher, then demand to see the stash. When Joy and the poacher arrived at the cache, the arrest was made and the ivory seized by the Kenya Wildlife Service. Joy says her undercover work nabbed 37 suspects and more than 2,000 pounds of ivory—and that the poachers were insulted and furious to have been duped by a woman. Today, besides being the mother of two children, Joy is an MEP ranger; she's too well-known among poachers for further intelligence work.

Joy, Cheptoo, Chepkemoi and the handful of other women who have chosen this dangerous career are at the vanguard of both wildlife conservation and gender equality in Kenya. The East African nation is a patriarchal, polygynist nation where female genital mutilation, or FGM (the

Cheptoo recalls finding a dead elephant killed by a spear. It suffered greatly. "The elephant had been moving with [the wound] for a long time, then died," she says.

Cheptoo and her team start at dawn, accompanied by an armed Kenya Forest Service officer for protection. Some treks take them 20 miles into the forest before their return to base camp: canvas tents scattered around a wooden shed where simple meals of chapatis, *ugali* (a boiled maize-flour staple) and vegetables are cooked over propane.

This is a career Cheptoo had long aspired to but doubted she would achieve. Her dream was realized in 2019 when she became one of the first two women recruits ever hired by the Mara Elephant Project (MEP), a U.S.-based conservation nonprofit that trains and supports ranger teams in

places like the Mau Forest. Cheptoo loved wild animals as a child and belonged to her school's conservation club in Kenya's Great Rift Valley. On hearing MEP was recruiting she applied, but, she says, "I had never seen any female rangers, so I was worried."

Cheptoo passed the initial interview, as did an older classmate, Fancy Chepkemoi. The pair, alongside nine male recruits, underwent six months of grueling fitness and technical training. Cheptoo followed this up with three months of advanced instruction in first aid with the Ranger Campus Foundation in Kenya's Tsavo National Park. She excelled, learning how to treat chest bullet wounds and spinal injuries; advanced to the top of her class; and was promoted to commander of the Mau ranger team, which includes 24-year-old Chepkemoi.

At first, some of the male rangers



From left: Conservation rangers patrol the Nyakweri Forest near the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya—the Nyakweri is being clear-cut at breakneck speed for lumber and to open up land for farming and cattle; head ranger Caren Cheptoo consults with a team member before heading into the Mau Forest.

nonmedical partial or complete removal of external female genitalia) has been illegal since 2011, yet is still surreptitiously performed, mostly on young girls. UNICEF reported that as recently as 2021, some 21 percent of Kenyan women and girls had suffered FGM.

At the same time, the gender inequality in Kenya negatively impacts elephants' survival. Data shows that when women receive an education and have some measure of financial independence, they generally choose to have smaller families. In this way women's inequality contributes to Kenya's mushrooming population, which is, in turn, eroding the elephants' habitat. There were 53 million people in the country in 2021, up from 30.8 million in 2000. Cropland and livestock pastures overlap with elephant migration routes and feeding areas, increasing human–elephant conflict. Farmers attack crop-raiding elephants with poisoned spears and arrows, injuring or killing them. Additionally, the proximity to human habitation makes it easier for ivory poachers to waylay an animal. And with only 415,000 elephants left alive in Africa today—down from 3 million to 5 million a century ago—every pachyderm is vital to the species' future.

Correcting a skewed gender dy-

namic demands economic parity. Cheptoo is paid wages equal to a man's: about \$200 per month (Kenya's monthly minimum wage is around \$114). MEP also pays school fees and awards bonuses. Cheptoo's economic power allows her to make her own choices. She is married and the mom of a little girl who's cared for by her grandmother when Cheptoo is on patrol. When asked if she'll have more children, Cheptoo shakes her head. She notes that it's rare to find a mother with five children nowadays, that mostly they have two or maybe three.

Chepkemoi has also become a family breadwinner. Her wages fund school fees for three brothers and five sisters. "It's a good thing that ladies become rangers," says Chepkemoi, who is also the mother of a small child.

Another MEP ranger, 20-year-old Gloria Nyanga, who has a 1-year-old girl, says she never wants to get married and doesn't need a husband. "What a man can do, a woman can do better," Nyanga says.

Cheptoo's accomplishments have garnered prestige for her and for MEP. She won the inaugural World Female Ranger Award in 2021 from the U.K.-based anti-poaching charity How Many Elephants. Cheptoo is proud of her conservation work and status as a role model for girls and

teens. During her time off, she speaks to students in her home city of Olen-guruone about being a ranger. She relates how her first-aid skills saved a fellow ranger who could easily have been killed during an ambush. Schoolgirls are especially impressed by Cheptoo's stories.

"I've inspired them," she says. "Most of them say, 'I want to be like her.'"

After the talks, Cheptoo is peppered with questions that reflect the inequality the girls navigate, such as what it's like working as an equal alongside men. "I answer that everything is possible," Cheptoo says. "And when you work with men, you have to be strong."

A few girls have come to Cheptoo begging her to speak to their parents, who don't approve of their daughter working as a conservation ranger—or having any career at all. In one case, she says, "I went and talked to [the] parents and they really changed. I told them the importance of a girl getting knowledge and having her own money. I told them that the girl is not only supporting herself, but you in your old age.

"They changed their minds, but it took time," Cheptoo says, adding, "The girl is now at college."

—ROBERTA STALEY