



Words and photos Mark Eveleigh

ON TV  
**SERENGETI**  
SIX-PART SERIES  
COMING SOON.  
BBC  
one

# On the outside LOOKING IN

Famous for its wildlife, the Serengeti is also home to a tribe that's struggling to adapt to life on the sidelines of the national park.

“When the Serengeti National Park was founded in 1951, we weren't allowed to be hunters anymore,” says William Chacha. “From that time onwards, we were considered poachers.”

Traditionally, Chacha's people, the Kuria tribe of northern Tanzania, hunted with poison-tipped arrows that could kill a buffalo within 10 minutes. “A few years ago, we learned an even faster way,” says the 42-year-old, who now works on the other side of the metaphorical fence as a wildlife spotter at the luxurious Bushtops Camp. “As far as I know, the Kuria are the only hunters who can kill a full-grown buffalo with just a sword.”

The buffalo is often considered the most dangerous animal in Africa, and even Maasai warriors, famous for spearing lions, avoid the ‘widow makers’ at all costs. Swords known as *umuhio* have been part of the Kuria armoury for generations but, traditionally, they were reserved for battles with the cattle-raiding Maasai, not hunting.

### Changing with the times

When hunting became illegal, poachers were forced to operate at night but their traditional bows were only accurate in daylight. You'd imagine that prowess with these weapons is an ancient skill that's unlikely to see much modern innovation but it seems, within the last six years, the availability of powerful flashlights has led to a revolution in bushmeat poaching in the northern Serengeti. ▶

Above: Daniel Mwita stands next to his wife and two of their many grandchildren. Left: a herd of buffalo grazing on the open plain of the Serengeti National Park.

James White/Daniel Delmon/Alamy

## Kuria guides have experience that even the most highly trained rangers find hard to match.

“We only recently realised that buffalo are easily killed with the *umuhio*,” says Chacha, who hunted in this way many times. “When a herd starts to run, we would chase them with a flashlight held low, so that it shines through an animal’s legs from behind. The buffalo slows down when it notices that something seems to be shimmering in front of it. This is the chance for the hunter to hamstring the beast with the *umuhio*, and then finish it off with a few more chops.”

Wilbebeest are harder to catch because, for some reason, they seem to be less puzzled by the light. It is possible to simply break their backs with the sword and Chacha has seen an experienced poaching boss – known in the Kuria language as an *omogechi* – kill 10 wildebeest as he sprinted through a confused herd, leaving his team to deal with his victims.

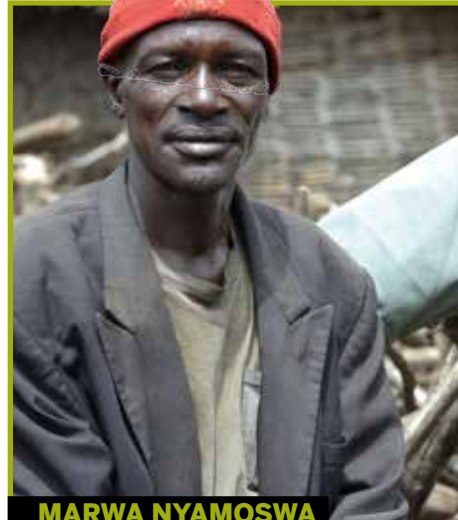
Once the head and innards have been removed and left for the hyenas, a strong man can carry a wildebeest that might still weigh about 90kg: “You put the front legs over your shoulders and tie the hind legs around your waist. It’s just like giving a piggyback,” Chacha recalls, “except that most of your body is inside the carcass.”

### Troubled past

As we sit, drinking steaming coffee, the thought of such carnage makes me shiver. We’re on our way to the Kuria community just outside the park’s remote north-western boundary, and my guide Amos Marwa (also a Kuria) has parked the Bushtops safari vehicle in the shade of a fortress-like ranger station. This was once considered the ‘badlands’ – in the 1980s and 90s, heavily armed ivory poachers (often financed by Somali warlords or Chinese businessmen) controlled much of this area.

“Occasionally our bushmeat hunters would stumble across ivory poachers armed with Kalashnikovs,” reveals Chacha. “I knew men who were executed just so that they couldn’t report what they’d seen.”

To the north of us, just 40km away, is the Kenyan border and to the east and south lies 14,763km<sup>2</sup> of Serengeti savannah. Thankfully the days of organised ivory poaching in northern Serengeti are over and an area that was once considered dangerous



**MARWA NYAMOSWA**

“When I got married in 1987, I had to pay 28 cows as a bride-price. Now cattle are rarer and the usual bride-price is about eight cows, which cost around US\$100 each. We lost our home because the area became a game reserve, and my wife, my mother and I walked about 200km, carrying our belongings. Finally, we built a new home here and raised some cows but this land is arid and it’s hard to grow crops.

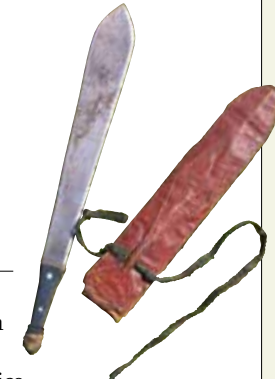


**ELIZABETH DANIEL MWITA**

“Life’s been better for my family since my son Charles became a ranger. When he got married, our last nine cows were used, so now the *boma* [corral] is empty. His wages bought us a concrete hut with an iron roof. We prefer the traditional Kuria houses we call *inumba* but there’s no building material left on the community land. The only wood and thatch is in the park. We were told tourists might come to visit us and perhaps buy something but I don’t think they’ll come when we all have tin roofs.”

Left: the Kuria say their grass is always grazed short and the animals inside the park have all the good

Right: a traditional *umuhio*. Bottom left: hyenas and vultures squabble over a wildebeest.



for tourists is gaining a reputation as one of the most wonderfully unspoiled wildlife hotspots in Africa. Apart from a zero-tolerance attitude to poaching, a key to this success is an increasing policy among many camps to hire staff from communities that have traditionally lived from poaching.

It’s a policy that pays dividends as far as tourists are concerned: the Kuria guides and spotters at Bushtops Camp, for example, have the sort of intimate bush experience that even the most highly trained rangers find hard to match, and the camp’s hospitality staff are clearly inspired to be playing an active part in the park’s future.

Leaving the park, Amos steers through scattered homesteads, across overgrazed pastures and scrubby maize fields to stop the vehicle finally beside a 10-foot-high thorn-scrub barricade. Every night, 50-year-old farmer Marwa Nyamoswa drives his precious cattle into this *boma* (corral) to protect them from lions and leopards. The rains have been erratic this year but the



This wildebeest’s injury may well be from an encounter with a *umuhio*.

## Serengeti in numbers

The astounding figures involved in the Serengeti’s migration and poaching.

**£35**

the average price for an entire wildebeest carcass in rural communities.

**3,000**

snares confiscated in 1969.

**17,000**

snares confiscated in 2018.

**3,500**

the total number of lions in the Serengeti-Ngorongoro ecosystem.

**250,000**

the estimated number of wildebeest that die during the migration.

**200,000**

the estimated number of game poached in Serengeti in a single year.

**2 million**

animals in the migration (wildebeest, zebra, gazelle and eland).



**DANIEL MWITA**

“The elders told us that the Kuria migrated south from Egypt – like our old enemies the Maasai – and we arrived in what is now Tanzania more than 200 years ago. We lived from farming and livestock, and hunting formed only part of our diet. We also gathered our medicine from the bush. Several years ago, I wrote all the old recipes I could remember in a book but it was stolen, and we are no longer allowed to go into the park even to collect herbs.”

## Snaring is the tip of the iceberg, because poachers have found other, more effective ways to ‘skin a cat’.

Africa’s conservation legends, reported what he called “the heaviest year of poaching ever recorded in the Serengeti, with 364 prisoners captured and nearly 3,000 wire snares confiscated.” Half a century later, the situation is worse than ever.

### Lucky escapes

“In 2018, anti-poaching patrols removed more than 17,000 snares from the park,” says Frankfurt Zoological Society’s Erik Winberg, who helps to administrate and support the national park’s anti-poaching teams. “We found 200 animals dead in snares – mostly wildebeest and zebra – but also saved 230 from slow strangulation.”

Winberg and I are nursing frosted bottles of Serengeti beer, while just room from the canvas-covered dining-room at Nimali camp a herd of wildebeest, thousands-strong, has

**Above: The Serengeti ecosystem, which includes Kenya’s Maasai Mara, is one of the best locations in Africa to spot leopards.**

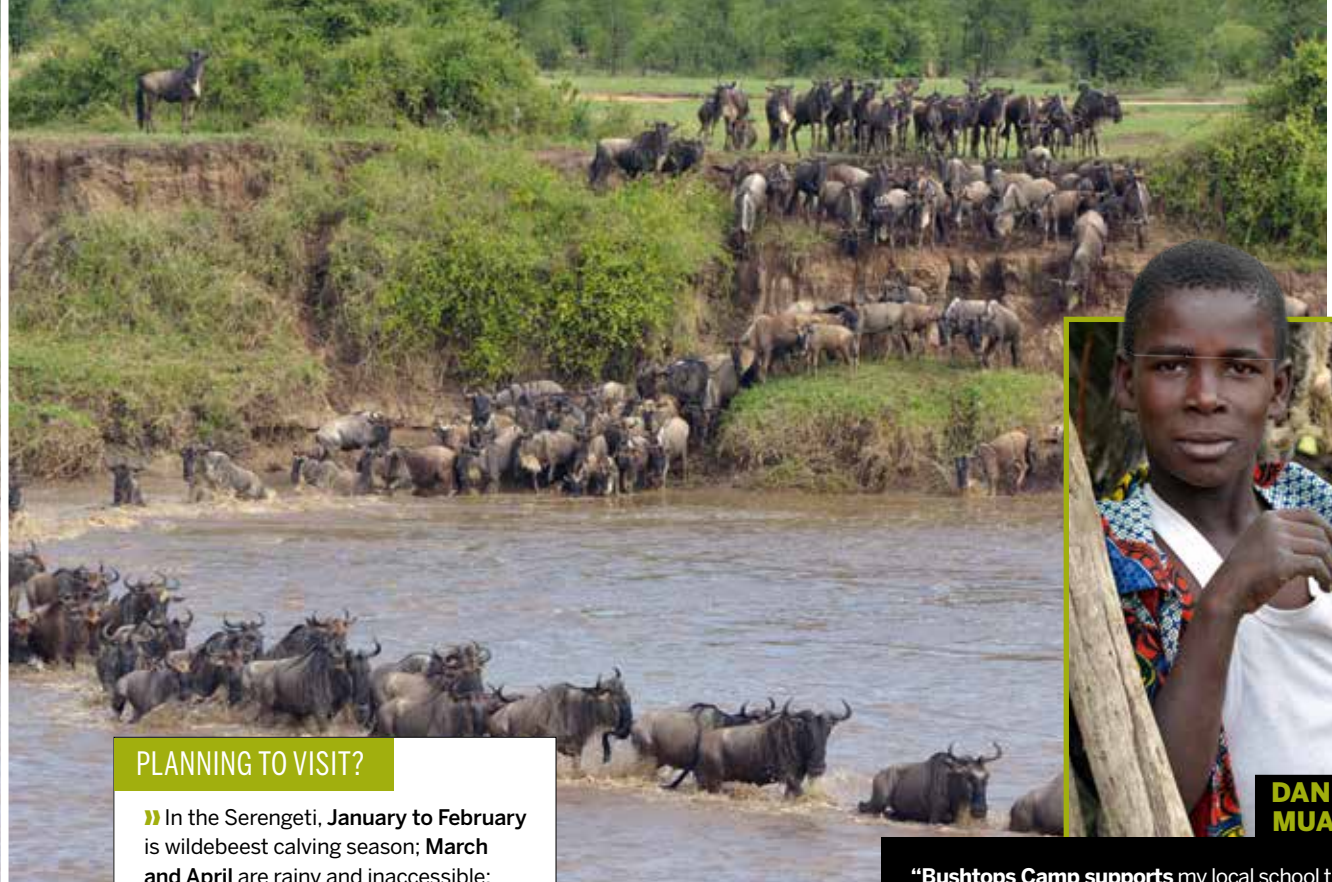
**Right: An impala ram maintains an alert stance in the dense bush, which could be the hiding place of any number of predators.**

been parading past all morning. It is hard to believe with wildebeest and zebra covering the central Serengeti plains that such havoc is being wreaked on the migrating herds, but the excellent *Stuarts’ Field Guide to National Parks and Game Reserves of East Africa* estimates that up to 200,000 game animals are being poached each year from the Serengeti ecosystem. Even lions are not immune to this particular threat.

The Kuria will kill lions for the mythical properties of their body parts. I’d met a poacher who had taken part in such a kill: “Fat from the heart and stomach is valuable to farmers who smear it on posts around their fields to deter elephants,” he said. “Healers say that you mix that fat with honey and herbs to cure tuberculosis.”



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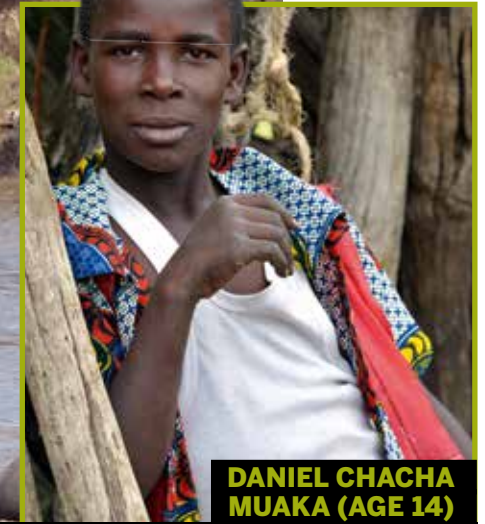


### PLANNING TO VISIT?

» In the Serengeti, January to February is wildebeest calving season; March and April are rainy and inaccessible; June to October are dry months when wildlife congregates around waterholes and the migration heads north; November to December is a good time to catch the return journey south.

» Safari operators in the Serengeti that employ local people as guides include Serengeti Bushtops ([bushtopscamps.com/serengeti](http://bushtopscamps.com/serengeti)), which offers luxury tented accommodation and game drives with a ranger and a Kuria spotter; and Nimali Central Serengeti ([nimaliafrica.com](http://nimaliafrica.com)), which offers full-board tented accommodation in the central Serengeti.

**Above: several hundred wildebeest make the perilous crossing of the Mara River, just a minor sideshow of one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on Earth.**



**DANIEL CHACHA MUAKA (AGE 14)**

“Bushtops Camp supports my local school through donations from guests. I’d like to be a teacher. Life is hard for a farmer and dangerous for a hunter. It’d be fun to work with tourists but, last year, the authorities put new restrictions on park entrance [aimed at penalising camps outside the park] and now it is also hard for visitors in the park to come out on a day trip. When we had visitors, I enjoyed practising English, but it’s been a year since the last [white person] came to our village.”

other clan areas that provided reserves, of sorts, for buffalo, leopard, elephant and many other species. It was a sort of conservation policy that ensured that it was impossible for everyone to hunt everything.”

Shooting with anything but a camera is now banned in the Serengeti, but snaring is taking an even greater toll on the wildlife. And, according to some, snaring is only the tip of the iceberg because the poachers have found these other, more effective ways to ‘skin a cat’ or slaughter a buffalo.

### Caught in a trap

“Snaring is too risky,” an experienced Kuria poacher told me. “A sword is better.” I avoided pointing out the irony in implying that tackling one of the ‘big five’ with a sword could ever be a safe bet. “You have to check snares regularly,” he explained, “otherwise hyenas will get the meat. The rangers can simply wait for you and use your own snares to trap you.”

Now, much of the poaching in the Kuria region of the park is done with torches and *umuhio* swords. Nobody is sure when the idea of hunting with flashlights originated but, in 1958, conservationist Bernhard Grzimek reported phenomenal success in catching gazelle (for collaring) by flashlight. His bestselling book *The Serengeti Shall Not*

*Die* described how the researchers caught 20 gazelles by hand in one night. Decades passed before even better flashlights found their way into the hands of poachers but it seems that the Kuria have shone a new light on their ancient buffalo-hunting strategies.

With communities growing around the park boundaries and pressure building for more grazing land, it looks like the Serengeti might be heading for an era of almost insurmountable problems unless neighbouring communities are given a part to play in the park’s preservation.

“We hire ex-poachers because not only do they offer ideal support for the anti-poaching rangers but, by hiring them, we’re also taking prodigious wildlife killers out of circulation,” explains Winberg. “The camps and safari operators in the Serengeti need to do the same, rather than importing staff from the towns. The survival of a national park depends on its perceived importance to the communities that live around its boundaries.”



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**FIND OUT MORE** Details of desnaring projects in the Serengeti: [fzs.org](http://fzs.org)