

Kalahari San Master Tracker Programme: A New Platform to Scale Up and Replicate Biodiversity Field Projects that Empowers Indigenous Communities

The world is experiencing a period of rapid environmental change caused by climate change, habitat destruction and pollution. Monitoring biodiversity is critical for effective conservation management. There are too few professional ecologists to deal with the scale of environmental challenges. Furthermore, global biodiversity conservation is seriously challenged by gaps in the geographical coverage of existing data. Locally based monitoring is particularly important in developing countries, where it can empower local indigenous communities to manage their natural resources.

Louis Liebenberg has been working with Kalahari San Master Trackers since 1985. Over this period about 90% of these elder Master Trackers have passed away, showing a rapid decline over the last few decades. In 2018 only 15 hunters still actively hunted with the bow-and-arrow in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy in Namibia. The exceptional skills of indigenous Kalahari San Master Trackers may soon be lost. These trackers represent a unique part of humanity's cultural heritage and are an invaluable resource for nature conservation worldwide. It is crucial that a programme of employment creation be initiated in order to ensure that their invaluable tracking expertise is passed on to the younger generation and that they mentor trackers from other parts of the world.

Case studies reported in scientific papers demonstrate the value of employing indigenous trackers using smartphones in large-scale, long-term monitoring of biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes for conservation management. Trackers play a critical role in preventing poaching and the monitoring of rare and endangered species. Trackers are also employed in wildlife surveys using animal track counts and scientific research on animal behaviour.

The Nyae Nyae Conservancy in the Kalahari, north-east Namibia, presents an opportunity to develop a conservation programme in one of the last true wilderness areas that can have far-reaching implications for indigenous communities and biodiversity conservation worldwide. The largest elephant population in Namibia is found in Nyae Nyae and the adjacent Khaudum National Park. Highly endangered species include the African Wild Dog, Cheetah and Pangolin, while Lion and Leopard also requires increased protection in the wild. The central Kalahari in Botswana and the southern Kalahari dune field in South Africa also provide important locations for the proposed field programmes.

The Kalahari San Master Tracker Programme will: (1) Identify and mentor indigenous Kalahari San Master Trackers who can mentor a new generation of young trackers. (2) Develop the CyberTracker Online software platform that will provide remote support to trackers, so that the programme can be scaled up and replicated worldwide. (3) Develop a core team of specialists who can provide remote technical, scientific and financial support to indigenous trackers. (4) Develop employment opportunities for indigenous trackers to ensure long-term sustainability.

The initial CyberTracker Online application will be custom-built for the Kalahari San Master Tracker programme as a pilot project. Once it has been field tested, it will be developed into a customisable CyberTracker Online platform that will make it possible to replicate the remote support model with indigenous communities worldwide.