

Community-Led Conservation: Ontulili Primates Protection (OPP)'s Conservation Achievements with PSGB Support

In 2023, Ontulili Primates Protection (OPP), with support from the Primate Society of Great Britain (PSGB) and Born Free, reached significant milestones in conservation and community engagement. These achievements, ranging from art education to ecosystem restoration, have been crucial in promoting peaceful coexistence between local communities and primates in the Ontulili sub-catchment, Kenya. Here's a summary of OPP's efforts and accomplishments.

Community Engagement

With PSGB's backing, OPP hosted two pivotal community awareness meetings aimed at educating local residents about the value of coexisting with primates and protecting their environment. These meetings, held in collaboration with local leaders, focused on pressing environmental issues, including climate change, deforestation, climate-smart agriculture, and Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM).

Residents were encouraged to recognize the connections between human activities and environmental health, fostering a culture of environmental stewardship. As a result, the community has taken greater responsibility for conservation, actively reducing human-primate conflicts. OPP's 9 women patrol team, the Primate Guardians, has been crucial in this effort, conducting regular monitoring to address any disturbances early on, thereby ensuring sustained conservation momentum.

Greening the Riparian Areas

OPP's efforts to restore the degraded riparian areas along the Ontulili river were significantly boosted by the establishment of two women-led tree nursery groups: the Ontulili Conservation Protection of Primates and the Ontulili Primate Guardians. These groups, comprising 24 women in total, were instrumental in producing 3,000 indigenous tree seedlings that were distributed to farmers, schools, churches, and a local dispensary.

These seedlings were planted in strategic areas by the Primate Guardians, focusing on restoring degraded regions, replacing non-native species, and providing better habitats for primates. This initiative not only enhanced the ecosystem along the Ontulili River but also raised environmental awareness within the community, particularly among schoolchildren. By engaging local schools and farmers, OPP cultivated a deeper sense of responsibility for environmental protection in future generations.

The Art Education Program

A highlight of OPP's initiatives was the Art Education Program, a collaboration with the Orkedi Foundation. The program brought together professional artists, including Caroline Mbirua, Esther Likali, and Boniface Maina, who mentored local children through creative workshops. Over a three-week period, the children learned to express their connection to nature and wildlife conservation through various art forms, including mosaics, painting, crafts, and clay work.

The program had a lasting impact, providing children with an opportunity to explore the beauty of nature while understanding the importance of conservation. The children's efforts were recognized when they won third place at the MASK UK Art Awards, a testament to their creativity and dedication to wildlife protection. This unique fusion of art and environmental science helped to nurture a sense of stewardship in the younger generation, reinforcing the link between artistic expression and nature conservation.

Mitigating Human-Primate Conflicts

A major challenge OPP has worked tirelessly to address is the frequent human-primate conflicts in the region. The Primate Guardians, working in collaboration with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and Mount Kenya Trust (MKT), have played an essential role in mitigating these conflicts. Through regular patrols along the Ontulili River, the team collects data on primate movements and wildlife encounters, with findings documented in a database developed by Dr. Peter Njagi from the Institute of Primates Research in Nairobi.

These patrols also serve as a forum for community members to report wildlife sightings and conflict concerns, helping to improve relations between residents and primates. PSGB's support has been vital in sustaining these patrols, which have reduced conflicts and raised awareness about the importance of conservation. Furthermore, OPP is exploring long-term solutions to these conflicts, such as constructing a tunnel bridge to facilitate primate movement across human settlements. Although the project's cost exceeds current funding, OPP is actively seeking financial support to bring this vision to life.

Looking Ahead

OPP remains committed to building on these successes and expanding its conservation initiatives in the years ahead. By continuing to engage communities and secure funding for critical projects, OPP hopes to ensure a future where both people and primates can thrive in harmony.

Photos



Figure 1 OPP 9 Women at their tree nursery joined by Dr Peter Njagi from the Institute of Primate Research in Nairobi



Figure 2 Josephine- OPP guardian holds a snare removed during a primate's patrol, showcasing our ongoing efforts to protect wildlife and preserve habitats.

Fig 3 Sykes and Colobus monkeys spotted thriving along the Ontulili riverine, a testament of OPP's ongoing conservation efforts to protect their natural habitat.



Fig 4 OPP's art classes inspire young minds to connect with nature, using creativity to raise awareness about primate conservation and environmental stewardship

