



MEET THE SCIENTIST

Laly Lichtenfeld

Co-founder and CEO at African People & Wildlife

A love of big cats and a commitment to empower rural communities led Laly Lichtenfeld to help develop 'Living Walls', a project to protect livestock in Tanzania.

Growing up in the beautiful 'garden state' of rural New Jersey, Laly Lichtenfeld was outdoorsy from the get-go. But it was when she first heard a wild lion roar in Kenya that she fell in love with big cats. "I knew from that moment I would be returning to try to contribute to conservation in this part of the world," she says.

Lichtenfeld was a freshman studying biology at the time. Later, she received a Fulbright scholarship to research community-based conservation in Africa. Fast-forward 21 years and she still calls the continent home, having co-founded the non-profit organisation African People & Wildlife.

"There is a long history of people on these landscapes, interacting with wildlife. In East Africa, where we work, people are as much a part of the environment as some of the large mammal species. They've been there for centuries," she explains.

So, when finding a solution to the problem of big cats attacking the livestock of the Maasai people in Tanzania, Lichtenfeld and her team invited community members to the table. "When you lose a cow to a lion, it's not just the economy [it affects], it's the whole social fabric," she says. Building trust and incorporating local, traditional knowledge is at the heart of the organisation's work.

Livestock corrals are – quite literally – at the centre of the homestead. In the past, brush would be cut down locally to fortify



A corral with a 'Living Wall' keeps livestock safe from lions and other large predators.

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them against roaming predators, but the Maasai were having to go further and further afield to find it. Could chain-link fencing supported by metal or wooden stakes do the trick? Metal was dismissed by the communities as being too expensive and wood would rot, they thought.

Instead, they wondered if indigenous thorny African myrrh trees could form the posts. Branches could be harvested without killing the tree, dried out for several weeks, and then planted in the dry season

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when they wouldn't rot. "That would have never occurred to me!" laughs Lichtenfeld. African People & Wildlife then secures chain-link fencing to the branches, and over time the growing trees weave through it, creating a sustainable, predator-proof barrier.

Word spread fast and now there are more than 1,300 of these 'Living Walls' across northern Tanzania. Lichtenfeld feels they are successful because the communities are invested. "It's important it isn't a handout," she says. They plant the trees themselves and pay 25 per cent towards the cost of the fence.

The rest is covered by African People & Wildlife and its key supporters and partners, with plans for more Living Walls funded by the Land for Life project led by WWF.

"These communities have an incredible amount of tolerance for large mammals roaming through their backyards compared to other parts of the world. I think they should be looked to for solutions more than they are." **Catherine Smalley**

African lions have declined by more than 40 per cent in three generations.



Laly Lichtenfeld and Living Wall: African People & Wildlife / Felipe Rodriguez; lioness: Richard Barrett / WWF-UK