

NYIKA-VWAZA TRUST (UK)

**REPORT ON FEEDBACK GIVEN TO
COMMUNITIES ON HONEY-HUNTING
WITH HONEYGUIDES RESEARCH**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents my feedback to the eight communities of Thomas Mkandawire, Kazuni, Kyeghama, Thazima, Mwazisi-Mphangara, Phoka-Chidiwo, Ng'onga, Mlare and Bolero, on the findings of a study exploring the remarkable human–honeyguide mutual relationship around Nyika National Park and Vwaza Mash Wildlife Reserve. The study revealed that while human–honeyguide mutualism in northern Malawi remains active, it is facing many challenges. These challenges are due to deforestation, loss of interest among the youth, restricted access to protected areas, and increased popularity of bee-keeping around the area. Communities expressed a strong cultural attachment to the honeyguide bird, emphasizing its irreplaceable role in traditional interaction, and their reluctance to abandon honey-hunting in favour of bee-keeping.

Communities gave their insights regarding honey-hunting and highlighted their concerns about the declining participation of young men in honey-hunting, the behaviour of the bird in guiding to other things other than nests of wild honey bees, and the importance of preserving this cultural practice. They proposed making honey-hunting legal within the reserves to maintain an ecological balance alongside bee-keeping and suggested involving community honey-hunters and bee-keepers as scouts. Additionally, they advocated for environmental education programmes focused on sustainable honey-hunting and forest management in schools and communities around the reserves.

1. Introduction

The honey-hunting culture around Nyika National Park and Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve, particularly with the guidance of the honeyguide bird *Indicator indicator*, is an important aspect of cultural heritage. This practice not only meet some needs of the communities but also plays a role in the cultural practices of the communities and ecological balance in the forest ecosystem. However, there is a growing concern about the decline of this practice due to factors such as deforestation, lack of interest among the youth, restricted access to reserves, and the increasing popularity of beekeeping.

2. Objectives of the study

The objectives of this research were:

- To characterise honey-hunting with honeyguides,
- To describe functional components of human-honeyguide mutualism,
- To identify the threats and causes of the decline of human-honeyguide mutualism.

3. Objectives of visiting the communities

- To share the results of the research on honey-hunting with honeyguides around the Nyika National Park and Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve,
- To collect insights and responses from the communities on the findings, particularly regarding their understanding and perception of the honeyguide bird, the importance of honey-hunting, and the factors contributing to the decline of the tradition,
- To discuss and explore potential strategies with the communities for making honey-hunting a sustainable practice to the next generation.

4. Feedback shared with communities

I visited the eight communities of Thomas Mkandawire, Kazuni, Kyeghama, Thazima, Mwazisi-Mphangara, Phoka-Chidiwo, Ng'onga, Mlare, and Bolero within the Nyika and Vwaza reserves. This trip took place from 25 to 30 July 2024 and 5 to 8 August 2024. I presented my thesis findings on the honey-hunting culture involving honeyguides and its implications for conservation efforts. My presentation highlighted that the honey-hunting culture is still active among the people. I also reported that most of the time, honey-hunters do not specifically plan for honey-hunting; rather they do the hunting opportunistically. Honey-hunters attract the bird with general sounds and the use of mouth whistles and blowing instruments. The whistles are known as *chipheta* and blowing instruments

include animal horns. Upon successfully locating a wild honeybee nest with the guidance of the honeyguide, they reward the bird with beeswax.

However, I also noted that there are instances where honeyguides lead hunters to other things other than bee nests. I also reported that consensus shows that the honey-hunting culture is declining around the reserves. Factors contributing to this decline include deforestation, lack of interest among the youth, restricted access to reserves, and the growing popularity of bee-keeping within the communities.

I also presented the rare relationship between the honey badger (*Mellivora capensis*) and the honeyguide bird as another example of mutualism. The honeyguide bird leads the honey badger to wild bee colonies in the same way it does with humans. Once the honey badger breaks open the hive to access the honey the bird feeds on the leftover beeswax and larvae which it cannot access on its own. I highlighted that most of respondents could not prove they witnessed this interaction during my study, except a few very old individuals.

4. Feedback from communities

The feedback received from the communities provided invaluable insights into the cultural significance and behavioural patterns of the honeyguide bird. Community members explained that when a honeyguide leads hunters to locations other than honeybee nests, it is often a form of warning to prevent potential harm or alert them of the danger around. This altered behaviour can also result from hunters not adequately rewarding the bird, or it may be an implicit request for hunters to address a threat, as the bird perceives them as its sole hope for safety. Further, the communities emphasised the profound cultural reverence for the honeyguide since they expressed strong opposition to any harmful practice that may intend to harm the bird. The honeyguide, named *Solo* symbolising luck, is deeply ingrained in their cultural identity. Despite recognising the bird's supernatural significance in herbal medicine and its occasional hunting for such purposes, the communities assert that honey-hunting cannot be replaced by beekeeping practices. The reason behind being the strong interspecies relationship or bond between the bird and humans. They also highlighted the unique function of wild honey in traditional medicine and its efficacy in treating various ailments. They emphasised again that wild honey is different from honey from beekeeping. Furthermore, there is a prevalent belief that the honeyguide experiences distress if hunters neglect to honey-hunt and share the harvested honey with it. A significant concern raised was the declining participation of young men in honey hunting,

attributed to the lack of accessible practice areas and the perception that reserves allow only those who practice beekeeping.



Figure 1: Meeting with communities at GVH Thomas Mkandawire in vicinity of Vwaza Marsh. The Chief addressing the audience.



Figure 2: Community members around Bolero listening to the findings.

5. Challenges

Several challenges emerged from this trip which were more like learning points.

- Low turn-out of community members in some location. Some chiefs and DNPW extension officers were asking in advance if they may get an allowance after the meeting. Upon realizing that only refreshments could be provided some members did not turn up.
- In poor communities some chiefs and extension officers did not make proper communication to community members. This forced me to visit the areas more than once.
- I could not visit back all the sampled areas around Nyika and Vwaza due to long distances. For example, I did not go up to Nthalire.
- Equipment failure was one of the main setbacks during the trip. The camera memory card I bought for this trip developed a fault when I finally wanted to extract the pictures.

All the pictures used in this report were taken using a phone. Thank God I thought of combining the phone and camera. The camera I used during primary data collection was borrowed from a different institution, hence I could not get the same.



Figure 3: One of the frustrating days at GVH Chidiwo in Phoka where the GVH could not communicate to participants to attend the meeting and I had to go back again.

6. Lessons and suggested ways forward

From the research findings and community interactions, several lessons have been learned on the proposed way forward to sustain and revitalise the honey-hunting culture.

- Communities say that it is important to legalise honey-hunting within the reserves to promote ecological balance and cultural preservation. They propose recognising honey-hunting as a legitimate activity that would facilitate controlled access and support conservation-focused practices.
- Engaging community honey-hunters and beekeepers as scouts can foster local stewardship, enabling them to monitor and protect the reserves effectively.
- Forest conservation, which includes maintaining and restoring forests, would benefit wild bee populations and the honeyguide bird, both of which are essential for traditional honey-harvesting. Reforestation efforts and sustainable land-use practices could help provide an environment for honey-hunting to continue.
- Implementing comprehensive environmental education programmes within communities and schools is crucial to raise awareness about sustainable honey-hunting practices. This extends to the ecological importance of honeyguides, honey-hunting practice and effective forest management techniques.
- These educational initiatives can rekindle interest among the youth through role models in honey-hunting. This would highlight the cultural and ecological significance of honey-hunting and encouraging the next generation to embrace and continue with this tradition.
- Honey-hunting and beekeeping do not need to be mutually exclusive. Communities can practice both. Honey-hunting can be seen as a cultural, ecotourism and seasonal activity, while beekeeping ensures year-round honey production.

7. Conclusions

The honey-hunting culture involving honeyguides in the Nyika National Park and Vwaza Mash Wildlife Reserve is an important component of the cultural heritage of communities and plays a significant role in conservation efforts. The research findings and subsequent community feedback underscore the importance of preserving this tradition amidst various challenges, including deforestation, cultural shifts and regulatory constraints. By legitimising honey-hunting, involving communities in conservation roles, and promoting environmental education, it is possible to foster a sustainable balance that honours cultural heritage and supports ecological conservation. These steps are essential to ensure that honey-hunting remains a living tradition, contributing to the preservation of Nyika National Park and Vwaza Mash Wildlife Reserve and enriching the cultural fabric of the communities involved.

8. Other relevant pictures





Figure 4: Honey hunters in Mphangala who were instrumental during honey-hunting trip.