

ABS Outreach Grant – Uaso Ngiro Baboon Project and Il Polei Secondary School

The Uaso Ngiro Baboon Project (UNBP) was established in 1984 near the town of Il Polei in Laikipia County, Kenya. Since its inception, the project has worked closely with the local community and has been instrumental in promoting and supporting women's rights in the area. In particular, UNBP's director, Dr. Shirley Strum (UC San Diego) was one of the founding members of a women's resource center in the area, Twala, which provides local women with economic opportunities through collective commercial endeavors ranging from bee-keeping to making traditional beaded jewelry. UNBP also provides an opportunity for ecotourism by allowing visitors to come "walk with the baboons" that have been habituated as part of its ongoing research project. These tours are guided by Twala's director, Rosemary Nenini, and the funds raised through this activity are entirely redistributed to the Twala community. Over the years, UNBP has also supported several nursery schools in the area as well as Il Polei's primary and secondary schools through financial sponsorships, providing building materials and textbooks, and educational activities. The latter were done on an ad hoc basis by UNBP interns and visiting scholars, and included art classes as well as ecology- and conservation-focused activities to raise awareness about topics of local concern such as riverbed erosion due to sand harvesting. These activities also led to the production of a booklet of watercolor paintings by the primary school students depicting plants used by the Maasai for medicinal purposes, an educational project that combined art and traditional ecological knowledge under the direction of artist Deborah Ross ([Olcani project](#)).

With this grant, we were able to continue UNBP's educational outreach activities in the community by focusing on the female students at the secondary school and providing them with a hands-on educational experience in studying animal behavior. Although gender roles are slowly changing in the area and opportunities for girls and women are improving (in no small part thanks to Twala), many girls still drop out of school early because they become pregnant. We took advantage of a program that has been developed at the Secondary School to allow at-risk girls to remain at school even when classes are not in session (one week in April, July, and December). Our goal was to teach these girls about primate behavior and about the field methods used to collect both behavioral and ecological data, so we took them to spend a day in the field with the UNBP researchers observing the baboons and learning about UNBP's behavioral data collection protocols. They also learned about the various environmental indicators that UNBP monitors in the area, which include rainfall and temperature, biomass, and the numbers of livestock and wildlife. We followed up the activity by having a "movie night" at the school where we projected "[Baboon Tales](#)" (1998), a documentary filmed on the UNBP baboons. The showing was followed by a Q&A with UNBP researchers, including an alumnus of the Secondary School, Kesier Mesopiro.

There were several other benefits to this project beyond its educational outcome. First, although baboons are often visible at the edges of Il Polei, local people have few interactions with them and – when they do – these tend to be antagonistic and usually involve having to chase the monkeys away from property. Educating these girls (and the rest of the school) about baboons and giving them the opportunity to have a positive experience with them helps raise goodwill in the local community towards animals that are primarily considered pests, and may help ameliorate human-wildlife conflict. Our hope is that learning about the animals and their habitat will give these students a different perspective and a renewed appreciation for the environment they live in, thus promoting their interest in conservation.



Schoolgirls from Il Polei Secondary School observing the baboons at their sleeping site together with UNBP observer James King' Au (above) and listening as he talks about the local plants the baboons eat (below).





Schoolgirls from Il Polei Secondary School together with UNBP co-Director Dr. Corinna Most (Iowa State University) and UNBP researcher Butu Masek (above) and Il Polei Secondary School students watching “Baboon Tales” at the school.

