

Embaka Community Based Conservation Organization

Empowering local communities to conserve the African golden cat whilst improving household income and local livelihoods.



ANNUAL REPORT 2021

Poaching, Piglets, and Smiles:

improving local household income and oral health to dissuade poaching and its impacts on the African golden cat in Uganda

www.savingafricangoldencat.com

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Executive summary

The year 2021 has been a progressive year for the conservation of the African golden cat in Uganda. We have registered our community-based conservation initiatives as a Community Based Organization (CBO). The CBO currently has 1146 registered members who have pledged support to the conservation of the African golden cat and to our anti-poaching initiatives around Bwindi. As part of the CBO, we have: 1) established 27 voluntary community based anti-poaching watch groups consisting of 243 local people from all the 25 frontline parishes of Bwindi, 2) conducted two annual General Assemblies, 3) extended our pig seed bank to 73 animals with 23 beneficiary families and 4) provided free oral health care and treatment to 178 local families. All these community livelihood benefits have been tied to the conservation of the African golden cat.

Background

This report is a culmination of my eight years of successful community-based conservation and ecological research on the African golden cat (*Caracal aurata*) in and around Uganda's protected areas— to start the first-ever long-term community-based conservation and livelihood program to save the African golden cat in Uganda. The program is called Embaka-Saving African golden cats (<https://www.savingafricangoldencat.com>).

The mission of this community-based conservation and livelihood program is to engage local people to mitigate threats to African golden cats and other wildlife in Uganda through local livelihood improvement. I work with local communities living adjacent to three of four protected areas known to have the African golden cat: 1) Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (hereafter “Bwindi”), 2) Echuya Forest Reserve and 3) Kasyoha-Kitomi Forest Reserve. Our work has focused on achieving the following specific objectives:

1. To expand ongoing local community (particularly poachers) engagement to reduce poaching.
2. To contribute to local household income through pig farming.
3. To provide free oral health care to local people as an incentive to promote community policing against poaching.
4. To monitor the role of community mobilization, pig farming and free oral health care in reducing poaching.

The Poachers to Protectors (P2P) program: Expanding local community engagement to reduce poaching

The year 2021 was a successful year for our conservation work during which we reached a milestone by mobilizing members of the frontline local communities around Bwindi into a Community Based Organization (CBO) registered by the government of Uganda solely focused on conserving the African golden cat (Figure 1). We have named this voluntary anti-poaching community policing program "poachers to protectors (P2P)" to reflect our community behavioral change approach to eliminating poaching and conserving the African golden cat. We named the CBO Embaka (local Kikiga name for the African golden cat), to reflect the CBO's aim of engaging local communities to mitigate poaching and its impacts on the African

golden cat and other wildlife through alternative sources of income and animal protein to bushmeat and improved general health and well-being.

Over the years, we have learnt that mobilizing communities into a community-based organization is indispensable for successful implementation of community-based conservation activities of the African golden cat. For community-based conservation to achieve its goal, there is a need to reach the right people. We have always taken a grass-root approach to identify and reach those families (living closest to the Bwindi boundary) which most partake in poaching and yet have received the least benefits from conservation and government, and we have organized them into a CBO.

The Embaka members through a democratic process elect a nine-person Local Executive Committee at all levels of Uganda's local government administrative structures; village (lowest level), to parish (each consisting of 8-12 villages/settlements), to sub-county, to the district (highest level of local government). The Local Executive Committees from the three districts neighboring Bwindi; Rubanda, Kanungu and Kisoro districts then select amongst them a regional Local Executive Committee to oversee the CBO at the protected area level.

These Local Executive Committees oversee the activities of the CBO for the benefit of both the local people and wildlife – with the African golden cat being the flagship and serve as the representatives to the CBO's annual General Assembly. No other conservation NGO working around Bwindi has this grass-root base structure, that provides over 1000 least affluent households a voice

and space to directly contribute and engage in conservation. The Embaka structure gives me confidence that the conservation activities are sustainable and are effective in achieving the desired conservation outcomes because the activities have been proposed, designed and implemented by the local people themselves.

(A)



(B)



Figure 1. Certificates of registration for the Embaka Community Based Conservation Organization in the districts bordering Bwindi; Rubanda (A) and Kanungu (B).

I consider this development a personal achievement and milestone for African golden cat conservation, not because of the formal status of the organization, but because of its registered membership of over 1,000 local community members (from all 25 frontline parishes of Bwindi) who have pledged to support the conservation of the African golden cat (and other wildlife) in the region.

Garnering this level of support (and trust) from people who are among the least affluent in the country has only been possible after my continued presence in the region since 2013 successfully implementing ecological and community-based projects that link people's livelihood with wildlife conservation. Embaka's (and mine – as its founder/director) approach to conservation is to pragmatically engage local communities in mitigating pressure on local wildlife from poaching.

To set up our community-based conservation organization successfully and effectively, we conducted a total of 17 mobilization village meetings in the form of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 300 representatives for 50 poaching groups in high poaching hotspot parishes (hereafter “communities”) around Bwindi. We adhered to the ethical principles of the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology and approved by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and local government to conduct FGDs. We classified the participants for the FGDs into two groups: 1) individuals identified from UWA's records as people recently (in the past 12 months) involved in bushmeat hunting in the park (poachers); and 2) the general community (people who have not been apprehended for poaching in the past 12 months).

We had 10 FGDs for poachers and seven FGDs for the general community. For both groups, participants were selected randomly, and participation was voluntary. The random sampling was achieved by assigning numbers to all the individuals in each group on pieces of papers, placing them in a box, shuffling them and then picking out the households to be included in the FGDs.

We obtained a random sample of 10 participants for each FGD. Names for those involved in poaching were obtained from the UWA community conservation and law enforcement departments, while names for the general community participants were obtained from the village residents' manifests kept by the local government officials. Including poachers and the general community in the FGDs allowed us to offer opportunities to members of the community with different backgrounds, while maintaining some level of emphasis on current poachers.

We also conducted a further 87 leadership meetings from which we have established 27 voluntary community based anti-poaching watch groups comprising of 243 former ("reformed") and active poachers providing voluntary community policing against poaching in all the 25 frontline parishes around Bwindi. The anti-poaching community policing groups comprise of nine people per village elected by the Embaka CBO membership to serve as the villages' executive committee/ representatives to the CBO's annual General Assembly.

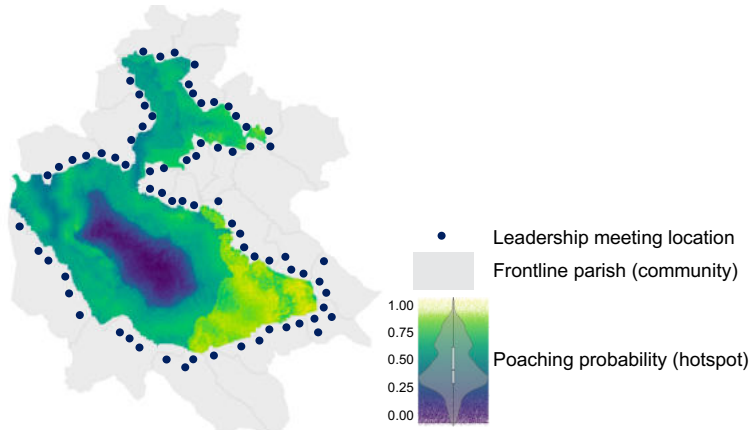
In addition to the leadership meetings, we also organized two General Assemblies in two of the three districts neighboring Bwindi (Rubanda and Kanungu districts) in which village leaders, representatives from the local government and the UWA participated. The general assembly is an important activity of the P2P program because it brings together all the local CBO representatives (the local executive committees) to discuss the management of the CBO, audit the finances of the CBO, elect new representatives, and discuss the CBO's ongoing conservation

projects and suggest ideas for new projects.

All combined, the key outcome of the P2P program is a locally managed and led CBO comprising a total of 1146 registered local community members all residents in the three districts (Rubanda, Kanungu and Kisoro districts) neighboring Bwindi (Figure. 2). I believe that by having a locally based and led organization, that implements livelihood improving activities conceived and designed based on community discussions is likely to provide a measurable decrease in poaching pressure on Bwindi's wildlife including the African golden cat. I believe this, because efforts until now have shown very promising results in terms of the number of people pledging to assist in African golden cat conservation (1,146 people) and who are already involved in voluntary community based anti-poaching groups (243 people).

The CBO has successfully ensured that the local communities themselves own and take a lead in the conservation of the African golden cat. Community engagement is nurtured via honest sharing of research findings on the status of the African golden cat in the region, explaining the threat that poaching poses on wildlife, and the provision of incentives to reduce poaching. These incentives are delivered at the household level to ensure direct family benefits. It is through this organization that we have been able to deliver community designed and implemented conservation actions to provide community managed financially feasible (and locally acceptable) sources of livelihood including: 1) household income and alternative protein to bushmeat through pig farming and 2) free oral health care (treatment and education).

(A)



(B)



(C)



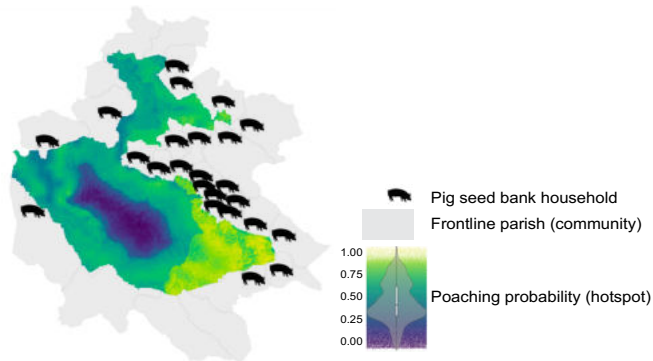
Figure 2. Poachers to Protectors: Leadership meeting locations (A), a leadership meeting in progress (B) and delegates to the Kanungu district Embaka General Assembly, UWA's Community Conservation Department and Local government after passing the CBO constitution at 2021 General Assembly (C).

The Piglets for Bushmeat (P4B) program: Contributing to local household income through pig farming

As part of the P2P program, we have expanded our pig seed bank of the Piglets for Bushmeat (P4B) program. We have provided 15 seed animals (2 males and 13 females) to 13 poacher families. The pig seed bank now has 73 animals (60 of which are piglets). Ten female piglets have been donated to 10 nearest neighbor families. A total of 23 families are now participating in the pig seed bank (three of which are headed by women).

The P4B program is structured as a "pig seed bank". The pig (a reproductive age sow) is the "seed" pig provided, along with necessary training and a pig farming manual, to a poacher's family ("the seed family"), which pledges to stop poaching. When that sow has offspring, at least one female piglet is given to the nearest household (regardless of whether it partakes in poaching or not) in exchange for voluntary community policing against poaching and other threats to the African golden cat (and wildlife in general). That way, the benefits gradually cascade across the community. After donating one piglet to a neighbor, the seed family keeps the rest of the piglets for meat and/or sale, directly improving the households' food security, nutrition, and income (Figure 3).

(A)



(B)



(C)



Figure 3. Piglets for Bushmeat: Locations of the 23 families participating in the P4B's pig seed bank (A), a member of the P2P community based anti poaching watch group who received a female seed animal (B) and one nearest neighbor to whom the first female piglet was donated as part of the pig seed bank (C).

The families to benefit first were selected at random via public and fully transparent lotteries from poacher households which; 1) have taken the pledge to support anti-poaching efforts either by committing to stop poaching and/or volunteer in the anti-poaching community policing groups, and 2) are living not further than 1 km from the Bwindi boundary. The random sampling is achieved by assigning numbers to families on pieces of papers, placing them in a box, shuffling them and then picking out the families to receive the seed pig. To ensure gender equality particularly women's equal participation in the P4B program, existing women groups such as those existing in churches (Mothers' Union) or women saving groups are contacted and requested to widely spread the opportunity to all women. The outcome of this activity is improved household income and livelihoods, increased support for conservation and associated decrease in pressure on African golden cat from poaching.

The Smile for Conservation (S4C) program: Providing free oral health care to local people as an incentive to promote community policing against poaching.

Through the Smile for Conservation (S4C) program, we used mobile dental clinics, the first of the kind in the region, to visit local families and provide free oral health check-ups, pain relieving procedures and oral health education to a total of 178 local people living in eleven frontline villages at Bwindi in the communities of Ruhija and Kirima. Majority (68.5%, n = 122) of the patients were female (Figure 4). The mobile dental clinics and outreach have been conducted by three experienced dentists (Dr. Hazel Orengo Simila, Dr. Bob Matsiko, Dr. Umaru Kizito) assisted by nurse Anitah Kyatuheire and three Makerere University 5th year Dental students (Ssetongo Paddy, Owomugisha Anitor and Bonabana Merab).

(A)



(B)



(C)

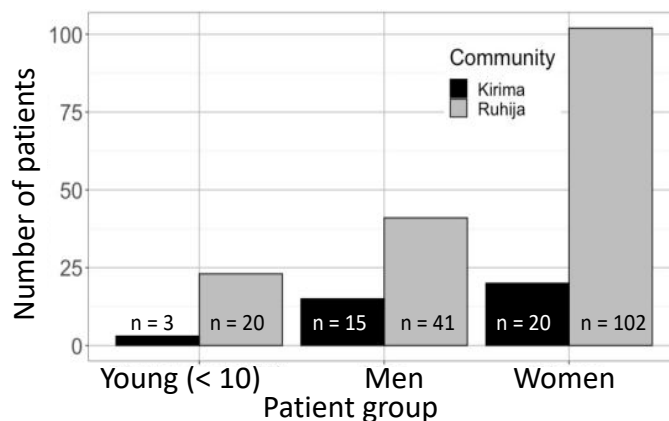


Figure 4. Smile for Conservation: Local community members waiting to receive oral examination and treatment (A), Dr. Hazel Simila performing a tooth extraction (B) and number of local community members who received free dental and oral care during the S4C mobile dental clinic and outreach (C).

The families to benefit were selected at random via public and fully transparent lotteries from all families (regardless of it partakes in poaching or not) which; 1) have taken the pledge to support anti-poaching efforts either by committing to stop poaching and/or volunteer in the anti-poaching community policing groups, and 2) are living not further than 1 km from the Bwindi boundary. The random sampling was achieved by assigning numbers to families on pieces of papers, placing them in a box, shuffling them and then picking out the households to participate in the S4C.

All households which participated in the S4C programme were registered in the mobile clinic patient record. Again, to ensure gender equality particularly women's equal participation in the S4C program, we requested existing women groups to encourage their members to participate. The outcome of this activity was improved health and wellbeing for all age classes, children, women and men, and increased awareness about the importance of African golden cats in the region. This service was again clearly tied to conservation and was offered as a benefit/incentive to families that have pledged to voluntary community policing against poaching within their communities.

Monitoring the role of community mobilization, pig farming and free oral health care in reducing poaching at Bwindi.

I acquired weekly reports via phone from the families on the status of the animals in the P4B program (general health condition, birthed piglets etc). The reports were dully entered into the P4B database which we use to track and monitor the status of the pig seed bank (including beneficiary household, number of animals, health condition, number of piglets birthed etc). I collected data on which households have received a piglet from the pig seed bank, and free oral health care and which individual(s) was/were involved in poaching in that given month. Newly identified poachers have been dissuaded from poaching by recruiting them into the P2P, P4B and S4C programs. Seven of the 10 members who have received piglets have volunteered to stop poaching and support our anti-poaching activities.

More achievements

We successfully organized and hosted the inaugural meeting of the African golden cat Conservation Alliance (AGCCA) from December 12th to 17th at Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda. This meeting was organized in collaboration with friends; SWCCF, Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN), Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation and Uganda Wildlife Authority. Ten partners of the AGCCA from eight countries attended and visited Embaka's ongoing community-based conservation around Bwindi to discuss how these could be effectively implemented in their countries. The idea behind this meeting was to bring all of us together to learn from each other, witness ongoing conservation action and get inspired to strengthen our threat reduction actions in our respective countries.



Figure 5. Participants of the AGCCA inaugural meeting on the last day at Kazinga National Park.

Next steps in 2022

1. Expand the community pig seed bank from 73 to 245 (through additional pig seed animals and piglets).
2. Deliver mobile dental clinics to 200 more local families at Bwindi and 100 at Echuya and Kasyoha-Kitomi Forest Reserves.
3. Extend the livestock seed banks and mobile dental clinics currently only at Bwindi to Echuya and Kasyoha-Kitomi Forest Reserves.

Our partners

Our conservation partners include the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, Small Cat Conservation Foundation and the Big Cat Rescue.