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HYAENA

We celebrate the hyaena

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While other iconic African wildlife species might be described as noble, majestic or beautiful, the lowly spotted hyaena enjoys no such compliments. Reviled and persecuted throughout history, associated with witchcraft, vilified in stories and even films such as *The Lion King*, the hyaena has long been yoked with all that is filthy, thieving and evil. However, as with so many stereotypes, the truth about hyaena is far more complimentary and fascinating than the fiction we have perpetuated about Africa's most successful, widespread and socially complex large carnivore.

Despite some resemblance to cats and dogs, hyaena are in their own distinct family. Unlike other large carnivores, hyaena form social units known as clans, with a rigidly enforced matriarchal hierarchy, meaning females,



PHOTO: GRANT ATKINSON

Spotted hyaena are social carnivores, and play is just one way that they maintain bonds. With older animals, or those close to maturity, play-fighting can be rough, though serious injuries seldom occur

and rank, rule hyaena society. Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of hyaena social systems is the pseudo-penis of the female, an elongation of the clitoris resulting in females looking like males, the function of which continues to elude scientists.

With one of the strongest bite forces and stomach acid of any large mammal, the spotted hyaena's ancestors likely evolved as 'bone-eaters', which is not hard to imagine when watching hyaena crunch bones at a carcass. But labelling them scavengers is inaccurate, for the hyaena is a

skilled predator that typically kills more than it scavenges.

As a result hyaena can exert a strong predatory influence on herbivores in addition to impacting co-occurring populations of wild dog, cheetah, lion and leopard through direct and indirect competition. In concert

hyaena play a key role in the structuring and function of African ecosystems and are therefore of considerable conservation significance.

Perhaps in part owing to their undeserved reputation, hyaena are not currently a species of concern, though populations are declining continent-wide, and overall little is known about their status. Nevertheless they are threatened by human conflict in the form of poisoning, shooting and trapping, as well as from poaching offtake of prey, poaching by-catch (where another species was the desired target) and habitat loss.

Like all large carnivores, hyaena need large tracts of connected habitat, and in the Zambezi region this connectivity often extends beyond country borders in the form of Transfrontier Conservation Areas such as KAZA.

This special issue of *Zambezi Traveller* celebrates one of Africa's most intriguing and maligned species, while detailing the ongoing conservation work across the region to help ensure that African nights continue to resonate with the whoop of the wandering hyaena for generations to come.

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