

# Cultural Keystone Species

A case study of the Inclusive Conservation Initiative in northern Kenya

Global support for biocultural conservation is growing with high profile commitments to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPs and LCs) in international conservation agendas and agreements (e.g. COP15 and COP26). The conservation of cultural keystone species – or, culturally important species – is essential to biocultural conservation; yet knowledge of how to conserve cultural keystone species in ways that are both just and sustainable remains limited in the literature. This study seeks to understand approaches and challenges of conserving culturally significant species among pastoralist communities in northern Kenya.

## WHAT ARE CULTURAL KEYSTONE SPECIES?

Cultural keystone species are those that “shape in a major way the cultural identity of a people, as reflected in the fundamental roles these species have in diet, materials, medicine, and/or spiritual practices” (Garibaldi and Turner 2004).

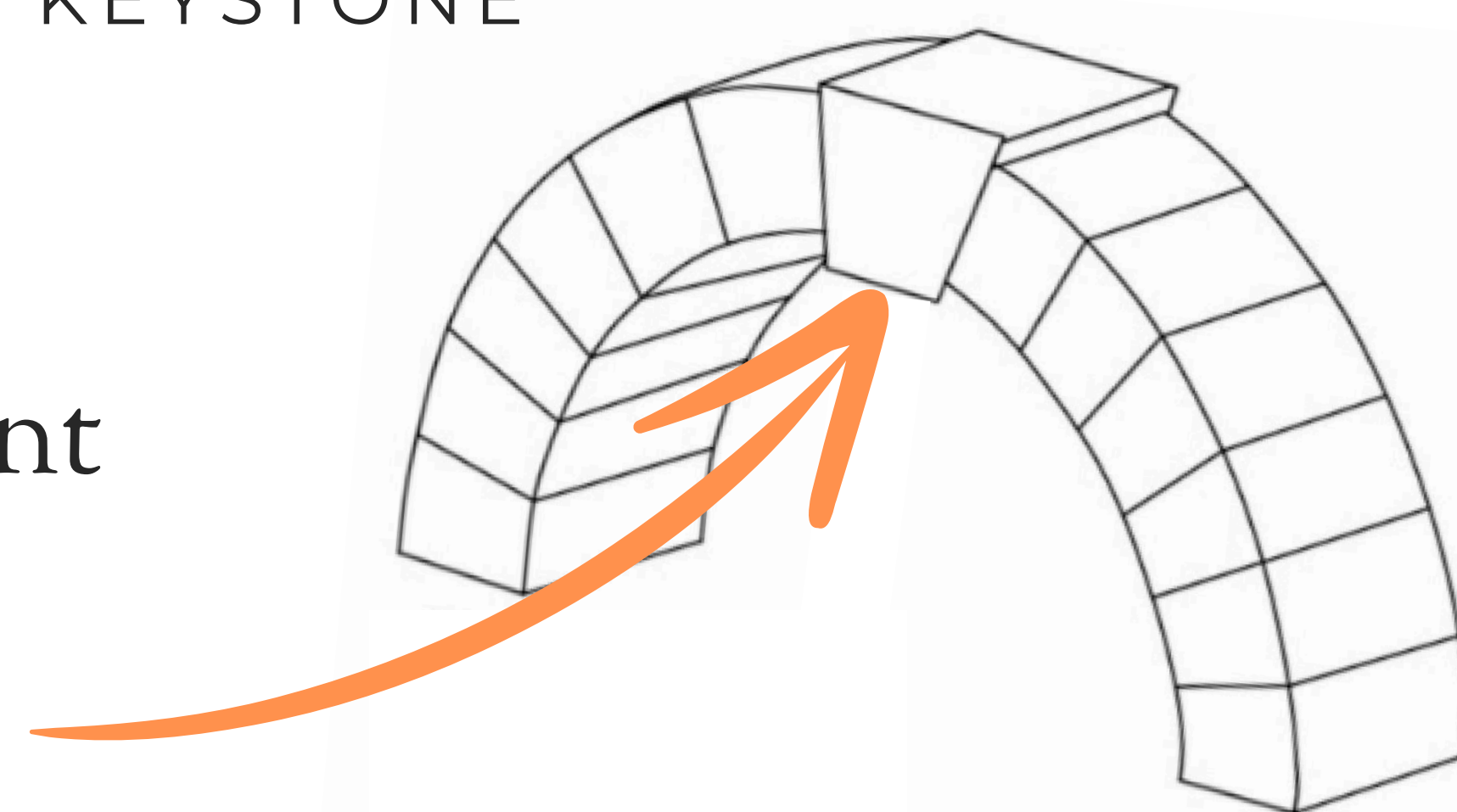
## WHY FOCUS ON CULTURAL KEYSTONE SPECIES?

- More holistic conservation action that supports the cultural, ecological, livelihood, spiritual, etc., needs of IPs and LCs
- Greater alignment between conservation agendas and approaches and the values of IPs and LCs
- Support for a wider diversity of ecosystem services
- Protection of non-/less- charismatic species that capture the bulk of funding
- Higher levels of bio (cultural) diversity

FIGURE 1. THE CULTURAL KEYSTONE SPECIES METAPHOR

### “KEystone”

An essential component upon which an entire structure depends



## METHODOLOGY

24 GROUP INTERVIEWS with  
64 PARTICIPANTS in  
LAIKIPIA, SAMBURU, and ISIOLO

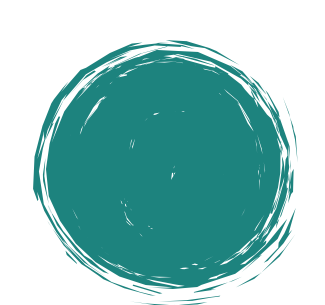
## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

### CULTURAL KEYSTONE SPECIES

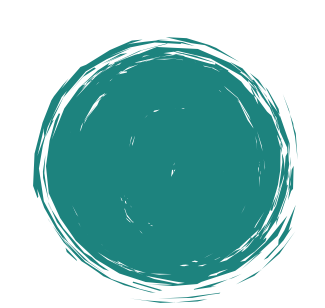
- Cultural keystone species commonly mentioned:
  - Oltepes (vachellia tortilis), oloirien (rhus natalensis), oreteti (ficus thonningii)
  - Enkiteng (cattle), enker (sheep), olmaalo (lesser kudu), esidai (ostrich), oltome (elephant), lion (orng’atuny)
- Many of the species mentioned by pastoralist communities are not prioritised in mainstream conservation agendas or receive significant conservation funding (e.g. herbs and trees, cattle and sheep, lesser kudu and ostrich)
- Plants (i.e. trees, shrubs, herbs) are mentioned more often and in greater diversity than animals

By way of example, this poster only depicts Maa words and phrases

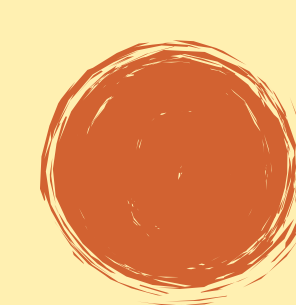
### FURTHER RESEARCH AND ACTION



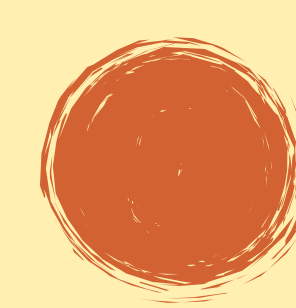
RESEARCH: What specific benefits to cultural keystone species offer ecologically, socially, culturally



RESEARCH: Could efforts to protect one cultural keystone species have trade-offs for other species?



ACTION: Cultural keystone species should be included in management plans at all levels



ACTION: Demo projects should be developed to profile and better understand cultural keystone species conservation

### RELEVANT LITERATURE

Garibaldi, Ann, and Nancy Turner. "Cultural keystone species: implications for ecological conservation and restoration." *Ecology and society* 9, no. 3 (2004); Reyes-García, Victoria, Rodrigo Cámara-Leret, Benjamin S. Halpern, Casey O'hara, Delphine Renard, Noelia Zafra-Calvo, and Sandra Díaz. "Biocultural vulnerability exposes threats of culturally important species." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 2 (2023): e2217303120; Mattalia, Giulia, Alex McAlvay, Irene Teixidor-Toneu, Jessica Lukawiecki, Faisal Moola, Zemedu Asfaw, Rodrigo Cámara-Leret et al. "Cultural keystone species as a tool for biocultural stewardship. A global review." *People and Nature* (2024).