

Pick your spots: Chance encounter leads MSU professor to career studying hyenas

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Spotted hyenas on the Masai Mara, Kenya, are excellent mothers, says Michigan State University zoology professor Kay Holekamp. It is just that their mothering techniques may be different from humans'. / Ellen Creager/Detroit Free Press



By **Ellen Creager**
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Writer

Zoologist Kay Holekamp has spent her life with a bunch of hyenas.

She has loved every minute of the journey.

She doesn't mind when students or strangers call her "the hyena lady."

"I'm fine with it," says the Michigan State distinguished professor. She'd rather be studying the hyena than the glamorous lion, chimpanzee or other "celebrity mega fauna," as she calls them. "Hyenas appear to break so many of the basic rules of mammalian biology," she says, "that it makes them really interesting."

Hyenas aren't regal like lions or graceful like dolphins. In fact, they are best known as the sneaky, nasty villains in the Disney film "The Lion King." Did that movie hurt the hyena's reputation?

"Well, it couldn't sink much lower," Holekamp says, laughing.

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Michigan State University professor Dr. Kay Holekamp first started studying spotted hyenas in Kenya in 1988 and has continued working on a long-term field study. / Ryan Garza/Detroit Free Press

7 Tips from Hyena Moms

You may not want to emulate the mothering techniques of the spotted hyena, but you have to admit they work for her:

1. **Bite your baby sister to death if you want to.** (If there are two or three pups, the most aggressive one gets more milk if he or she injures, kills or intimidates siblings).
2. **Gulp your dinner.** (Like lions, spotted hyenas are major predators and excellent hunters who can bag a zebra and chow it down in 15 minutes. They don't just eat carrion).
3. **Girls rule, boys drool.** (Females are aggressively dominant in hyena society and live their whole lives in the same clan of other females and their pups. Being a male isn't much fun).
4. **It's not who you are, it's who your mother is:** (hyenas are class-conscious — a mother's high status in the clan means their pups also will have high status. There is no such thing as Horatio Alger hyenas).
5. **Reserve giggles and laughs for when you are agitated or angry.** (Yes, it sounds unnervingly like human laughter).
6. **Don't throw away yucky, spoiled food — eat it** (Hyenas are nearly immune to diseases and toxins, even anthrax; that's something scientists cannot explain but are trying to figure out).
7. **Looks aren't everything.** (hyenas are among the least attractive mammals, but they don't care. They are super successful. P.S.: They are neither cats nor dogs — their closest relatives are the mongoose, meerkat and civet).

Did you know?

Fewer than 25% of the nation's science, math, technology, engineering jobs are held by women, according to the Association for Women in Science, with most female scientists working for the government rather than universities or business. Among biologists, of which zoology is a part, however, there have been strides in the past decade. Half of the nation's biological scientists were women in 2012 as compared with just 44% in 2002, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

As a young scientist Holekamp, now 62, studied ground squirrels. Then one day a colleague at lunch suggested that hyenas should be studied in the wild — and she should be the one to do it.

That chance encounter changed the entire direction of her career, and her life. And it's a lesson to women, career experts say: Don't be so rigid in your career plans that you fail to recognize something even better that comes along.

“Of course, chance favors the well-prepared,” says Mark Savickas, editor of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. But beyond that, he says, careers indeed are enhanced by what academics call “planned happenstance,” or “affordances” and what a lay person might call serendipity.

Career theorist John Krumboltz of Stanford's “planned happenstance” theory holds that chance and unplanned events are inevitable and desirable in careers, and the more you put yourself out into the world, the more likely unexpected career opportunities will appear — like a chance to go to Africa to study the spotted hyena.

Starting at the zoo

Holekamp, grew up in Town and Country, Mo., an upscale St. Louis suburb. As a senior at the private John Burroughs High School, she was encouraged to get a temporary job for a class project.

“So I got a job as a keeper at the St. Louis Zoo,” she says. “I worked in the children's zoo there. I worked with mammals, and there was a nursery component — infants whose mothers had rejected them, and they were the smaller mammals like bush babies and kinkajous.”

Bush babies? Kinkajous? Holekamp realized the world was full of odd mammals that may not get a lot of media attention but which deserved scientific study.

She kept working at the zoo at \$1.25 an hour. But she aimed higher, because “I didn't want to spend my life shoveling manure.”

She graduated from Smith College in



A baby spotted hyena has soft black fur and only later gets its spots and rough coat. MSU zoology professor Kay Holekamp, one of the world's top authorities on the spotted hyena, holds the baby at a U-C Berkley research center recently. / Kay E. Holekamp Lab

Northampton, Mass., in biology and psychology, interested in the intersection of those two topics — the social workings of the animal kingdom. Then a friend's father gave her the opportunity to work in the Colombian Amazon.

"He brought live animals for research from Leticia, Colombia, to the United States, and he also owned a 12-room hotel," recalls Holekamp. She went to Colombia to be a tour guide, but she also had an ulterior motive — to catch some murine opossums, a mouselike animal she'd been studying back at Smith.

"I was so naive. I didn't even see one," she says. But her exposure to the vibrant natural world of South America inspired her. She continued to the University of California, Berkley for a PhD on the behavioral ecology

of Belding's ground squirrels, which are tiny cousins of groundhogs.

Then, a turning point. When Berkley got a clan of hyenas for study, a colleague mentioned to Holekamp that the animals were behaving differently in captivity and someone really needed to study them in the wild, "and he thought it should be me," she says.

So she applied for a grant and moved to Kenya. Her work gained notice, and in 1991, she was offered a position at Michigan State University, where she now is distinguished professor of zoology.

Holekamp once spent five years straight — 1988 to 1993 — living in a tent in the middle of Kenya's Masai Mara bush with the hyenas. Six hours by vehicle from civilization, she and a colleague had no phone, no fresh vegetables and little contact with others. At night, lions, hyenas, hippos and elephants prowled past the tent, leaving their footprints for her to see in the morning. How did she stay safe?

"A colleague told me to make noise when I walked," she says. She is not kidding — the Kenyan government prohibited researchers from carrying weapons. Needless to say, her Missouri parents were not thrilled by her remote adventures, although they visited her once in 1989, bumping over the roads to their daughter's remote encampment.

Holekamp, whose hobbies include sailing and scuba diving, lives with her partner Laura Smale, who also is a professor at MSU. They have two dogs.

Today, the St. Louis native still spends part of each year, from April to July, in Kenya, supervising students who are part of MSU's [Kay E. Holekamp Lab](#), which has a field office there and the main office back in East Lansing. The Okemos-based professor often encourages young women considering science to follow their dreams. But even she has to admit that a life with hyenas is not

exactly a mainstream career path.

Hyena tendencies

Over the years, Holekamp has amassed eight generations of data on hyena families of the Masai Mara. She and her students have followed hundreds of mothers and cubs, witnessing the social dominance of some females, the odd and astonishing society of the hyenas, their intelligence and their fierceness.

She spends quite a lot of time explaining to others things that are and are not true about hyenas. They don't just eat dead things. They aren't hermaphrodites. They don't eat lions. They almost never get sick, even from things that would kill other animals.

These days, she is writing a book about her early experiences in Kenya, plus her latest scientific monograph about the evolutionary ecology of hyenas. The soft-spoken Holekamp is somewhat of a celebrity, too. She has been featured in Smithsonian Magazine and on the BBC. She won a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship in 2006.

"There are literally no other studies like hers," says colleague Dorothy Cheney, a biology professor at the University of Pennsylvania who studies the social behavior of baboons in Botswana. "She has had the patience and fortitude to persevere with her long-term research in both a difficult funding environment and some exasperating political conditions."

The good thing is, in Holekamp's seventh decade she finds that hyenas still fascinate her. Yes, the bureaucracy and expense of research in Kenya is worse than it used to be, "and it is definitely more dangerous" in parts of the country. But she never tires of the endless Masai Mara. And she is still curious.

"To me, one interesting problem opens up a new one, and they are such interesting animals to work on, and it's been a pleasure for me to work on it with the wonderful students," the scientist says.

Anything else? "Yes. People should definitely go to the zoo or better yet, go to Africa."

—Ellen Creager with Kay Holekamp

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