

## **KENYA'S FIRST LADY GRACES CONSERVATION HEROES DAY CELEBRATIONS**

Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Conservation Heroes Day held on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2018 at KWS headquarters was marked with pomp and colour, with Kenya's First Lady, Her Excellency Margaret Kenyatta, presiding over the function.

The day coincided with the 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday of the Nairobi National Park, the first park to be gazetted on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 1946, when Kenya was still under colonial rule.

Conservation Heroes Day brings together the families of KWS staff who lost their lives in the course of duty while standing in the gap for our world-renowned wildlife. The day also sees 'living heroes' – those who go above and beyond their comfort zone whilst performing their duties – remembered for the gusto with which they tackle their conservation work.

Upon her arrival at KWS, the First Lady joined assembled guests for the unveiling and blessing of the heroes' monument.

Wreaths were laid at the base of the monument, with Her Excellency laying the first bouquet. Others who paid their respects in a similar manner were: Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife Mr. Najib Balala, Principal Secretary in the State Department of Wildlife Dr. Margaret Mwakima, Chair of KWS Board of Trustees Dr. John Waithaka, KWS Acting Director General Prof. Charles Musyoki, a representative of the fallen heroes' families, Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU), KDF representative, Kenya Police Service representing other disciplined services, Diplomatic corps, Conservation Alliance of Kenya (CAK), a representative of all former KWS Directors and the clergy.

While addressing the gathering, the First Lady acknowledged that those under whose umbrella our wildlife seek refuge deserve special mention and

continuous support and that Kenya, her wildlife and the world was grateful to the living and fallen heroes, as well as KWS staff as a whole.

"The government is committed to the sustainable management of Kenya's unique wildlife resources, which natural capital contributes an estimated 120 billion shillings to the Kenyan economy through tourism. This commitment is embedded in the National Wildlife Strategy 2030, which outlines a vision for wildlife conservation as part of a strong environmental foundation, for achieving Kenya's sustainable development agenda. It is also aligned with Kenya's Vision 2030 and the government's Big Four Agenda," she said.

Her Excellency stated that the government will continue to make deliberate efforts to ensure that the immense values derived from our wildlife trickle down to the communities in which we live, which bear the biggest brunt of co-existence with wildlife. She averred that Kenyans must play an inclusive role in wildlife stewardship, to reap sustainable benefits from our wildlife heritage.

She noted the alarming downturn in wildlife population in Kenya and the world over the past several decades, saying that Kenya must protect her invaluable natural resources. To this end, Kenya has invested heavily in capacity building of her rangers to enable them be up to task through force modernization, improvement of ranger training college and rigorous training, leading to an over 90% reduction in rhino poaching in Kenya in the last five years.

She commended the constant sacrifices of KWS rangers, 95% of whom were shown to be immensely proud of their work protecting wildlife heritage in a recent Global Ranger's Survey conducted early this year. Their bravery and dedication to national service has seen a rise in our elephant and rhino populations and a reduction in the popularity of wildlife trophies in their core markets, as well as gradually enlightening the world about the importance of preserving our unique flora and fauna for posterity.

“Yet the war on poaching will not be won if the countries that drive the demand for these products do not shut the markets. We therefore call upon the international community to prevail upon the countries driving trophy demand globally; to shut them down<sup>2</sup>, said the First Lady.

The representative of the fallen heroes' families Ms. Malisera Sangawe, elicited laughter when she requested the First Lady to ensure the President's attendance in the next Heroes' Day celebrations. She thanked KWS and partners for stepping in to ensure that fallen hero children's school fees were catered for, requesting that KWS goes a step further and absorbs these children into its workforce once their studies were completed.

Cabinet Secretary in the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife Najib Balala expressed gratitude to Her Excellency for her dedicated efforts in conservation, including travelling abroad to lobby against trade in wildlife trophies, which contributed in part, to China banning the sale of ivory. He responded to the heartfelt request of the representative of the fallen heroes' families and intimated that the children of fallen heroes would be absorbed into KWS, after necessary policies were drawn up, in conjunction with the Board of Trustees (BoT) and the Public Service Commission. He saluted KWS staff even as he promised a restructuring of the whole organization to streamline internal processes.

Dr. John Waithaka, Chair of the KWS BoT, lamented the recent death of a ranger after a rhino attack in Lake Nakuru National Park, expressing his dismay at the paltry out-patient insurance availed for rangers and other staff. He said that the ranger statue situated at the entrance of KWS headquarters pricked the consciences of the BoT and averred that better medical coverage was under consideration.

The Chair explained that KWS' protection transcended wildlife; it covers forests, oceans and other resources as well. He admitted that human resource is, by far,

the most important asset in KWS, and that the BoT was determined to uplift staff welfare to the maximum, during their three-year tenure.

KWS acting Director General Professor Charles Musyoki said that the fallen heroes are true patriots who heeded the clarion call to serve a noble purpose higher than oneself; ordinary people who showed extraordinary resolve under extreme conditions.

A sober atmosphere rent the air during the reading out of fallen heroes' names killed in the line of duty. Some were shot by bandits and others were shot while on investigative duties. Several lost their lives during Problem Animal Control (PAC); 13 drowned; there were six fatal accidents and two deaths attributed to aircraft accidents.

There were two categories of living heroes; those recognized for rendering Invaluable Service and others feted under the Special Award category for outstanding performance in their core competency areas. Some of the living heroes earned promotions for their outstanding performance, with the First Lady personally attaching their new rank insignia to their uniforms.