Northern Kenya Conservation Clubs, Nancy Rubenstein

A weekly after-school conservation club has started at the Mpala, Il Mottok, Naiperere, and Ewaso Primary Schools. It is important for Kenyan children to understand the connections between wildlife, the landscape, and people. Recently, increases in the number of people and livestock have intensified habitat use and thus have put pressure on wildlife. The purpose of the club is to teach students about the world around them and how it works, and how the presence of people impacts other species and habitats. With this knowledge it is hoped that the next generation of pastoralists will become wise stewards of their rangelands.

A curriculum guide that includes many experiential activities was put together so that the children could learn these concepts in a way that is very different from the way they spend the rest of their school day. For example, a game which the children enjoyed is called “What Animal Am I?”. A picture of an animal is clipped to a child’s back and the other children get to see what it is. Then the child has to ask questions to figure out what animal it is, questions that can only be answered with yes, no, or maybe. This helps children think about an animal’s appearance, habitat, classification, and habits. Since students rarely see the wildlife around them, Mpala students went on a game drive in Mpala’s new school bus. Afterwards, students each selected an animal and wrote a diamante, a diamond-shaped poem, about their animal. These poems were then made into booklets. It is hoped that the students in the clubs on the group ranches will also get to drive around Mpala in the school bus and engage in the same activities. When learning about biodiversity, the students were divided into four groups and went outside in four directions, recording all the animals they saw, their group size and activity. After talking about why animals live in groups, the children played a game called “On Guard!” in which they quickly learned how difficult it is for animals to eat and be vigilant at the same time. Scientists and local research assistants are encouraged to visit the clubs and inform students about the types of research they are doing that promotes wildlife conservation. Katie Prager, a researcher at Mpala, came to the club and spoke to the students about her research on hyenas and jackals and showed them the traps she uses to trap the animals in order to carry out her research. By learning firsthand about jackals and hyenas, Katie may have helped change the students’ opinions about these animals.

The conservation clubs were originally started out of Daniel Rubenstein and Belinda Low’s research in Samburu on Grevy’s zebra. Dan, a professor at Princeton University, and Belinda, now director of Grevy’s Zebra Trust, hired scouts to observe the Grevy’s zebras as they went about their daily tasks, the men herding cattle, the women gathering firewood. About once a year Dan, Belinda and their education team from Lewa Conservancy and the Northern Rangeland Trust would go to each community and present their findings from the scouts’ data to the men and women in the community. Afterwards, they would go to the school and teach a lesson on conservation. One of the head teachers challenged Dan to find a way to make it possible for his teachers to continue the lessons when Dan and Belinda’s team wasn’t there. A workshop involving teachers from Samburu district schools and community members explored topics they wanted students to know and activities were compiled by an educator at the St. Louis Zoo, which funded part of the research. It was found, however, that the teachers needed more background in order to understand how to use the activities. Hence, a conservation biology course was taught and the curriculum guide was created.

The curriculum guide is divided into five themes: The Living World Around Us, How Animals Work, How Plants Work, How the World Works, and How Grasslands Work. Because Dan now heads the ‘Ewaso Water Project’ which is taking place in the western region of the Naibunga Conservancy, the clubs have been expanded to include the three schools in the Koija, Tiemamut and Ilmotiok area. And because Dan is based at Mpala, the Mpala School was one of the twelve original clubs. Each of the four Laikipia schools was given a copy of the curriculum guide and a box filled with the supplies needed to carry out the activities. In addition, the clubs have a mobile library that contains books on many of the topics in the curriculum guide. It is hoped that each club will eventually be able to have its own library. In the meantime, the books will be transported from school to school by Wilson Nderitu, a field assistant at Mpala who is helping with the clubs. Another important person in the functioning of the clubs is Joseph Mosiyan, LWF Community Liaison Officer, who will help with the communication between Wilson and the teachers at the Mpala School and the teachers at the three neighboring schools. My job is to work with the club teachers to explore experiential learning methods that will engage the students in fun and challenging activities so that they will learn about the world around them and the need for conservation.