

## Fort Wayne Children's Zoo

# African Journey Wild Week

## Background Information on the African Savannah

Africa is a vast and varied continent. About 50 nations coexist on a landmass that spans both the northern and southern hemispheres. The climate ranges from the dry, dune-covered Sahara Desert in the north to the dense jungles of central Africa. One thousand languages are spoken and a myriad of cultural traditions are maintained by the 3,000 ethnic groups of this continent. Africa is home to a huge variety of fascinating wildlife, from chimpanzees to zebras.

The information on these pages will provide background information on the habitats, animals, and cultures of East Africa for your school's African Journey *Wild Week*.



*The African Savannah*

### East Africa's Grasslands

Grasslands cover about one-quarter of the Earth's surface. Grasslands are so familiar that we may not realize that they are specialized ecosystems. Much of eastern Africa is covered by tropical grasslands called *savannahs*. Savannahs are regions where grasses are naturally the most abundant form of vegetation.

Like all grassland regions, Africa's savannahs do not receive enough rainfall throughout the year to support large numbers of trees. Trees that do grow on the savannah

tend to be drought- and fire-resistant species. They are sparsely scattered among the grasses, and grow more densely along stream and riverbanks, where water is more abundant.

Grasses survive well in the dry climate and poor soils of the savannahs. Their deep roots seek water while helping to hold moisture in the soil. Because of their narrow, bladelike shape, the leaves lose very little moisture through transpiration. The seeds of many grasses can lie dormant through long dry spells, then germinate when the rains finally come.

Grasslands around the world help provide people with food and other products. Corn, wheat, oats, rice, and millet are members of the grass family, and were all originally cultivated from wild grasses. Domestic cattle, sheep, and horses are all descended from wild grassland animals.

### An Ecosystem in Balance

As a natural habitat, the savannah provides for the needs of many kinds of animals. Large hoofed animals, like the wildebeest and zebras, graze on the tender grasses. Other animals, such as giraffes and gazelles, browse on trees and shrubs. Small mammals like rodents eat plants and insects and dwell in

underground burrows. Predators and scavengers feed on the plant-eating animals to keep the ecosystem in balance.

The African savannah is the largest grassland in the world. It covers about 5 million square miles -- nearly half the continent of Africa. Most African countries contain at least some savannah-type lands. The few countries that have no savannah are in the desert-covered northern part of Africa, and along the equator, where there are large areas of rain forest.

There are no cold and warm seasons on the African savannah. Instead, the year is divided into one or two rainy seasons alternating with one or two dry seasons. It is warm all year long.

During the rainy season, most parts of the savannah receive about 30 inches of rain. Some of the wettest areas may get 60 inches of rain. The heavy rains cause the grasses to sprout and grow, turning the land lush and green. The land becomes brown and parched during the dry season, which lasts most of the year. Almost no rain falls, and the dry grass and brush easily ignite during lightning storms that precede the returning rains.

Fires are part of the natural life cycle of the savannah. Fires clear away the dead, matted grass and allow new grass to sprout in its place. Nutrients are quickly released into the soil, making them available to the new grasses. Trees are destroyed, thus preventing them from overtaking the grasslands. Thanks to their underground stems (called rhizomes) and deep roots, the savannah grasses can regenerate and send up new shoots.

## **Wildlife of the African Savannah**

The world's greatest number and greatest diversity of large plant-eating animals live together on the African savannah -- alongside some of Earth's most spectacular predators.

Great herds of wildebeest mingle with zebras, gazelles, and ostrich on the savannah. These grazers are hunted by lions, cheetahs, leopards, and wild dogs. Three of the world's largest animals live on the savannah: giraffes (which can reach heights of 17 feet), rhinoceroses (which can weigh up to 5,000 pounds), and elephants (which are the largest of all land animals, weighing 13,000 pounds or more). Each of these creatures reaches their enormous size by eating only leaves, twigs, and other plants.

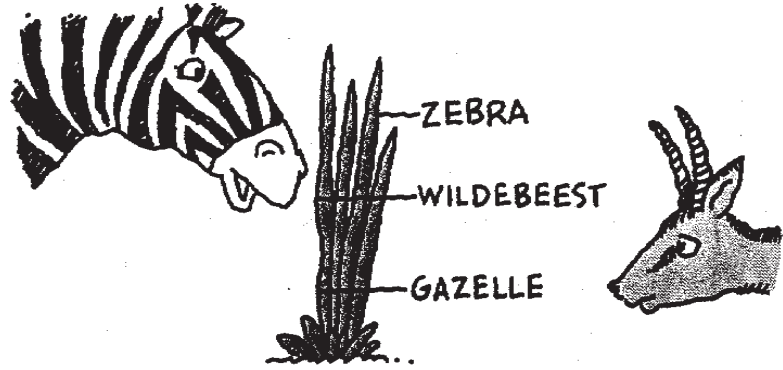
How can so many wild animals live on the African savannah, feeding mostly on grass? The grazing and browsing of African animals is closely tied to the well-being of the savannah. Grass grows from the base of the stem, not the top. As long as animals are feeding on the grass, the grass continues to grow new shoots, which are nutritious food for animals. If few animals eat the grass, it matures into full flower, which is not as edible. As the grazing animals eat the grass, it is actually stimulated and grows healthier.

Animals on the savannah are always on the move. After they have eaten in one area of the savannah, they move on to another area. This gives the grass time to recover, so the grass is never overgrazed.

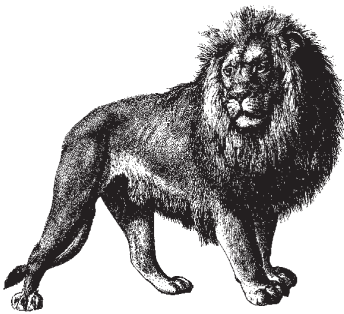
Different animals eat different parts of the same grass plant. For example, the zebra may eat the rough tops of the grass; the wildebeest eats the tender middle section, and the gazelle eats the leaf tips at the

base of the stems.

Many savannah animals live in large groups. Grass-eating animals like wildebeest and zebra live in herds. The animals are safer in a group, because predators may have a difficult time selecting a target from the group. Young animals are sheltered by the stronger members of the herd. While the group is grazing, some members can look out for danger.



Predators like lions hunt more successfully in groups. They work together to create diversions and ambushes, and share a feast among the entire group, called a pride.



Scavengers like vultures are the cleanup crew of the savannah. They feed on anything left by the hunters, completing the cycle of birth and death on the African savannah.

## People of East Africa

### Lion

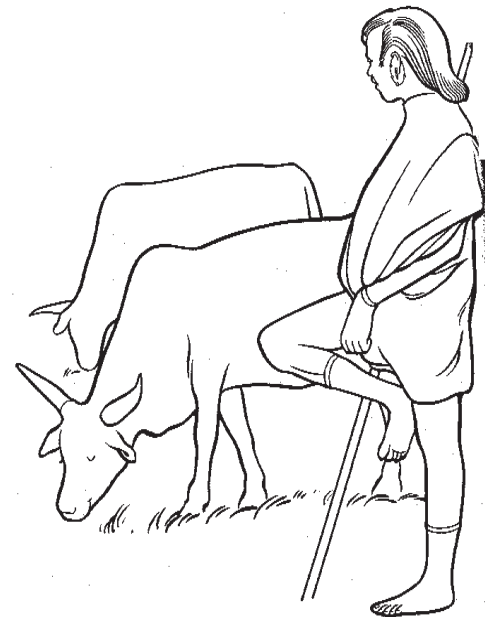
A variety of people inhabit east Africa, ranging from rural cultures where food, religion, dress, tribal roles, and daily life have remained unchanged for centuries, to modern cities with skyscrapers, computers, western dress, and bustling commerce.

A large east African city such as Nairobi, Kenya or Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, is a major urban center.

Here, one would find government offices, foreign embassies, and upscale shopping centers. Businessmen might wear suits and ties; women dress in skirts and blouses.

These large cities typically contain sprawling open markets, where one can purchase everything from a live chicken to exotic fruits and vegetables. These cities usually attract large numbers of people from the countryside hoping for a job that will better their family's life.

In contrast to the city dwellers, many African people live a traditional lifestyle. The Masai are one such group. They are nomadic to provide grazing and water for their cattle. The cattle provide the Masai with milk, blood, and meat to eat, leather for clothing, and dung to seal their houses. The Masai construct small clusters of huts, called *kraals* or *bo-mas*, from sticks and seal them with cow dung. The kraals also include an enclosure for the cattle. Masai social life is rigidly structured. Rites of passage into adulthood are important events in the life of Masai children. About 250,000 Masai currently live in southern Kenya and northern



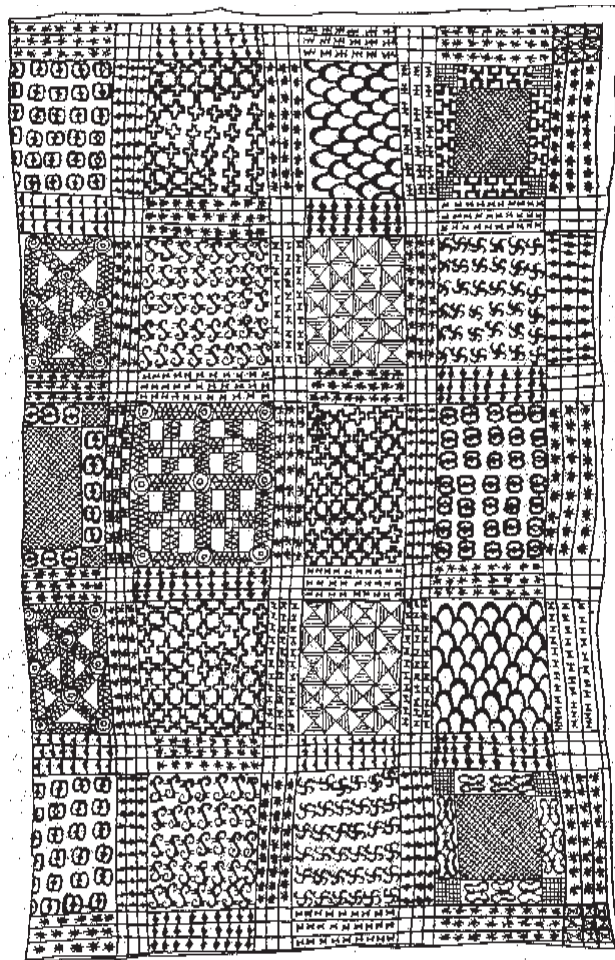
Masai Herdsman

Tanzania.

Most Africans are neither nomads nor city-dwellers. Rather, they are subsistence farmers – raising just enough crops and livestock to feed their families. Life centers around their extended family and their village. Children attend school, play, and assist with farm chores.

Swahili is among the few languages that are widely spoken in east Africa. Each of the several hundred ethnic groups may have its own language. Many east Africans are multilingual, speaking their native language at home, and Swahili or another widely spoken language at school or in the workplace.

Cultural activities flourish in Africa, and they center on family and ethnic groups. Art, music, dance, and storytelling reinforce existing traditions and ensure their passage to the next generation.



*Adinkre Cloth designed by the Akan people of Africa. Symbols on the cloth represent facets of Akan culture, such as God, drum, war horn, crocodile, and death. The symbols are carved in wood, dipped in dye, and stamped repeatedly on the fabric.*