

The women are back!

- By Maaïke Manten, Miriam Westervelt, Helen Anthem and Veronicah Lekopole



Local women's merry-go-round group, Loita Forest (South Nguruman KBA). Image Miriam Westervelt

In March and April 2015, we posted a series of articles about Women in Conservation (re-read them [here](#)). These stories were based on small grant projects funded by Conservation International and managed by BirdLife International, through the [Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies](#) opportunity. The projects, implemented by the Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation (ITFC), Fauna & Flora International (FFI), Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO), Kigezi Initiative for Women and Children Empowerment & Development Uganda (KIWOCEDU) and Miriam Westervelt were so successful, that Conservation International decided to provide additional funding to each of these grantees. The second phase of these projects has now also ended, so here are a few more stories to share.

Project 1: Miriam Westervelt, Loita Forest (South Nguruman KBA, Kenya) - "New Friends of the Loita Forest"

Remember the women who used to [sing for the conservation of their forest](#)?

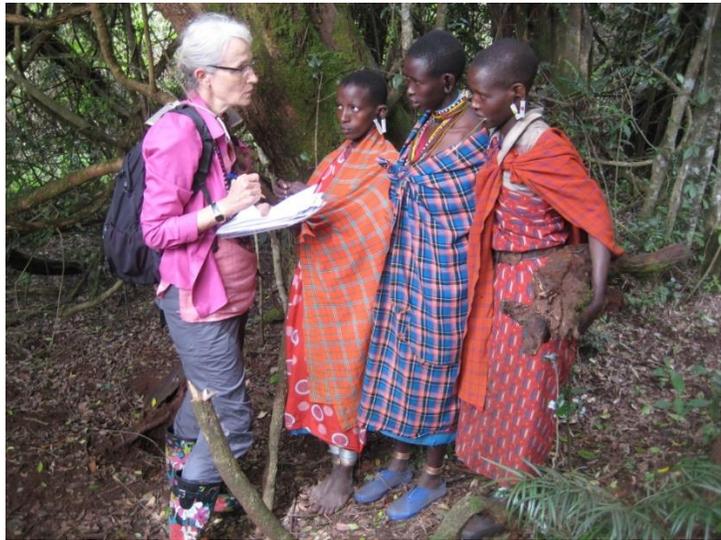
On November 22, 2015 a quiet but radical transformation took place in their remote rural community in the [South Nguruman](#) Key Biodiversity Area, located in Maasailand in southern Kenya. Local leaders organized themselves to address issues about Loita Forest, as they often did, but on this day there were two profound differences: their purpose was to develop *written* forest rules, and *half of the rule-makers were women*.

The impetus for these breakthroughs was learning of the results of Miriam Westervelt's four years of research in Loita Forest, including through the two Conservation International-funded grants. This research showed that:

- traditional verbal forest rules were broken more today than in the past,
- high priority tree species (e.g., African pencil cedar, African olive) were vanishing due to human activities, and
- women had valid concerns about their families' futures based on current trends in land use.

Calling themselves "Friends of Loita Forest", the new community-based organization aims to establish rules for sustainable forest use and protection, replenish loss of high priority tree species, and increase local awareness of forest ecology, particularly among young people.

That the community recognized both the need for such an organization and that equal representation of women would be necessary to achieve its goals, is a testimony to the stewardship Loitans have demonstrated for their forest for centuries and their courage to adapt their cultural values on behalf of the future.



Local women explaining use of African olive (in her arms). Image Miriam Westervelt

Project 2: Fauna & Flora International (Mathews Range KBA / Shaba National Reserve IBA, Kenya) - "Is the neck overtaking the head?"

Last year we also posted a story that showed [how cultural beliefs influenced the perceptions of men about the decision-making skills of women](#). Male rangers of community conservancies near the Mathews Range [Eastern Afromontane Key Biodiversity Area](#), and the [Shaba National Reserve](#) Important Bird Area in Northern Kenya, took part in an FFI-led project to promote women's participation in conservancy decision making. During one of the facilitated discussions in that project, one young ranger, who clearly felt that women had little to contribute, put it like this: "When women talk to us, it is like they are singing," – i.e., we can't take them very seriously.

However, things are changing. Veronicah Lesasuyian, formerly one of only two female rangers at Sera Conservancy, has recently been promoted to become the first female Corporal Ranger with 9 male and 5 female rangers under her authority. When some *moran* (warriors) were subsequently recruited and reported to work, they were shocked to learn that their boss is female. Some swore never to salute a woman and others even considered leaving their job. Veronicah did not demand that they salute. She told the ranger who shared his concerns with her to leave them alone because they will eventually salute, no matter how long it takes.

Two male rangers say they have seen a transformation in the behaviour of *moran* living in the rangers' camp, not only in saluting a woman but also cooking and serving meals. This is in contrast to accepted behaviour in surrounding villages where *moran* are almost 'worshipped' by women.

Veronicah and the rangers attribute these changes to the CI-funded WHSS projects, which have helped them to see things differently and given them the courage to raise their voices. They are keen for Sera to set a good example of a gender sensitive conservancy, where women's 'songs' are valued, and they are committed to playing their part.



Veronicah Lesasuyian has been promoted to Sera's first female Corporal Ranger. Image Veronicah Lekopole

This is the first story in a second series of articles about 'women and environment' posted on www.birdlife.org/africa/project/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies. The BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat managed a small grants portfolio of five innovative projects at selected [Eastern Afromontane](#) Important Bird Areas / Key Biodiversity Areas in Uganda and Kenya, on behalf of Conservation International. For all previous stories, click [here](#). All projects were so successful that they received additional funding for a second phase, which has now also ended.