

HumanRace

NEWS, TRENDS, AND REGULAR RUNNERS DOING AMAZING THINGS →



AFRICAN PRIDE
Bhalla with Samburu warriors and lion scouts, who provide security to locals.

The Lion Queen

A Kenyan researcher launches a race to raise local awareness for big-cat conservation
BY JAYME MOYE

ON RACE MORNING last June, Shivani Bhalla wasn't worried about lions on the course. The sun was about to rise over the African savannah, and the nighttime predators had retired. The race director was more concerned about elephants. "You don't want to come running around a blind corner and surprise a bull elephant," she says. "He'll charge."

Bhalla would know. Born and raised in Nairobi, the 34-year-old Ph.D. student has spent the last 10 years stationed in Samburu, Kenya, with five of those at West

Gate Community Conservancy, where she founded Ewaso Lions (a research project dedicated to lion conservation) and created a race, Running for Lions, as a way to bring together the local Samburu people in support of her cause.

Lions, or the lack thereof, are a concern in Africa, where numbers have declined nearly 70 percent since 1960. The Kenya Wildlife Service predicts that lions could disappear from the country within two decades. The reduction is largely due to habitat loss and conflict with humans.



DEDICATED EFFORT
Runners wear official race T-shirts (and sandals); Bhalla collects data (left).

The Samburu people are pastoralists who depend on their livestock for survival. So when lions hunt their cattle, sheep, and goats, the warriors (young men charged with protecting their tribe's herds) sometimes kill the large carnivores in retaliation.

Bhalla strives to teach the locals about wildlife ecology, the value of lions, and how to reduce livestock loss in the first place, with training sessions on building secure animal enclosures, for example. But such programs usually serve a small audience, like the warriors, and Bhalla wanted to make sure her message spread

through the entire community—including future generations.

And so the idea of a race was born. "That's why we started it—to bring the women, warriors, elders, and kids all together for the cause," says Bhalla, who ran cross-country in secondary school and recreationally at Lancaster University in the U.K. At the inaugural event in 2010, only about 30 competitors showed. But participation doubled in 2011, and last year, 64 men raced in the 21-K and about 20 women and children did the 7-K. "People are now excited by it, talk about it, and wear their race shirts year-round," Bhalla says.

The Samburu National Reserve, one of Kenya's famous game parks, is better known for its wildlife than its runners. The region is home to all three big cats—lions, cheetahs, and leopards—as well as elephants and rhinos, and some species

found no place else, including the reticulated giraffe, the beisa oryx, the Somali ostrich, and the endangered Grevy's zebra.

Although locals aren't runners like their famed countrymen from the Rift Valley, interest in the race grew when word spread that Bhalla doesn't charge an entry fee and offers a unique prize purse: first prize is a pregnant goat, second a female goat, and third a billy goat. Winners either keep the goats for food and milk or sell them for a good price in the market. "I thought I was too old to run, but I beat all the younger women in 2011," says Pasitin Leadismo, 24, a Samburu mother. "I was so happy to win that goat."

Warriors embraced both the event and the cause. "I like how the community came together to run for the lions; it's a great way to educate people," says Jeneria Lekilele, a 24-year-old Samburu warrior who placed seventh in 2011, his first race.

And it's helped Bhalla develop stronger ties with the warriors, who are important allies to her mission. "These young men spend more time than anyone in wildlife areas, yet they were rarely involved in decision-making regarding conservation," she says. "We are changing that."

Bhalla expects an even bigger turnout at the 2013 event. She has changed the course to be less hilly, per request, and has moved it to an area called the Grevy's Zebra Plains. "You'll see hundreds of the endangered Grevy's zebra," she says, "and thankfully, no elephants." **EW**

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