

The southern ground hornbill
(*Bucorvus leadbeateri*).
Photo © Wang LiQiang

Mvundula Madzi:




Dr Julia Baum

The Ground Hornbill that caused War

Conservation Fables: Teaching us key values

PLCnetwork of the Southern Hemisphere is collaborating with Tongole Wilderness Lodge, Malawi, and the Tongole Foundation for the storytelling and publication of local conservation fables. Human behaviour is closely related to conservation fables. These are traditionally passed down from generation to generation within communities, often through quality family time, and are an invaluable cultural heritage. However, this knowledge is slowly being lost due to the difference in perceptions, priorities and attitudes between the older and younger members of societies.

The following conservation fable, “Mvundula Madzi: The Ground Hornbill that caused War”, will make the reader pause to reflect on the role animals and people play on the planet, especially as the global community needs to support transforming our life approaches toward developing conservation economies.

 PLCnetwork wants to preserve these thought-provoking fables in forms that will reach wider audiences and honour their origin. The project promotes both local and international cultural education as well as widespread awareness of and action for conservation themes.
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Each conservation fable illustrates a moral lesson meant to encourage reflection on human behaviour and norms toward the conservation of our planet and its ecosystems.





PLCnetwork member



Tongole Wilderness Lodge

The Tongole Wilderness Lodge has been a member of PLCnetwork since November 2020. This high-end lodge operates as a private concession within the 1 800 km² Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve in Malawi that is managed by African Parks. Tongole was formed in 2009 with the vision to create a stunning luxury destination with first-class accommodation, food, service and safari activities to delight guests. Tongole’s passion lies in using the benefits of their travel destination to help fund local projects focusing on education, conservation, health and economic empowerment within their communities in a rural part of Malawi.

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Photo © Wang LiQiang



The Riverside Suites.





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MvunduLa Madzi:

The Ground Hornbill That caused War Conservation Fable from Malawi

A long time ago there were two tribes living in different villages sharing a water hole. They believed that the gods of their ancestors gave them this water hole to safeguard against the years of drought and as a symbol of peace. Surrounding this water hole were long blades of grass, luscious flowers of every colour, and evergreen shrubs growing. It was also a home for abundant aquatic life that both villages agreed upon to never diminish.

Now, not every villager lived close to the water hole. Those who lived far away always waited for the rains to arrive. When the rain came, so would they, one by one, balancing plastic basins on their heads to collect plenty of clean water.

Many years passed with all villagers being proud to share clean water. Until one day, when a woman complained about mud found in the water hole. She told her village chief it looked as if people from the other village deliberately mixed the water up after fetching their own supplies.

A man was reporting the same problem in the other village.

After three days of this problem arising, no culprit had been found yet. Each village blamed the other, and so on and so forth. Finally, it was arranged that they would fight in order to settle the dispute. The losing village would be forbidden to fetch water from this water hole. Later that night, each village was busy forging fighting tools for the next day's battle.

Early in the morning, soldiers were chosen from both villages. While waiting for their chiefs to command them to start fighting, they saw an elderly man approaching them. The old man used to stay in one of the villages but had migrated far to the south to a new settlement for growing cassava crops. This old man heard about the water

problem and came to help, so he asked the chiefs to please listen to him before commanding soldiers to start the fight.

The old man simply requested two things:

Firstly, the villagers should postpone the fight to the next day;

Secondly, one brave young boy from each village should meet him at the water hole at four o'clock in the morning. All other villagers begrudgingly accepted and went home.

The two boys met the old man at sunrise. Ducking behind leafy bushes, they had a clear sight of the water hole. A few minutes passed and nothing happened. Just as the boys grew restless, they spotted it: A large ground hornbill bird landed at the water hole! It then started mixing up the water and made it very dirty. They watched the bird doing this for an hour and then saw it flying away.



The old man explained to the young boys that the hornbill is only mixing the water to create a layer of thick mud on the surface that limits the amount of oxygen in the water hole. When the fish use up the oxygen underwater, they start coming to the surface to try and access more oxygen. That is when the hornbill can catch the fish to feed his female partner and their offspring.

The young boys went home and explained their sighting. All villagers apologised to each other and agreed to build a wall dividing the water hole into two sections. They fenced and covered one section so that the hornbill would only catch fish from the other section while the villagers could fetch clean drinking water from their side of the water hole.



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Moral of the Fable

Find the cause before attempting to solve a problem, and avoid involving violence when trying to achieve a meaningful outcome.


Conservation Value of the Fable

While the story teaches love and patience, it reminds us that every living being is adapted to life in its own way. What secures survival of a species in the wild will not always be in alignment with human needs or opinions. Species and habitats need to be allowed their own space and behaviour, and resources need to be shared and protected for future.




Reasons for hornbill killings in parts of Africa:

- Some people believe that hornbills have heavy bodies because they land clumsily on tree branches. Thus, it is believed that mixing grated hornbill skull with any crop that is sold per kilogram enhances the crop’s weight, which will increase profits from sales.
- Some people think that a certain species of hornbill has a rotten anus. They kill them to confirm this.
- Some people believe that hornbills rub lion blood around their neck for the red colouring. They kill them to avoid being chased themselves once the lions are all dead.
- Some people think that the wattle of a hornbill attracts lightning. They chase them away from their homes so as to not be struck.

 The southern ground hornbill (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*) is one of two species of ground hornbill, which are both found solely within Africa, and is the largest species of hornbill worldwide.


Conservation status: Vulnerable (IUCN 3.1). ■


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