

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

FALL 2025 -

FARMS, GIRAFFES,
AND COEXISTENCE

LEAVE A LEGACY
FOR WILDLIFE

CAMEROON'S FIRST
SCIENTIFIC DIVERS



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Farms, Giraffes, and Coexistence

In Kenya, a farmer watches dawn spill over a mango grove, where yellow flowers will soon yield fruit—the source of his future income. Scanning the treeline, the farmer spots two towering giraffes plucking flowers from branches. Crop raids by giraffes are not uncommon in Kenya, causing financial loss and sometimes lethal retaliation. As head of Human-Wildlife Conflict at the Hirola Conservation Program (HCP), Mohamed Hussein has witnessed frustrated farmers setting snares that catch giraffes around the neck, strangling them until they collapse. That's why he spends his days speaking with farmers about a toolkit designed to keep giraffes and livelihoods safe.

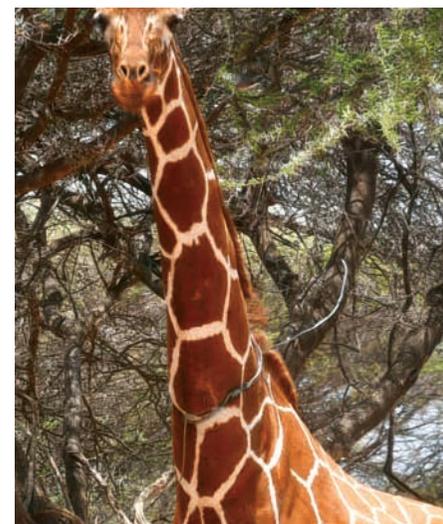
In Garissa County, Kenya, human-wildlife conflict has intensified as expanding farmland and settlements fragment habitats. Wildlife species dependent on vast territories for foraging now encounter sudden barriers along ancient routes. Farmlands near Kenya's scarce water sources are flashpoints as animals damage crops while seeking water. HCP, a new WCN Conservation Partner, has spent over a decade addressing these challenges. By restoring grasslands and employing herders as scouts, HCP fosters

TO HELP FARMERS WHO LOST SIGNIFICANT HARVESTS TO GIRAFFES, HCP SUPPLIED FREE LIME SEEDLINGS SO THEY COULD GROW MORE GIRAFFE-RESISTANT CROPS.

coexistence between people and wildlife to sustain a healthy landscape.

While HCP primarily protects the Critically Endangered hirola antelope, they've begun addressing farmer retaliation against the Endangered reticulated giraffe, a species that heavily influences Garissa's landscape. Though giraffes are picky eaters, mango and guava groves are similar to the acacias they prefer—trees largely eliminated from Garissa due to development. Even a few giraffes can eat enough foliage in one night to significantly harm a farmer's livelihood. Tracking rising tensions over several years, HCP compiled a conceptual "toolkit" of non-lethal deterrents—like solar lamps, noisemakers, and beehive fences—that they could introduce to farmers. However, they lacked reliable data to pinpoint priority conflict zones—information essential to invest in and deploy deterrents wisely.

That began to change in early 2025, when rapid development near water sources



Wire snares like the one visible around this giraffe's lower neck represent the deadly escalation of human-wildlife conflict in Kenya.

sparked a surge in conflict reports. Rangers increasingly radioed about giraffe intrusions, and farmers brought their grievances directly to HCP's office. With this influx of data, Mohamed could map hotspots and roll out HCP's giraffe coexistence toolkit.



Working with the Kenya Wildlife Service and other partners, HCP removes a snare from a giraffe, demonstrating the critical rescue operations that complement their prevention efforts with farmers.

By summer 2025, Mohamed began visiting farmers, outlining the toolkit's options. Once farmers chose methods best suited for their crops, HCP would supply the devices, and Mohamed helped install them before setting up camera traps to monitor each device. Overall, fifty farms adopted deterrents, half using multiple barriers. Early results have been promising: Farms with at least two deterrents reported far fewer giraffe visits, and no participating farmers have killed giraffes in retaliation. While the effectiveness of individual devices is still being studied, the initial results demonstrate the toolkit's potential—Mohamed hopes to expand it to reach up to 2,000 farmers.

As Mohamed reviewed new footage, a frame came to life: a bull giraffe moved across a farm, his spotted coat shining against the darkness. Then a sudden flash from a solar lamp bleached his features, followed by a noisemaker's rattle. The giraffe paused, then veered away from the farm. The giraffe was unharmed, and the crops were safe—a stunning victory. ■



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– David Attenborough



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Cameroon's First Scientific Divers



Top: AMCO trainees during diving instruction—learning not only to dive but also to handle scientific equipment underwater for marine research. Above: AMCO's flagship species, the Critically Endangered West African manatee, symbolizes the marine life that Cameroon's first scientific divers are being trained to monitor and protect.

Beneath the coastal waters of Limbe, Cameroon, 24-year-old Cyndi Karel Ngnah steadies her diving gear as she drifts toward a reef shimmering with coral reds and purples. She can hardly believe this is her reality. Just two years ago, she couldn't swim. Today, she is one of Cameroon's first scientific divers, collecting data for the African Marine Conservation Organization (AMCO), a new WCN Conservation Partner working to safeguard the country's aquatic wildlife. Cyndi's presence underwater represents a breakthrough. Cultural taboos around the ocean and limited diving expertise have left underwater research to international NGOs, excluding local scientists and creating data gaps. AMCO's push for local conservation leadership addresses these shortfalls and ensures the people closest to these waters lead its protection.

Cameroon's coastline, connected to the Gulf of Guinea's coral reef network, teems with wildlife in

need of protection: Critically Endangered West African manatees, sharks and rays, sea turtles, reef fish, and diverse corals. Unsustainable fishing, coastal development, and climate change have degraded this ecosystem; however, without trained Cameroonian divers, the consequences—such as declining marine wildlife populations—have not been adequately documented. Through Cyndi's work, AMCO is building the scientific foundation that has been absent for decades. What she captures beneath the waves transforms into action above, informing policy and AMCO's programs.

At AMCO, Cyndi has worked to protect the ocean for years, but she never dared explore it herself. For many Cameroonians, local myths, like those of the water spirit Mami Wata dragging people beneath the waves, have cast the ocean as dangerous, fostering

detachment rather than stewardship—even for the fishing communities that depend on the ocean for food and income. While Cyndi's curiosity and determination eventually pushed her past these fears, helping the broader community develop similar care for aquatic life remains a challenge.

As AMCO's Head of Environmental Education, Cyndi leads programs on sustainable fishing techniques and promotes safe release methods for sharks and rays. She also creates educational cartoons to spark curiosity about marine life among children. By becoming a diver, Cyndi now draws directly from her underwater experiences to ground her outreach—integrating her photos into educational materials and mapping locations for fishers to avoid due to an endangered species' presence.

Cyndi is part of a local network of scientific leadership that will ensure Cameroon's marine ecosystems are studied and protected by Cameroonians themselves. Her diving expertise has become the cornerstone of AMCO's most ambitious project yet—the country's first scientific and recreational marine center, a vision the team is steadily working toward. The facility will train and inspire the next generation of Cameroonian conservationists. It will be a place where communities gather, learn, and see the ocean as a source of possibility.

As Cyndi continues her dive, the reef initially bursts with tropical fish, yet only a few meters further, bleached coral lies like bones picked clean. She photographs the stark contrast caused by rising ocean temperatures before ascending. At the surface, Cyndi becomes the link between two worlds—bringing the ocean's hidden life into reach for her community. "People gather on the shore when I dive," she explains. "A new world opens when they see me." ■



Left: Cyndi Karel Ngnah



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Wildlife Conservation Network

209 Mississippi St., San Francisco, CA 94107, USA
Ph. (415) 202-6380

wildnet.org