

KOMBA

Issue 1 - 2012

Hello Hyaena

WCK motto "Learn to conserve for a better tomorrow"



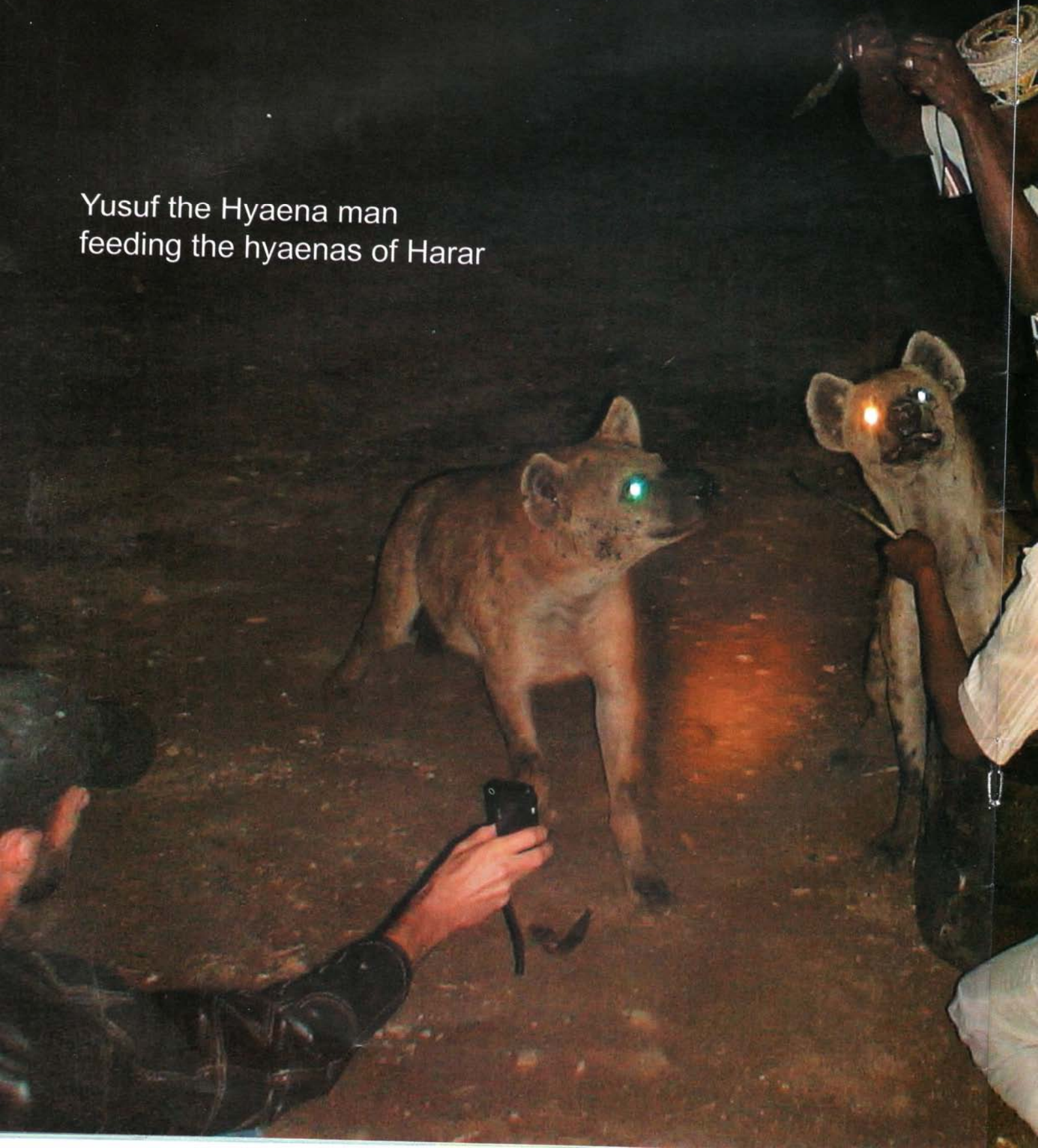
KOMBA is the Kiswahili name for the Lesser Bushbaby and the symbol of the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya (WCK). The magazine is owned and published by the WCK.

WCK - P.O.Box 20184 PC 00200 Nairobi Kenya

Hyaenas of Harar

Story and pictures by
Stephanie M. Dloniak, PhD

Yusuf the Hyaena man
feeding the hyaenas of Harar





Please note - do NOT try this! These pictures show wild hyaenas in a place where they have been habituated to humans for over 50 years. Hyaenas can be unpredictable and extremely dangerous. It is illegal to feed wildlife in Kenya's protected areas.

There is nothing quite like the smell of a hyaena's breath... especially when you can also FEEL that breath on the back of your neck! I recently had such an experience with a hyaena named Tukwondilli, just outside the walled city of Harar, Ethiopia.

During my years studying large carnivores in the Masai Mara National Reserve, I have been close to a lot of hyaenas. But those encounters usually occur on savannah plains where there are other species, and I am in vehicle or while collecting samples from an anesthetized hyaena that has been darted.

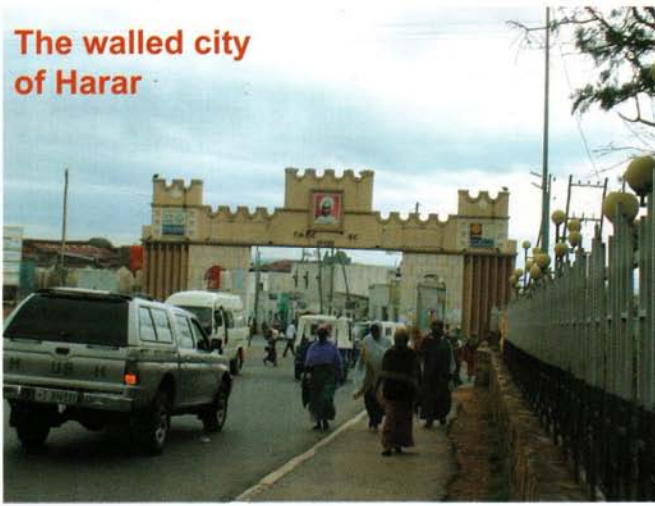
This encounter was different. We were on the edge of a large city at night. I was sitting with three other people on a cement bench under a tree that marks the Shrine of Aw Anser Ahmed. About 25 meters away, there were ten tourists standing next to a car whose bright headlights showed a fascinating scene: Yusuf, the "Hyaena Man of Harar", was feeding scraps of meat and skin dangling from

short sticks to at least eight hyaenas that were wandering in and out of the darkness. The tourists had paid money to feed the hyaenas and took turns poking sticks into the black plastic bucket full of off-cuts from a local butchery. Some of them held the sticks as far from their bodies as possible, so the hyaenas did not have to come too close to get their snacks. But others joined Yusuf in holding the sticks between their teeth to go eye-to-eye with the hyaenas as they snatched the scraps. After the tourists had finished feeding the hyaenas, Yusuf wandered over to me and deftly lured Tukwondilli, an adult male, behind me with a chunk of meat, getting him to eat a few pieces while he was touching my back.

Instead of fearing for my life, however, I actually enjoyed this unusual experience. I had traveled to Harar to learn about these urban hyaenas and to talk with Marcus Baynes-Rock, an Australian anthropologist who was studying the unique relationship between people and hyaenas in Harar.

According to Yusuf, who has fed these hyaenas for over 10 years and knows them all, **Tukwondilli is one of the politest hyaenas in the Suqutatberi Clan, so I had nothing to worry about.** His name means "to harm him is a sin" in Oromo, one of the languages common in this diverse city of over 150,000 people about 500 kilometers east of Addis Ababa.

The walled city of Harar



Harar is considered the fourth holy city of Islam, and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site for Culture as well as a City of Peace.

The walled part of the city (the old town, known as Jugal) was built in 1560s and may have the highest number of shrines in a holy city on the planet. Harar itself emerged sometime between the 7th and 11th centuries. The city lies at the top of the Eastern Rift Valley escarpment and is surrounded by fertile agricultural land that is mainly used for growing coffee and 'chat' (miraa).



Yusuf the hyaena man's house

Spotted hyaenas are fascinating and biologists have been studying their ecology, evolution, and behavior in the Masai Mara, Serengeti, and Ngorongoro Crater for years.

But urban hyaenas living close to people and being used for nightly tourism is unusual.

This was perhaps the most interesting thing I have ever seen and I gained some unexpected but valuable information from my visit.

I learned from Marcus that the bizarre practice of feeding hyaenas in Harar probably originated from the Ceremony of Ashura, which takes place every July at a shrine near Harar. As a part of this ceremony, a bowl of porridge and fat is placed at the shrine and the community waits for the hyaenas to come to the shrine and taste the offering.



Outside the butchery with the hyaenas

How much of the porridge gets eaten by hyenas supposedly predicts how the year will unfold, including whether there will be good harvests or not.

In general, it seems that Ethiopians have quite a different relationship with hyaenas compared to East Africans, who typically despise the species. In parts of Ethiopia, people often take bits of skin from dead hyaenas to be used in medicines and to make protective amulets, bracelets, and armbands. It is also believed that hyaenas eat bad spirits, or "jin", and if a disturbed child feeds meat to the hyaena he will be cured. When a hyaena whoops, people believe that it has actually eaten a bad spirit!

Hyaenas are also seen as caretakers because they clean up garbage, a behavior which probably led to their extreme habituation to humans in Harar. Thus I learned that the cultural importance of hyaenas in Ethiopia is different to the rest of East Africa. The fact that the hyaena is valued by the local community is undoubtedly the main reason the hyaenas continue to thrive in Harar. This is an important general lesson, as it supports the idea that we will only be able to successfully conserve species that we value, whether culturally or economically.

In addition to feeding hyaenas scraps of meat at Yusuf's house, Marcus and I also visited the city garbage dump and the city's football pitch, which lies adjacent to Harar's police station and a Christian butchery.

My observations suggested that, despite living entirely on garbage and handouts, in many ways the Harar hyaenas are just like the Mara hyaenas I have studied.

I could see that there is a social rank amongst the hyaenas. They show the same behavioral traits, and they participate in scent marking and other territorial behavior. During the daylight hours, they also retire to small pockets of woodland and bush near the city where they can raise their cubs and hide from people.



Hyaenas feeding at dumpsite

why some species can adapt to people and how this affects their behavior and ecology. If we want to conserve wild large carnivores I think we need to start looking more closely at places like Harar...even if it means feeling hyaena breath on the back of your neck!

Another thing I learned during this trip was just how incredibly adaptable spotted hyaenas are. This is another important lesson for conservation: species have certain traits that will affect how well they can adapt to changing conditions - whether it be climate change, changes in diversity, human encroachment, or habitat change. In the spotted hyaena's case, being a generalist (able to eat pretty much anything) is certainly a good trait to have when faced with new challenges.

At first glance the hyaenas of Harar may seem like just a random freak show. But as I learned from my visit to Harar, my friend Tukwondilli and the rest of the hyaenas could actually teach us a lot if we stop and take a careful look at them. With the increasing human population in Africa it is important for us to investigate how and

Q: What do you get when you cross a hen with a hyena?

A: An animal that laughs at every yolk.

Spotted hyaena facts

- The scientific name for the spotted hyaena is *Crocuta crocuta*.
- The spotted hyaena is one of four species in the family Hyenidae.
- The other species are the brown hyaena, striped hyaena, and the aardwolf.
- Within the order Carnivora, the hyaenas are more closely related to viverrids and felids than to canids.
- Spotted hyaenas are found in a multitude of habitats, from savannah to desert to forest.
- The spotted hyaena is the most abundant large carnivore in sub-saharan Africa and second in size only to the lion.
- Adult females are slightly heavier than adult males. Adult hyaenas generally weigh between 45 and 80 kg.
- Spotted hyaenas can eat everything from caterpillars to elephants. They can survive on garbage and they have powerful digestive systems.
- Spotted hyaenas have the strongest bite force of all the carnivores and can crush through bones to access the protein and fat in bone marrow.
- Spotted hyaena scat often turns white over time because of the calcium from ingested bones.

More on hyenas

- Adept as hunters and as scavengers. In the Masai Mara they kill up to 90% of their own food.
- Spotted hyenas are coursers. Their hunting technique involves running prey down to exhaustion. The hyaena kills by ripping off chunks of flesh, as opposed to the cats, which typically kill by suffocating prey.
- A single hyaena can kill an adult wildebeest. A group of hyenas can kill a zebra or buffalo.
- Hyenas live in large social groups called clans that can have up to 100 individuals.
- They have a unique social system characterized by female dominance. All adult males rank lower than the adult females and their cubs.
- Male hyenas do not gain high rank through fighting. Instead they have a tenure system.
- Some people think spotted hyenas are hermaphrodites (individuals that are both male and female). This is not true, but the female spotted hyena is masculinized: the external genitalia look like a male's.
- Female hyenas urinate, copulate, and give birth through a pseudopenis.
- Giggling is a real, meaningful behavior displayed by spotted hyenas which signals subordination. The whoop is a long distance call.
- After a gestation period of 110 days, spotted hyenas give birth to 1 or 2 (rarely 3) black-furred cubs at a natal den. The cubs are born with their eyes open and fully erupted teeth!
- After 4-6 weeks cubs are moved to a communal den housing other cubs from the clan.. They will live here until they are about eight months old. Cubs are nursed for up to 1.5 years depending on the mother's social rank and her access to resources.
- The spotted hyaena, striped hyaena, and aardwolf are all found in East Africa. The spotted hyaena is the largest hyenid, and the only one living in such large social groups. The striped hyaena is mainly a scavenger, and the smallest hyenid, the aardwolf, has teeth specially adapted to feeding on termites.
- The brown hyaena is mainly a scavenger and is only found in southern Africa.



Stephanie (pictured above with hyaena behind her) is a biologist and science writer based in Nairobi. She is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Zoology at Michigan State University in the USA, a member of the KWS Large Carnivore Management Committee and the IUCN Hyena Specialist Group, and a scientific advisor to the Kenya Wildlife Trust.

Email: s.dloniak@kenyawildlifetrust.org



More
Hyenas

A Striped Hyaena



Aardwolf - the smallest and has teeth to eat termites



Brown hyaena - only in South Africa

For more about hyenas log on

IUCN Hyena Specialist Group: <http://www.hyaenidae.org/>

The Mara Hyena Project Blog: <http://msuhyenas.blogspot.com/>