

1

2

3

4

**Infanticide by females is a leading source of juvenile mortality in a large**

5

**social carnivore**

6

7

Ally K Brown<sup>1</sup>, Kay E Holekamp<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Eli D Strauss<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>

8

9

10 <sup>1</sup>Department of Integrative Biology, Michigan State University, East Lansing,

11 Michigan

12 <sup>2</sup>Program in Ecology, Evolutionary Biology, and Behavior, Michigan State

13 University, East Lansing, Michigan

14 <sup>3</sup>BEACON Center for the Study of Evolution in Action, Michigan State University,

15 East Lansing, Michigan

16 <sup>4</sup>School of Biological Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln,

17 Nebraska

18

19

20 **Abstract**

21           Infanticide, or the killing of offspring by a conspecific, occurs in many animal  
22 species. Although both males and females can kill infants, sexually selected infanticide  
23 by males has been the primary focus in studies of infanticide. In contrast, the prevalence  
24 and function of infanticide by females is less well understood. Here we use 30 years of  
25 data collected from several social groups studied in the Masai Mara National Reserve and  
26 Amboseli National Park in Kenya to describe the prevalence of, and explore functional  
27 hypotheses explaining, infanticide in the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*), a carnivore  
28 that lives in mixed-sex matrilineal groups structured by rigid dominance hierarchies.  
29 Hyenas breed year-round and raise their cubs in communal dens concurrently with other  
30 mothers from the same social group. We document cases of infanticide at the communal  
31 den and relate the observed patterns to hypothesized functions of infanticide. We find that  
32 infanticide is a significant source of mortality experienced by young juveniles. Victims  
33 were equally likely to be male or female, but in all observed cases the killers were adult  
34 females. Killers tended to be higher-ranking than the mothers of victims, and killers were  
35 sometimes aided by kin. Our results are most consistent with the hypothesis that  
36 infanticide by females in this species serves as a form of social competition among  
37 matrilines.

38

39 Key words: infanticide by females, matrilineal society, thanatology, female-female  
40 competition

41

## 42 **Introduction**

43           Infanticide is the killing of an individual's offspring by a conspecific, whether a  
44 direct relative or an unrelated member of the species (Hausfater & Hrdy, 1984). This  
45 phenomenon has been observed in both lab settings and the wild, and may be committed  
46 by either males or females (Agrell, Wolff, Ylönen, & Ylonen, 1998; Hrdy, 1979).  
47 Occurrences of infanticide are especially prominent in mammals, where it has been  
48 observed in over 100 species; however, this behavior has also been documented in birds,  
49 fish, and invertebrates (Agrell et al., 1998; Hausfater & Hrdy, 1984; Hrdy, 1979). In  
50 species where infanticide represents a common source of infant mortality, infant defense  
51 and avoidance of infanticidal individuals may function importantly in the social behavior  
52 of adults and juveniles (Balme & Hunter, 2013; Lowe, Hobaiter, & Newton-Fisher, 2018;  
53 Packer & Pusey, 1983a). However, because infanticide events occur infrequently and  
54 take place rapidly, it can be difficult to identify the circumstances under which they occur  
55 and to assess their importance; for example, in the late 1990s there was a debate in the  
56 literature over whether or not infanticide by male African lions (*Panthera leo*) occurred  
57 regularly during pride takeovers, which are rarely observed (Dagg, 1998; Packer, 2000;  
58 Silk & Stanford, 1999).

59           Hrdy (1979) introduced the first adaptive hypotheses regarding the evolution of  
60 infanticide, positing that infanticide functions to provide fitness-related benefits to  
61 infanticidal individuals (Agrell et al., 1998). Hypothesized functions of infanticide  
62 include the killing of conspecific offspring for food, to reduce intra-group competition for  
63 other resources, or as a means of increasing the killer's reproductive opportunities (Hrdy,

64 1979). This final hypothesis, known as the sexual selection hypothesis, is best supported  
65 in cases where infanticide is committed by males (Lukas & Huchard, 2014). In African  
66 lions, males kill cubs sired by other males to bring the mothers of those cubs back into  
67 estrus more quickly (Packer & Pusey, 1983b). The sexual selection hypothesis has also  
68 been supported in African leopards (*P. pardus*), where infanticide by males accounts for  
69 nearly half of all infant deaths (Balme & Hunter, 2013). In baboons (*Papio spp.*),  
70 infanticide as a mechanism of sexual selection has been well documented and accounts  
71 for anywhere from 2 to 70 percent of infant mortality depending on geographic location  
72 and demography (Alberts, 2018; Cheney et al., 2004). The sexual selection hypothesis is  
73 frequently invoked because it is easy to identify the fitness advantage accruing to males  
74 by killing infants sired by others, and because this type of infanticide can represent a  
75 significant mortality source, as seen in African leopards.

76 In contrast to infanticide by males, infanticide committed by females is less well  
77 studied, nor is it well explained by the sexual selection hypothesis; nevertheless,  
78 infanticide by females occurs in at least 89 mammalian species and can be a significant  
79 source of infant mortality (Lukas & Huchard, 2019). A recent phylogenetic study by  
80 Lukas & Huchard (2019) suggests that infanticide by females is often motivated by  
81 competition with other females, and that the contexts in which this competition occurs  
82 varies with social organization and ecology.

83 In cooperatively breeding species, infanticide by females is committed primarily  
84 by the dominant breeder and serves to increase the number of available helpers by  
85 preventing would-be breeders from reproducing. In studies of captive dingoes (*Canis*

86 *familiaris dingo*) and wild African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*), dominant females kill  
87 many cubs born to subordinate females, making infanticide the leading cause of infant  
88 mortality (Corbett, 2010; Creel & Creel, 1998). A study of meerkats (*Suricata suricatta*)  
89 found that infanticide by dominant breeding females was a common means of reducing  
90 future resource competition between pups (Clutton-Brock et al., 1998). In plural breeders  
91 with female philopatry, infanticide by females generally occurs in species where  
92 dominance hierarchies are influenced by nepotism (i.e., the ranks of daughters are  
93 influenced by the ranks of their mothers), and killers are typically lactating females of  
94 high social status (Lukas & Huchard, 2019). These findings offer a starting point for  
95 understanding the evolution of infanticide by females, but our knowledge remains limited  
96 by the available data on each species included in the Lukas & Huchard study. In some  
97 cases, patterns of infanticide in a species were inferred based on only one or a few  
98 observations, suggesting that more descriptive studies of infanticide by females are  
99 needed to better understand this behavior.

100       Here we use three decades of behavioral observations of spotted hyenas (*Crocuta*  
101 *crocuta*) to assess the prevalence and context of infanticide by females in a plural  
102 breeding species with female philopatry and nepotistic rank inheritance. We describe  
103 cases of infanticide as they occur in spotted hyenas, and assess the contribution of  
104 infanticide to cub mortality. Finally, we consider our observations in relation to two non-  
105 mutually exclusive hypotheses (Table 1) regarding the evolution of infanticide by female  
106 spotted hyenas suggested by the results obtained by Lukas and Huchard (2019). The  
107 exploitation hypothesis posits that infanticide by females in spotted hyenas functions as a

108 form of predation, with juvenile groupmates serving as a source of prey. This hypothesis  
109 predicts that infanticide should take place more frequently under conditions of low food  
110 availability, that the killer or offspring of the killer should primarily feed on the carcass,  
111 and that there should be no sex bias in the perpetrators or victims of infanticide. By  
112 contrast, the resource competition hypothesis posits that infanticide serves to reduce  
113 numbers of social allies available to other group-members, and is likely to occur  
114 primarily in species where kin play an important role in determining social status. As  
115 outlined by Lukas and Huchard, this hypothesis predicts that infanticide by high-ranking  
116 individuals against low-ranking individuals should be prevalent in spotted hyena societies  
117 because of their nepotistic dominance hierarchies. Additionally, this hypothesis predicts  
118 that the victims and perpetrators of infanticide should be biased towards the philopatric  
119 sex (females, in this instance), as they are the individuals that will be long-term  
120 competitors for social rank or resource access.

121

## 122 **Methods**

### 123 *Study Animals*

124 Spotted hyenas are large carnivores found widely across sub-Saharan Africa  
125 (Holekamp & Dloniak, 2010). Individuals reside in mixed-sex, groups, called “clans,”  
126 each of which contains multiple matrilineal kin groups and is structured by a linear  
127 dominance hierarchy (Frank, 1986). Spotted hyenas are polygynandrous and breed year-  
128 round. Males disperse during the years after reproductive maturity, which occurs at  
129 around 24 months of age (Holekamp et al., 2012). Females are philopatric and usually

130 mate with immigrant males (Engh et al., 2002). Females give birth to one or two cubs in  
131 an isolated natal den, where they are maintained for a few weeks before being moved to  
132 the clan's communal den. The communal den may contain up to 31 cubs at any given  
133 time (Johnson-Ulrich & Holekamp, 2020), and cubs typically remain in or around the den  
134 until they are approximately nine months of age (Holekamp et al., 1997). These cubs,  
135 which belong to several different mothers, are often left unattended during much of the  
136 day while the mothers are away. Spotted hyena societies are characterized by fission-  
137 fusion dynamics where individuals associate in subgroups that change composition  
138 throughout the day (Smith et al., 2008). Both mothers and other groupmates visit the  
139 communal den regularly, either alone or with others. Starting at 1-2 months of age, cubs  
140 emerge from the den to socialize when their mothers are present and, as they get older,  
141 when their mothers are absent.

#### 142 *Study Area*

143 Data presented here were collected from two study areas in Kenya near the  
144 Tanzanian border. Most observations come from eight clans in the Masai Mara National  
145 Reserve (MMNR, 1510 km<sup>2</sup>), a savanna ecosystem in southwestern Kenya that is  
146 contiguous with the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania and grazed year-round by  
147 multiple herbivore species (Holekamp et al., 1997). The greater Serengeti ecosystem  
148 (including the MMNR) contains millions of migratory ungulates that seasonally visit the  
149 MMNR, with their numbers peaking there between June and September (Smith,  
150 Kolowski, Graham, Dawes, & Holekamp, 2008). Data were collected in MMNR from  
151 1988 to 2018; we observed one clan for the entire study period, and seven other clans

152 during subsets of that period. Our second study area was in Amboseli National Park  
153 (ANP, 392 km<sup>2</sup>), which is located in southeastern Kenya; data were collected from two  
154 clans in ANP from 2003 to 2005 (Watts, Scribner, Garcia, & Holekamp, 2011).

155 For describing cases of infanticide and their frequency, we use data from all ten  
156 clans of spotted hyenas located in both study areas to capture the full breadth of  
157 circumstances under which infanticide occurs. For tests of hypotheses regarding the  
158 function of infanticide in spotted hyenas, we limited the dataset to only our six most well-  
159 studied clans of hyenas in the MMNR. We elected to use this restricted dataset for  
160 exploring the function of infanticide because these clans live under similar ecological  
161 conditions, because all covariate data was available for these clans, and because these  
162 clans account for the majority of our data (86.7% of juvenile mortality from the larger  
163 dataset).

#### 164 *Data Collection and Analysis*

165 Data were collected during twice-daily observation periods that took place around  
166 dawn and dusk. Observers used vehicles as mobile blinds to find and observe hyenas.  
167 Scan sampling (Altmann, 1974) was used to collect demographic data. Maternity was  
168 determined based on nursing associations and genotyping. Data documenting specific  
169 types of social interactions, including observed infanticide events, were collected using  
170 all-occurrence sampling (Altmann, 1974). Individual hyenas were identified by their  
171 unique spot patterns, and the sexes of juveniles were determined based on the dimorphic  
172 morphology of the erect phallus. Juvenile age was determined (to  $\pm 1$  week) based on  
173 appearance when first seen. Social ranks of adult females were determined based on the



174 outcomes of aggressive interactions as described elsewhere (Strauss, 2019; Strauss &  
175 Holekamp, 2019a). In three recent cases of infanticide, ranks from the prior year were  
176 used to determine ranks of mother or infant-killer. All statistical analysis and  
177 visualization was done using the statistical software environment, R (R Development  
178 Core Team, 2018).

### 179 *Juvenile mortality*

180 We assessed various causes of mortality among juveniles less than 1 year of age.  
181 In our 30 years of data, the most common sources of mortality for young juveniles were  
182 starvation, humans, lions, flooded dens, illness, siblicide, and infanticide (n = 99 cases  
183 with known mortality sources). Starvation was identified in cases where juveniles were  
184 observed to be becoming progressively more gaunt before they vanished, or in cases  
185 where dead juveniles were found in an emaciated state. Death by humans was assigned  
186 when there was a clear anthropogenic cause of the mortality; for example, hit by a car,  
187 speared, poisoned, etc. Death by lions was either observed or could be inferred based on  
188 the deep, widely spaced puncture wounds typically inflicted during lion attacks. Death  
189 due to flooded dens was determined when we arrived at a den to find it flooded and we  
190 knew that juveniles had been residing in the den at the time that were never seen again.  
191 Death by illness was assessed based on whether cubs exhibited disease symptoms before  
192 they disappeared (e.g., canine distemper).

193 We identified 21 cases of infanticide, divided into three categories based on the  
194 certainty with which we could determine infanticide as the cause of death. In 12 cases of  
195 ‘observed’ infanticide, a cub was observed being killed by another hyena or dying as a

196 result of having its skull recently crushed by another hyena (Figure 1). Additionally, we  
197 identified five ‘presumed’ cases of infanticide where observers arrived at the den to find a  
198 cub that had been killed recently with its skull crushed. We used skull crushing as  
199 diagnostic of infanticide because 1) it was directly seen in all of the ‘observed’ cases of  
200 infanticide, 2) it does not occur during death by siblicide, and 3) it is a common predation  
201 strategy used by hyenas on small prey (Holekamp et al. unpublished data). Finally, we  
202 identified four ‘likely’ cases of infanticide, where no information on the state of the skull  
203 was available (either due to observer omission or because the victim had already been  
204 largely consumed), but other common aspects of ‘observed’ cases of infanticide were  
205 noted (e.g., mother guarding or grooming the victim, victim consumed by mother or  
206 others, victim found at communal den).

207 To assess support for the exploitation hypothesis, we examined the frequency of  
208 different mortality sources as a function of seasonal prey availability. In the Masai Mara  
209 National Reserve, prey availability peaks when seasonal migrations of millions of  
210 ungulates are present in our study area June – September (Smith et al., 2008). We used a  
211 Chi-squared test to evaluate whether infanticide was more or less likely to occur than  
212 other sources of mortality during these periods of high prey availability.

213

## 214 **Results**

215 Our results suggest that infanticide appears to be a leading source of mortality for  
216 cubs under 1 year old. Of the 99 cases of death of den-dependent juveniles with a known  
217 mortality source (of 543 total juvenile mortality cases), infanticide accounted for 21.2 %

218 of mortality (Figure 2). This figure places infanticide as the second largest mortality  
219 source for den-dependent juveniles, ranking below starvation (36.4%) but above lions  
220 (17.2%) and humans (9.1%) (Figure 2, dark bars).

221       Next, we used these proportions of known causes of mortality in young juveniles  
222 to infer the potential cause of death in 444 cases of mortality in young cubs where the  
223 cause of death was unknown. Cub deaths of both known and unknown causes of  
224 mortality were first separated into two categories: 1) cases where the mother disappeared  
225 prior to the cub's death, and 2) cases where the mother was alive upon the cub's death. In  
226 cases where the mother disappeared prior to the cub's death, known cause of death was  
227 frequently starvation ( $n = 29/35$  cases), and in most cases of known starvation ( $29/36$ ),  
228 the mother preceded the cub in death. To use this extra information about starvation in  
229 inferring unknown mortality sources, any cub death of unknown cause where the mother  
230 disappeared prior to the cub's death was attributed to starvation ( $n = 37$ ). Next we  
231 inferred the cause of death in unknown cases where the mother was alive upon the cub's  
232 death, and the number of deaths attributable to each cause were inferred using the  
233 proportions of observed mortality in each category, limited to cases where the mother  
234 was alive upon the cub's death. Uncertainty around these inferred cases was estimated  
235 using bootstrapping with 1000 replicates. We found that, of the 444 cases of mortality  
236 where the cause was unknown, a significant number of deaths could be potentially  
237 attributed to infanticide (Figure 2, light bars). Including both inferred and observed  
238 sources of mortality, infanticide became the leading cause of death for juveniles under 1

239 year of age, although the 95% confidence interval for infanticide overlapped the intervals  
240 for starvation and lions.

241 The distribution of ages of death associated with each of these mortality sources  
242 supports the hypothesis that infanticide is a leading cause of mortality in young spotted  
243 hyenas; whereas the other three leading sources of mortality generally occurred among  
244 older juveniles (> 5 months old), the peak age distribution of deaths by infanticide  
245 aligned with the peak age at death in cases of juvenile mortality where the cause of death  
246 was unknown (Figure 3).

247 Every observed case of infanticide in our dataset was perpetrated by an adult  
248 female. All cases of infanticide occurred at a communal den, although in one case the  
249 victim was killed by other groupmates as its mother was transferring it from the natal den  
250 to the communal den. Attackers sometimes acted alone, and other times were aided by  
251 groupmates. In three cases where infanticide took place while the victim's mother was  
252 present, multiple hyenas displayed aggression against the mother while her offspring was  
253 being attacked. In one of these events, the highest-ranking female killed a low-ranking  
254 juvenile while her offspring chased away the victim's mother. In two other cases where  
255 the victim's mother was present, multiple hyenas attacked the mother while the  
256 perpetrator killed the cub. In cases where females committed infanticide unaided, they  
257 often did so during what appeared to be normal social behavior, and in a few cases  
258 prosocial 'groan' vocalizations were emitted by the attacker immediately before  
259 attacking. Close kinship did not prevent females from committing infanticide: in one  
260 case, a female coaxed each of her full sister's two offspring out of the den by groaning,

261 then killed both cubs (previously reported in (White, 2005)). However, although we did  
262 not have full pedigree data available for most killed infants, infanticidal females most  
263 often killed juveniles other than those born to their closest relatives.

264 Infanticidal females typically targeted young juveniles (<5 months old), although  
265 we did observe two cases of infanticide in older juveniles (Figure 2). Victims with known  
266 sexes were evenly split between males (n = 4) and females (n = 5), suggesting that  
267 juveniles of both sexes were equally likely to be attacked by conspecifics. Finally,  
268 comparison of attacker and victim ranks revealed that infanticidal females were on  
269 average higher ranking than the mothers of victims (Welch's two-sample t-test:  $t = -3.44$ ,  
270  $df = 20.98$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ; Figure 3).

271 Victims of infanticide were sometimes consumed, but we did not find any  
272 evidence that infanticide in this species was sensitive to prey abundance. A Chi-squared  
273 test revealed that death by infanticide was no more strongly associated with seasonal prey  
274 availability than any other juvenile mortality source ( $X^2=0.787$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.531$ ).

275 Victims' bodies were consumed by one or more hyenas in 11 out of 21 cases; they were  
276 sometimes consumed by the killer (n = 3) or the killer's offspring (n = 3), sometimes by  
277 the mother of the dead infant (n = 4), and sometimes by other group-members (n=3; note  
278 that these numbers don't add to 11 because multiple hyenas were often observed  
279 consuming infanticide victims). When given the opportunity, mothers sometimes (n = 7)  
280 groomed or otherwise cared for their deceased offspring after its death. In 3 cases,  
281 observers noted unusual, unprovoked, and distressed-sounding vocalizations emitted by  
282 the mother. In 5 cases, the body was either carried away from the den or completely

283 consumed in less than 50 minutes, with one cub being completely consumed in 13  
284 minutes. These records may underestimate the frequency with which victims are  
285 consumed because observers collected the victim's body for biological samples in 6  
286 cases, and halted observations before the fate of the body was determined in 4 cases.  
287 However, it is clear from our observations that the remains of victims of infanticide do  
288 not persist for long.

289

## 290 **Discussion**

291 We found that infanticide is a significant source of mortality among young  
292 juvenile spotted hyenas. Extrapolating information from cases where the mortality source  
293 was known suggested that infanticide was a leading cause of death for den-dependent  
294 juveniles (Figure 2). We found no evidence for sex-bias in the victims of infanticide, and  
295 most victims were under five months of age at the time of death. The killer was always  
296 female, and the mean rank of the perpetrators was significantly higher than the mean rank  
297 of the mothers of victims (Figure 3). Killers acted alone or with assistance from others; in  
298 the latter cases, other group members (often members of the killer's matriline) displayed  
299 aggression towards the cub's mother during the infanticide event. All cases of infanticide  
300 occurred at the communal den. Bodies of killed cubs were often consumed by the killer  
301 or her offspring, the mother of the dead infant, or other clan-mates. Mothers of victims  
302 sometimes displayed grooming or other maternal behaviors towards the deceased cub,  
303 which may be of interest to those interested in comparative thanatology (Anderson &  
304 Anderson, 2016; Carter, Baniel, Cowlshaw, & Huchard, 2020).

305           Our results provide mixed support (Table 1) for both the exploitation and resource  
306 competition hypotheses, although we suggest that the latter is more strongly supported by  
307 our data. The resource competition hypothesis predicts that infanticide by females should  
308 be prevalent in this species, typically should be directed by high-status individuals toward  
309 low-status individuals, and should preferentially target females over males. We find  
310 support for the first two of these predictions. Although we do not find support for the  
311 third prediction, the low sample size for victims of known sex ( $n = 9$ ) provides minimal  
312 power for detecting a possible difference. In support of the exploitation hypothesis,  
313 killers and their offspring did sometimes consume the victims. However, the killer did  
314 often leave the victim's body for others to consume, and in some cases, a killer quickly  
315 crushed the skull of a cub then walked away from it. Furthermore, there was no evidence  
316 that infanticide was more likely to occur during times of prey scarcity. Finally, females  
317 were the killers in all observed cases, whereas males were never observed to engage in  
318 infanticide, even though immigrant males should theoretically be leaner and hungrier  
319 than females because of female dominance in this species. Our results are therefore more  
320 consistent with victim consumption as a secondary, opportunistic use of the product of  
321 infanticide rather than the primary driver of the decision to commit infanticide, as found  
322 in chimpanzees (Lowe, Hobaiter, Asiimwe, Zuberbühler, & Newton-Fisher, 2020).

323           Support for the resource competition hypothesis suggests that infanticide by  
324 females in spotted hyenas may serve as a mechanism of matrilineal competition. Social  
325 support has been found to be a significant force for establishing and maintaining  
326 dominance in spotted hyenas (Engh, Esch, Smale, & Holekamp, 2000; Strauss &

327 Holekamp, 2019b; Vulliamid et al., 2019), and kin provide a significant portion of that  
328 support (Smith et al., 2010). Thus, reducing another female's matriline size via  
329 infanticide may serve to prevent potential coalitions of lower-ranked matrilineal females aspiring  
330 to improve their status. Interestingly, we did observe one case of infanticide directly  
331 related to escalated aggression between matrilineal females. Observers arrived at the den to find a  
332 recently killed offspring from a high-ranked matriline. Many hyenas were acting highly  
333 agitated, and roughly one hour later we observed a coalition of related low-ranking adult  
334 females viciously attacking members of the high-ranking matriline. However, in a  
335 contrasting example, we observed one hyena kill two cubs born to her full sister. A larger  
336 sample size than ours will be needed to further assess the relationship between kinship,  
337 infanticide and matrilineal competition, and to learn more about the function of  
338 infanticide in spotted hyenas.

339 In addition to competition over social status *per se*, it may be that infanticide by  
340 females in this species reflects social competition more generally. For example, rather  
341 than serving to reduce the number of social allies available in another matriline and  
342 therefore lowering their potential standing in the dominance hierarchy, infanticide by  
343 females might instead serve to reduce the number of individuals with which the killer or  
344 the killer's offspring would need to compete for resources in the future. Furthermore,  
345 although the observed difference in rank between killers and victims may arise as a result  
346 of strategic social competition by high-ranking females against low-ranking females, it is  
347 possible that this pattern instead reflects differential vulnerability to infanticide among  
348 juveniles of different rank. Rank-related variation in the number of kin present and time



349 spent at the communal den has already been demonstrated in this system (White, 2007).  
350 Our observations of relatives assisting killers during infanticide events demonstrate how  
351 social context can influence the occurrence of infanticide. Further observations are  
352 needed to identify situations presenting opportunities for infanticide to evaluate the  
353 contexts in which females elect to commit infanticide, and when they elect not to.

354       Regardless of the cause of rank-related patterns in infanticide, our results  
355 demonstrate that infanticide is another in a long list of ways in which rank influences  
356 fitness among spotted hyenas. In addition to having greater reproductive success  
357 (Holekamp, Smale, & Szykman, 1996; Höner et al., 2010), higher priority of access to  
358 resources (Smith et al., 2008), better immune defenses (Flies, Mansfield, Flies, Grant, &  
359 Holekamp, 2016), and greater longevity (Holekamp et al., 2012), we find that high-  
360 ranking females are less likely to suffer offspring loss via infanticide than their lower-  
361 ranking group-mates.

362       Our findings also indicate the dual use of the communal den as protection against  
363 both outside predation sources such as lions, and intraspecific killing via infanticide. The  
364 diameter of den holes limits the size of individuals able to enter the den, such that cubs  
365 can escape inside when threatened by adults or large predators, which cannot follow cubs  
366 into the den hole. This function has been born out in our observations: we have seen  
367 larger cubs killed by lions while they attempted escape into the communal den, as well as  
368 cubs escaping into the den while lions attempt (and fail) to extract them with their paws  
369 (unpublished data). In our observations of infanticide, we occasionally observed  
370 perpetrators coaxing cubs out of the den before attacking them, and in one case a targeted

371 juvenile attempted to escape into the den but was caught and killed before reaching safety  
372 (Supplemental Videos).

373         Our results highlight the conflicting forces that characterize the lives of  
374 gregarious animals. The prevalence of infanticide highlights risks faced by females  
375 choosing to rear their cubs in a social environment. More solitary individuals could  
376 choose to keep their cubs at a natal den for several months, and thereby avoid the  
377 potential risks of infanticide, but female hyenas rarely choose to do so. This suggests that  
378 the benefits of social integration for cubs raised at communal dens outweigh the costs to  
379 females imposed by conspecific infanticide.

380         Finally, our results indicate the power of using long-term data to study rare or  
381 difficult-to-observe phenomena. Rarity of phenomena can obscure their importance, and  
382 rapidly occurring, high-impact events like infanticide are the sorts of phenomena that  
383 require extensive data collection to permit analysis. Our results highlight both the  
384 importance of long-term studies and the value of recording rare, but potentially  
385 important, events that may not be the focus of ongoing study.

386

### 387 **Acknowledgments**

388         We thank the Kenya Wildlife Service, the Narok County Government, and the  
389 Kenyan National Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation, The Mara  
390 Conservancy and Brian Heath for permissions to conduct this research. This work was  
391 supported by NSF grants OISE1853934 and IOS1755089 to KEH, and by an NSF  
392 Graduate Research Fellowship to EDS. This work was also supported in part by NSF

393 Grant OIA 0939454 (Science and Technology Centers) via “BEACON: An NSF Center  
394 for the Study of Evolution in Action.” AKB was supported by the MSU Honors College.  
395

## References

- 396 Agrell, J., Wolff, J. O., Ylönen, H., & Ylonen, H. (1998). Counter-Strategies to Infanticide  
397 in Mammals: Costs and Consequences. *Oikos*, 83(3), 507.  
398 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3546678>
- 399 Alberts, S. C. (2018). Social influences on survival and reproduction: Insights from a long-  
400 term study of wild baboons. *Journal of Animal Ecology*, (June), 1–20.  
401 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2656.12887>
- 402 Altmann, J. (1974). Observational study of behavior: sampling methods. *Behaviour*,  
403 49(3), 227–266.
- 404 Anderson, J. R., & Anderson, J. (2016). Comparative thanatology. *Current Biology*,  
405 26(13), R553–R556. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2015.11.010>
- 406 Balme, G. A., & Hunter, L. T. B. (2013). Why leopards commit infanticide. *Animal*  
407 *Behaviour*, 86(4), 791–799. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.ANBEHAV.2013.07.019>
- 408 Carter, A. J., Baniel, A., Cowlshaw, G., & Huchard, E. (2020). Baboon thanatology:  
409 responses of filial and non-filial group members to infants' corpses. *Royal Society*  
410 *Open Science*, 7(3), 192206. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.192206>
- 411 Cheney, D. L., Seyfarth, R. M., Fischer, J., Beehner, J., Bergman, T., Johnson, S. E., ... Silk,  
412 J. B. (2004). Factors Affecting Reproduction and Mortality Among Baboons in the  
413 Okavango Delta, Botswana. *International Journal of Primatology*, 25(2), 401–428.  
414 <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:IJOP.0000019159.75573.13>
- 415 Clutton-Brock, T. H., P. N. M., B., Smith, R., McIlrath, G. M., Kansky, R., Gaynor, D., ...

- 416 Skinner, J. D. (1998). Infanticide and expulsion of females in a cooperative  
417 mammal. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London. Series B: Biological Sciences*,  
418 265(1412), 2291–2295. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.1998.0573>
- 419 Corbett, L. K. (2010). Social Dynamics of a Captive Dingo Pack: Population Regulation by  
420 Dominant Female Infanticide. *Ethology*, 78(3), 177–198.  
421 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1439-0310.1988.tb00229.x>
- 422 Creel, S., & Creel, N. M. (1998). Six ecological factors that may limit African wild dogs,  
423 *Lycaon pictus*. *Animal Conservation*, 1(1), 1–9. [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-1795.1998.tb00220.x)  
424 1795.1998.tb00220.x
- 425 Dagg, A. I. (1998). Infanticide by Male Lions Hypothesis: A Fallacy Influencing Research  
426 into Human Behavior. *American Anthropologist*, 100(4), 940–950.  
427 <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1998.100.4.940>
- 428 Engh, A. L., Esch, K., Smale, L., & Holekamp, K. E. (2000). Mechanisms of maternal rank  
429 ‘inheritance’ in the spotted hyaena, *Crocuta crocuta*. *Animal Behaviour*, 60(3), 323–  
430 332.
- 431 Flies, A. S., Mansfield, L. S., Flies, E. J., Grant, C. K., & Holekamp, K. E. (2016).  
432 Socioecological predictors of immune defences in wild spotted hyenas. *Functional*  
433 *Ecology*, 30(9), 1549–1557.
- 434 Frank, L. G. (1986). Social organization of the spotted hyaena < i> *Crocuta crocuta* </i>. II.  
435 Dominance and reproduction. *Animal Behaviour*, 34(5), 1510–1527.
- 436 Hausfater, G., & Hrdy, S. B. (1984). *Infanticide: comparative and evolutionary*

- 437            *perspectives*. Transaction Publishers.
- 438    Holekamp, K. E., Cooper, S. M., Katona, C. I., Berry, N. A., Frank, L. G., & Smale, L. (1997).
- 439            Patterns of association among female spotted hyenas (*Crocuta crocuta*). *Journal of*
- 440            *Mammalogy*, 55–64.
- 441    Holekamp, K. E., & Dloniak, S. M. (2010). Intraspecific Variation in the Behavioral
- 442            Ecology of a Tropical Carnivore, the Spotted Hyena. In *Advances in the Study of*
- 443            *Behavior* (Vol. 42, pp. 189–229). Elsevier. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-3454(10)42006-9)
- 444            3454(10)42006-9
- 445    Holekamp, K. E., Smale, L., & Szykman, M. (1996). Rank and reproduction in the female
- 446            spotted hyaena. *Journal of Reproduction and Fertility*, 108(2), 229–237.
- 447    Holekamp, K. E., Smith, J. E., Strelhoff, C. C., Van Horn, R. C., & Watts, H. E. (2012).
- 448            Society, demography and genetic structure in the spotted hyena. *Molecular*
- 449            *Ecology*, 21(3), 613–632.
- 450    Höner, O. P., Wachter, B., Hofer, H., Wilhelm, K., Thierer, D., Trillmich, F., ... East, M. L.
- 451            (2010). The fitness of dispersing spotted hyaena sons is influenced by maternal
- 452            social status. *Nature Communications*, 1(1), 60.
- 453            <https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms1059>
- 454    Hrdy, S. B. (1979). Infanticide among animals: A review, classification, and examination
- 455            of the implications for the reproductive strategies of females. *Ethology and*
- 456            *Sociobiology*, 1(1), 13–40. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0162-3095\(79\)90004-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0162-3095(79)90004-9)
- 457    Johnson-Ulrich, L., & Holekamp, K. E. (2020). Group size and social rank predict

- 458 inhibitory control in spotted hyaenas. *Animal Behaviour*, 160, 157–168.  
459 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2019.11.020>
- 460 Lowe, A. E., Hobaiter, C., Asiimwe, C., Zuberbühler, K., & Newton-Fisher, N. E. (2020).  
461 Intra-community infanticide in wild, eastern chimpanzees: a 24-year review.  
462 *Primates*, 61(1), 69–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10329-019-00730-3>
- 463 Lowe, A. E., Hobaiter, C., & Newton-Fisher, N. E. (2018). Countering infanticide:  
464 Chimpanzee mothers are sensitive to the relative risks posed by males on differing  
465 rank trajectories. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 168(1), 3–9.  
466 <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23723>
- 467 Lukas, D., & Huchard, E. (2014). The evolution of infanticide by males in mammalian  
468 societies. *Science*, 346(6211), 841–844. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1257226>
- 469 Lukas, D., & Huchard, E. (2019). The evolution of infanticide by females in mammals.  
470 *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 374(1780),  
471 20180075. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2018.0075>
- 472 Packer, C. (2000). Infanticide Is No Fallacy. *American Anthropologist*, 102(4), 829–831.
- 473 Packer, C., & Pusey, A. E. (1983a). Adaptations of Female Lions to Infanticide by  
474 Incoming Males. *The American Naturalist*, 121(5), 716–728.  
475 <https://doi.org/10.1086/284097>
- 476 Packer, C., & Pusey, A. E. (1983b). Male takeovers and female reproductive parameters:  
477 A simulation of oestrous synchrony in lions (*Panthera leo*). *Animal Behaviour*, 31(2),  
478 334–340. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0003-3472\(83\)80051-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0003-3472(83)80051-7)

- 479 R Development Core Team. (2018). R: A language and environment for statistical  
480 computing. Vienna, Austria: R Foundation for Statistical Computing.
- 481 Silk, J. B., & Stanford, C. B. (1999). Infanticide Article Disputed. *Anthropology News*,  
482 40(6), 27–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/an.1999.40.6.27.2>
- 483 Smith, J. E., Kolowski, J. M., Graham, K. E., Dawes, S. E., & Holekamp, K. E. (2008). Social  
484 and ecological determinants of fission–fusion dynamics in the spotted hyaena.  
485 *Animal Behaviour*, 76(3), 619–636. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2008.05.001>
- 486 Smith, J. E., Van Horn, R. C., Powning, K. S., Cole, A. R., Graham, K. E., Memenis, S. K., &  
487 Holekamp, K. E. (2010). Evolutionary forces favoring intragroup coalitions among  
488 spotted hyenas and other animals. *Behavioral Ecology*, 21(2), 284–303.
- 489 Strauss, E. D. (2019). DynaRankR: Inferring Longitudinal Dominance Hierarchies. CRAN.  
490 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2531640>
- 491 Strauss, E. D., & Holekamp, K. E. (2019a). Inferring longitudinal hierarchies: Framework  
492 and methods for studying the dynamics of dominance. *Journal of Animal Ecology*,  
493 88(4), 521–536. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2656.12951>
- 494 Strauss, E. D., & Holekamp, K. E. (2019b). Social alliances improve rank and fitness in  
495 convention-based societies. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*,  
496 116(18), 8919–8924. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1810384116>
- 497 Vulllioud, C., Davidian, E., Wachter, B., Rousset, F., Courtiol, A., & Höner, O. P. (2019).  
498 Social support drives female dominance in the spotted hyaena. *Nature Ecology &*  
499 *Evolution*, 3(1), 71–76. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-018-0718-9>



500 Watts, H. E., Scribner, K. T., Garcia, H. A., & Holekamp, K. E. (2011). Genetic diversity and  
501 structure in two spotted hyena populations reflects social organization and male  
502 dispersal. *Journal of Zoology*, 285(4), 281–291.

503 White, P. A. (2005). Maternal rank is not correlated with cub survival in the spotted  
504 hyena, *Crocuta crocuta*. *Behavioral Ecology*, 16(3), 606–613.  
505 <https://doi.org/10.1093/beheco/ari033>

506 White, P. A. (2007). Costs and strategies of communal den use vary by rank for spotted  
507 hyaenas, *Crocuta crocuta*. *Animal Behaviour*, 73(1), 149–156.  
508 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2006.09.001>

509

Figure 1. Adult female spotted hyena carrying a cub recently killed by infanticide.

Infanticide was typically achieved by crushing the skull, as seen here. Photo by Kate Yoshida.

Figure 2. Age distribution of observed causes of juvenile (<1-year-old) mortality in spotted hyenas (left), and frequencies of the 7 leading causes of juvenile mortality (right).

Dark bars indicate cases where the mortality source was known (n = 99). Lighter bars indicate inferred mortality sources for cases where the cause of mortality was unknown (n = 444). Inferred mortality source was calculated based on frequencies of observed mortality, and 95% confidence intervals were obtained by bootstrapping the known cases of mortality to obtain new observed frequencies. For inferred mortality sources, cases where the mother disappeared prior to offspring death were attributed to starvation, and frequencies used to infer remaining unknown mortality causes excluded cases where the mother preceded her cub in death. Inferred sources of mortality point to infanticide as a leading cause of death among juvenile hyenas, and this is supported by the overlap in age distributions of juveniles killed by infanticide and juveniles with unknown mortality sources.

Figure 3. Rank distributions of killers and mothers of cubs killed by infanticide. Ranks of infant-killers were on average higher than the ranks of mothers of infants killed by infanticide (Welch's two-sample t-test:  $t = -3.44$ ,  $df = 20.98$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ).

Table 1. Two non-mutually exclusive hypotheses suggesting functions of infanticide in spotted hyenas, along with associated predictions, and observations in support (+) or not in support (-) of those predictions.

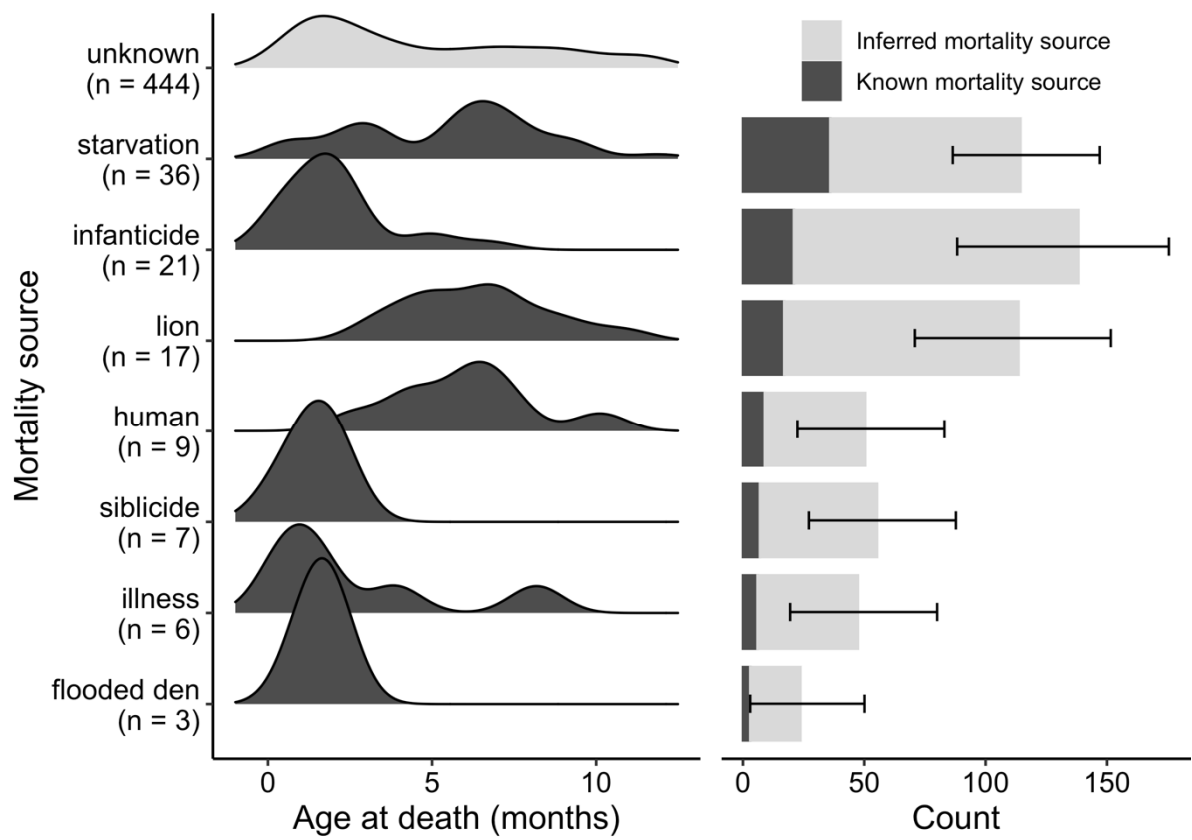
Hypothesis	Prediction	Observation
Exploitation	Infanticide is more likely during prey scarcity	(-) Infanticide no more sensitive to seasonal changes in prey availability than other sources of juvenile mortality
	Perpetrators and their kin benefit nutritionally from infanticide	(+/-) Perpetrator or their kin consume the victim in a subset of cases. Victim consumed by mother or other group-mates in other cases.
	No sex bias of perpetrators	(-) Only females commit infanticide
	No sex bias of victims	(+) Female and male cubs killed with equal frequency
Resource Competition	Perpetrators commit infanticide against potential future competitors (philopatric sex)	(-) Female and male cubs killed with equal frequency
	Perpetrators are long-term residents of social group	(+) Only females (philopatric sex) commit infanticide
	Infanticide reflects competition among matrilines	(+) Killers are of higher rank and mothers of victims more likely to be of lower rank
		(+) Infanticide observed during inter-matriline competition
	(+) Kin aid each other while committing infanticide	
	(-) Infanticide observed against kin	

**Figure 1.**

511  
512  
513  
514  
515  
516  
517  
518  
519  
520  
521  
522  
523  
524  
525  
526  
527  
528  
529  
530  
531  
  
532  
  
533  
  
534  
  
535  
  
536  
  
537  
  
538  
  
539  
  
540  
  
541  
  
542  
  
543



544 **Figure 2.**



545

546

547

548

549

550

551

552

553

554

555

556

557

558

559

560

561

562 **Figure 3.**

563

564

565

566

567

568

569

570

571

572

573

574

575

576

577

578

579

580

