

Crisis and Opportunity in Maasailand: Community Perspectives on Land-use, Conservation and Tourism

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We have all seen the picture of dusk on the Serengeti plain, the throngs of wild zebra, wildebeest and elephants gathering under an acacia tree to drink alongside hyena, buffalo and cattle, led by their Maasai herders. This image has been reproduced in countless photographs and etched into our cultural imagination. Travelers from homelands that were long ago fenced often remark on their surprise at seeing a landscape shared by humans and wild animals. Zebra and cattle drink together here. Herders and their herds cross a savanna dotted with gazelles and elephants. All animals—cows, warthogs and topi alike—share a skittish unease, a ripple of fear, at the first scent of an approaching lion. All parties meet at water, and exist, if not in romantic harmony, in a tolerant tension.

The co-existence of wildlife and Maasai people is a miracle, a gift that sustains both of these precious global treasures. It also happens to be the deep foundation of Kenya's safari industry on which the country's economy relies. Like many ecological foundations, the importance of the relationship between people and animals in Maasailand is known best to those most intimately connected to it. This symbiosis is reflected in the Maasai's essential role in Kenya's tourism industry, and the vitality of both tourism and Maasai culture is presently hinged on whether and how the industry will be accountable to this mutual relationship.

In this article, we explore different aspects of the economic, environmental and social context of the relationship between people, wildlife and tourism in Maasailand, past and present, and options for strengthening conservation in East Africa through this relationship. We are a group of students and faculty from Prescott College in Arizona who are collaborating with Maasai leaders and activists in common pursuit of conservation and cultural preservation. This article represents our attempt to create conversation between the academic scholarship and Maasai expertise.

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Part I: Maasailand and Conservation

Indigenous vs. Colonial Approaches to Maasailand Conservation

The deep roots of the current threat to both Maasai culture and Kenya's tourism industry lie in the history of conservation in Kenya—and particularly in the differing ways that Maasai and British societies understood the relationship of people to land. Before the arrival of the British in the late 19th century, villages of nomadic Maasai people and their herds of cattle and goats were scattered across the wide stretch of land including the Kenyan rift valley and adjacent savanna extending from Lake Victoria to what is now central Tanzania.¹ People owned the land communally; land was governed through consensus of a council of senior elders and regulated by community law that gave free access to all Maasai.² The land was also shared with wildlife. Like the wildebeest, zebra and elephants indigenous to East Africa, Maasai and their herds migrated long distances as seasons changed, to find water and favorable grasses. Though Maasai people claim to have lived in East Africa for millennia and express ancestral ties to the land that they occupied in Kenya and Tanzania, scholars argue that they migrated from the northeast and settled in their traditional area several hundred years ago.³ Regardless, for many generations, humans and animals have shared the East African savanna, both relying on seasonal migration and knowledge of where food and water would be found under fluctuating conditions. Conflicts occurred, as livestock would occasionally be taken by lions causing Maasai men to retaliate. But generally, Maasai people and East African wildlife maintained a working co-existence. This relationship continues today in Maasailand. Visitors notice that gazelle,

¹ James L. Newman. *The Peopling of Africa: A Geographic Interpretation*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 172

² Simon K. Seno and W.W. Shaw, "Land Tenure Policies, Maasai Traditions, and Wildlife Conservation in Kenya," *Society and Natural Resources*, 15, 2002: 79-80

³ *The Peopling of Africa*: 172

zebra and impala often follow herders as they return to their bomas at sundown, because the animals know that lions and other predators are less likely to approach them there. Similarly, elephants create paths through dense brush, which humans and cattle take advantage of in walking to get to water.

There is a great deal of evidence, from Maasai people and outside scholars that, among pastoral peoples, Maasai culture is especially compatible with conservation. As one scholar has noted, “It is not a mere accident of history that many of the most spectacular wildlife protection areas in East Africa were carved out of territories previously part of Maasailand.”⁴ Elephants and gazelles continued to thrive in areas of Kenya shared with Maasai communities even as those animals were being hunted out of existence elsewhere.⁵ In many instances, Maasai communities have been known to construct their lives around the needs of both humans and wildlife. Many people throughout Maasailand tell us that their culture has always forbidden eating wildlife. When problems arise between herders and wildlife— during migrations or in competition for water, for example— Maasai communities will often compromise for the needs of the animals, and they may even relocate villages rather than exterminate problematic wildlife. Because of their knowledge of local animals and their migratory patterns, Maasai people avoid walking in areas at certain times of day and seasons to circumvent conflict with animals. Some traditional Maasai land management practices, which have been recognized by scholars, include rotating dry-season pastures until forage is available for all community members without stressing one area; by default, wildlife enjoys exclusive use of large areas of Maasailand during those times.⁶

The ability of Maasai communities to share the land with wildlife began to change with the establishment of Kenya as a British protectorate, and later a colony. After staking a claim to the terrain that is now Kenya in the late 19th century, the British government quickly realized the value of Maasailand and took steps to control it. Basing its policy on the then-current U.S. model of conservation, the British established preserves for certain species of wildlife and regulated access for all people, including local indigenous communities and the European settlers and hunters, that began to appear after the turn of the century. While hunters were merely restricted in their activities, however, local communities were evicted from their homes and cut off from their grazing lands and sources of water. Displaced communities were put on reservations through the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance, which again, was directly influenced by U.S. policy—the Native American reservations system—as well as South African apartheid. The relocation of Maasai continued through “treaties” in 1904 and 1911, as well as through a second Crown Lands Ordinance in 1915 that increased the opportunities for white settlers to acquire more land out of the reserves. Some Maasai people remained within established game reserves and continued co-existing with incoming settlers for a time. But in the 1930s, these remaining communities were officially ejected from the protected areas. The first national parks were designated in the 1940s, and this segregationist approach to conservation continued after independence was achieved in 1963.⁷ At present, 43,673 square kilometers, or 12% of Kenya, is classified as protected in 52 national parks and game reserves.⁸

Kenya’s post-Independence government of Jomo Kenyatta continued this same approach to conservation by further separating Maasai people from the land. Under the colonial system, Maasailand was initially divided in half by the establishment of Kenya and Tanzania as separate colonies. Kenyan Maasailand was then reduced to designated “reserve” lands in both southern and northern parts of the country. Maasailand nearest the Tanzanian border was divided into two districts, Kaijido (currently surrounding Tsavo West and Amboseli National Parks), and Narok (currently surrounding Masai Mara National Reserve). In the government’s push for development, it began to privatize communal land and settle nomadic people. Kaijido and Narok districts were further separated into Group

⁴ M. Ole Parkipuny quoted in Mara Goldman, “Partitioned Nature, Privileged Knowledge: Community-based Conservation in Tanzania.” *Development and Change* 34(5): 851, 2003.

⁵ David Western has claimed that the taboos against eating wildlife were lifted in Maasai societies during times of drought, as wildlife served as Maasai’s “second cattle.” This claim is controversial and strongly denied by many Maasai people. David Western, “Amboseli National Park: Enlisting Landowners to Conserve Migratory Wildlife.” *Ambio*, Vol. 2, No. 5, 1982: 304

⁶ Western, “Amboseli National Park,” and Fred Nelson, “Sustainable Development and Wildlife Conservation in Tanzanian Maasailand.” *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 2: 107-117, 2000. (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001)

⁷ Bethwell A. Ogot, Kenya under the British, 1895-1963.” Ed. B.A. Ogot and J.A. Kieran, *Zamani: A Survey of East African History*. (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968): 255-289;

⁸ www.africaquest.co.ke/wildlife_africa/africa_safari_tours/kenya_safari.htm

Ranches in the 1970s through the Kenya Livestock Development Project. Group ranches in Maasailand were collective associations of families and communities organized into manageably sized groups to give the government more control of the use of land and the ability to limit the size of herds; privatization of land was imposed in the name of conservation.⁹

But this plan was not successful. To the government's surprise, Maasai continued to relate to land communally by allowing open access among grazing areas regardless of group ranch borders. Many Maasai communities rejected private ownership because they feared it would leave many of them landless. From the 1980s to the present, the national government has pushed for further subdivisions of Group Ranches in the interest of development and agriculture. Currently, the federal government and outside entrepreneurs are partitioning the group ranches (nearest to the borders of national parks and game reserves) into private parcels of land, which are owned by males who act as heads of individual households. These subdivisions give private authority over land use for selling, leasing, or development.¹⁰

The Erosion of Maasailand to Agriculture and Tourism

Maasai communities are finding their fears being realized as they are caught between government policy and economic pressure to sell or develop their land. Both the administrations of Daniel Arap Moi and current Kenyan president Mwai Kibaki have supported settlement to make more grassland available for agriculture to feed Kenya's growing population. Agriculture, especially small farming for a family's use, was promoted after independence to combat poverty and promote development, along with foreign investment and industry. Agricultural production grew dramatically during the first ten years, mostly by turning grasslands to fields, but then declined as the country's economy faltered. Many Kenyans associate small farming with the promise of independence, as it is an alternative to the vast plantations and exploited labor that marked the colonial period.

But many Maasai people have expressed the belief that this push for agriculture is undermining Maasai culture. Once land becomes privatized, it is no longer managed by community consensus, and individual landowners find individual solutions to their problems. Land is sold and leased to relieve poverty in times of drought, to educate children, and to pay doctors. The process of shifting from herding to agriculture is gradual. According to recent study, families typically begin to cultivate small plots of less than two acres near bomas for their own use.¹¹ As more sections of land are cultivated, however, there is greater economic pressure to develop larger areas for commercial agriculture. The study shows that 53% of households around Maasai Mara National Reserve have used cultivation in the past 10 years. The trend of this land use starts with private plots but leads into larger farming associations amongst group ranch members. These associations draw the attention of outside entrepreneurs who take over the associations for large-scale commercial development, growing crops such as wheat. In two outer group ranches (those lying furthest from the protected areas) in the Narok District, Lemek and Olchoror-Oiroua, roughly 23% and 9% of the land, respectively, has been converted to commercial agriculture.

As more outsiders settle in Maasailand, the cohesiveness of Maasai society can erode. In the outer group ranches of the Narok District, 53% of the population was non-Maasai in 1989, while all but 0.02% of people living in the dispersal area around the Mara Reserve were Maasai. One indication of the impact of these changes on the Maasai has been a decrease in the percentages of young men who become *ilmorran* (warriors). This shift indicates a trend among younger generations of Maasai being forced to find means of subsistence outside of pastoralism.¹² As they become landless, Maasai are forced to take the only jobs available to them, such as underpaid farm work, or move to towns to find other employment. Many Maasai people see this development as a tremendous threat to their culture, as communities are broken and poverty increases.

⁹ Goldman, "Partitioned Nature" 3; Michael Norton-Griffiths, "Property Rights and the Marginal Wildebeest: An Economic Analysis of Wildlife Conservation Options in Kenya." *Biodiversity and Conservation* 5, 1557-1577 (1996)

¹⁰ Seno and Shaw, "Land Tenure Policies" and Michael Thompson and Katherine Homewood, "Entrepreneurs, Elites, and Exclusion in Maasailand: Trends in Wildlife Conservation and Pastoralist Development." *Human Ecology: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, March 2002, vol. 2, p107

¹¹ Thompson and Homewood, "Entrepreneurs, Elites, and Exclusion in Maasailand"

¹² Thompson and Homewood, "Entrepreneurs, Elites, and Exclusion in Maasailand"

The growth of agriculture in Maasailand also has significant consequences for Kenya's wildlife and also therefore the country's second largest industry: tourism. Kenya's wildlife does not live only in the parks and reserves; the animals move freely across a landscape that recognizes no borders between reserves and surrounding Maasai community land, or borders within that land. According to representatives of Kenya Wildlife Service, roughly 90% of Kenyan wildlife in and around the Masai Mara National Reserve and Amboseli National Park will be found outside of the protected areas and on Maasai community land. The wildlife converges in the protected parks and reserves during the high tourist seasons of July and August when water is scarce in the outer areas. During the rest of the year, most of the wildlife is dispersed across a region several times the size of the parks. The parks alone cannot sustain the numbers and diversity of wildlife that tourists come to see.¹³

The evidence suggests that Kenya's thriving tourist industry depends on the willingness of Maasai communities to maintain extensive wildlife habitat. As that habitat is being consumed by subdivision and agriculture the animals are squeezed onto islands of land that cannot support them. Even today, as one drives north toward Nairobi from Amboseli or Masai Mara, there is a clear line of development when entering the outer group ranches. One begins to see fences, then plots of corn, coinciding with the sudden disappearance of roaming giraffes and herds of zebra.

The British were right when they recognized that Maasailand has value. Maasailand brings in hundreds of millions of Kenyan shillings every year through tourism. But this begs the questions of who will profit from this value and what is a fair share for Maasai people? Maasai people are lacking medical care, education facilities, and clean water. A visitor to the Amboseli Serena Lodge paying \$250 USD per night can sit on a shaded veranda, watching hippos play in a diverted spring just feet away from the swimming pool. Meanwhile, one kilometer away in a Maasai village, a crowd of lucky school children clusters at the mouth of a rare water pump to fill their plastic trays. This is not a region lacking in natural resources; if Maasailand were fully developed, some Maasai people would be able to afford to drink iced tea on the veranda with the American tourists. This will be discussed in the second part of this paper.

Maasai people have shown that they will continue to look for ways to meet their basic needs for adequate education, basic health care, and clean water. The urgent question is whether they will be forced to find what they need at the expense of the wildlife and land, their own culture, Kenya's tourism industry, and ultimately the shared inheritance of our common home, at the cradle of human life.

The Academic Perspective and Local Knowledge

One of the major aspects of the problem our work has revealed is a deep disconnection between the expertise of Maasai people and that of the academic community. Maasai people do not have access to the scholarship written about them and their land,¹⁴ and the majority of academics do not incorporate local knowledge into their work. This schism has limited the ability of all parties to find solutions. A prime example is the adoption by the academic community of the colonial assumption that humans are incompatible with the preservation of wildlife. Early environmental scholarship on East Africa assumed that Maasai lifestyles were destructive to the environment, acting upon, rather than as a functioning part of ecosystems. The main concern expressed by the academic community was that pastoral people, because of their communal ownership of land, would tend to overstock their herds, thus overgrazing grasslands, because human nature would drive individual herders to get as much as they could of communal resources. This view is most well known through Garrett Hardin's 1968 "Tragedy of the Commons," but that idea has been repeated at least since the 1830s.¹⁵ Scholars assumed that cattle would compete with wildlife for water, which is precious in semi-arid environments. The scholarship also made assumptions about Maasai culture—for example, that the status afforded those with large herds would lead to "irrational" desires for

¹³ Conversations with Ole Perrio and Joel Lasalle of Kenya Wildlife Service, Nairobi 5/11/05, and XX, Game Warden, Amboseli, 5/17/05

¹⁴ This complaint was repeated by many Maasai people with whom we spoke and appears to create mistrust between U.S. and European researchers and Maasai communities, undermining the research. We were told stories of researchers who had become famous from their studies of Maasailand, conducted over many years, and who had yet to share copies of the papers that they wrote with their Maasai hosts. Various conversations with Bernard Tulito, Daniel Latush, and George Lupembe May, 2005.

¹⁵ See discussion of William Forster Lloyd, Oxford economist, 1832: www.econlib.org/library/Enc/TragedyoftheCommons.html

herds that exceeded the carrying capacity of a region. This early work tended to support the idea that Maasai communities were not compatible with the goal of wildlife conservation.¹⁶

A sea change has occurred in recent years, however, on the environmental impact of pastoralism, which has ultimately challenged the “fortress mentality” of wildlife conservation. In the early 1970s, ecologists began to suggest that the concept of “sustainability” might not apply in the usual ways to semi-arid rangelands, like those found in East Africa. These ecosystems are characterized by seasonal drought and great variation in water and vegetation. To determine their “sustainability,” therefore, one must have an intimate knowledge of changes over a long period of time. This work suggests that herding societies may not be detrimental to the regeneration of grasslands when looking at the long-term impacts. It also suggests that long-standing relationships to land, such as those of the Maasai, constitute a unique and necessary expertise. Researchers began to claim that, instead of being a destructive force, pastoralism might be an answer to conservation problems.¹⁷

One key indicator of the strength of an ecosystem is the diversity of its animal population. It is widely accepted that biodiversity in a region is lost in three main ways: 1) by over-exploiting and eradicating one single species; 2) through sporadic development that destroys certain habitat; and 3) by converting undeveloped habitat to other uses, such as agriculture. Because it preserves land from development, pastoralism is thought to strengthen environments by preventing the third and most serious cause of lost biodiversity. Pastoralism is especially important to the wildlife of East Africa because it enables corridors for migration.¹⁸

Some ecologists are recognizing that Maasai cultural relationships to the environment are a critical area of expertise that is needed for conservation in East Africa. For example, Maasai herders have complex systems of classifying plant species based on the preferences of their cattle for certain grasses, and they use those systems to analyze changes in an area’s biodiversity. Such systems of classification, which are apparently common among pastoral people in other parts of the world, express an intimate knowledge based on long-term experience and cannot be replicated by western science.¹⁹ Maasai people have an equally intimate knowledge of wildlife that is useful to conservationists. Additionally, Maasai knowledge is in no way static, and many Maasai conservationists value integrating their cultural expertise with western methods to further understand the environment and improve conservation on the whole. For example, Maasai conservationists with the Amboseli Elephant Research Project relayed a story of an outside researcher who sought to gather DNA data from the park’s elephant population by using dart syringes, making the elephants so angry that they avoided contact with all researchers for years. The conservationists raised among the animals said that they could have just as easily gathered the data from dung, and they would have timed their data collection more in concert with the elephants’ seasonal patterns.²⁰

This is one of many examples of the possibilities that exist for furthering conservation work in East Africa when scholars collaborate with local experts. However, our friends in the Maasai conservation community express concerns that aspects of their culture are being misinterpreted by the scientific community to the detriment of the science. For example, scholars’ belief that Maasai herds will grow in size to meet the food supply because they offer status reflects a lack of understanding of the complex role of livestock within Maasai pastoralism. While cattle are primarily the source of security and physical survival for Maasai, *nkishu* are also the spiritual backbone of many ceremonies, and the very act of daily milking is an act of prayer. To give a cow is the highest form of expression of love, gratitude and commitment. Knowing the deeper meaning of cattle in this culture helps us appreciate the gift of 14 cows given by Maasai people to the victims of the 9/11 tragedy in New York City in 2001; the value of that gift extending far beyond the monetary value of the cows. The “status” associated with the number of cattle in a herd does not take on the western tone of *having more* but is indicative of how much a herder *has available to give*.

¹⁶ K.M. Homewood and W.A. Rogers, “Pastoralism and Conservation.” *Human Ecology*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1984

¹⁷ Homewood and Rogers, “Pastoralism and Conservation” and Arnold L. Mapinduzi, Gufu Oba, Robert B. Weladji and Jonathan E. Colman, “Use of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge of the Maasai Pastoralists for Assessing Rangeland Biodiversity in Tanzania.” *African Journal of Ecology*, 41, 2003: 329-336.

¹⁸ Norton-Griffiths, “Property Rights and the Marginal Wildebeest”:1557

¹⁹ Mapinduzi et al. “Use of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge”

²⁰ Interview with Soila Sayaille, The Elephant Trust, Amboseli, 5/17/05

These perspectives cannot be accessed if local people are left out of conservation work. And it is a perspective that is necessary to understanding conservation in Maasailand.²¹

Some scholars have concluded that Maasai people must not only be consulted, but also fully included in designing conservation policy, if the work is to succeed. Ecologist Mara Goldman has challenged the international conservation and academic communities to take seriously the expertise of people living with the land. She argues that local communities must be treated as partners, as “active knowing agents” in conservation work, and calls for “power-sharing and decision-making,” which must include the ‘real devolution of significant powers.’²² Goldman argues that to treat Maasai knowledge as exotic and incompatible with science is to undermine a valuable resource. That knowledge is critical in preventing the interests of Maasai people from becoming fractured through government policy. She describes her Maasai friends routinely referring to wild birds as “the government’s chickens,” suggesting that government policies to preserve wildlife, at the expense of people, can drive a wedge between their shared interests and destroy the traditional tolerance from which the West has much to learn. Maasai people, she argues, have much to teach the rest of the world about conservation. She wonders, “Why not ask how the belief of a harmonious relationship between Maasai and wildlife came to exist, what the real relationship looks like, and what Maasai know about wildlife?”²³

Meeting the Challenge through Collaboration

In response to this scholarly turn, but even more to a new recognition of the fragility of African wildlife, African governments are addressing this situation. African elephant populations have been reduced from an estimated 10 million animals 500 years ago to the current population of 700,000: 30,000 of these live in Kenya. It is this reality and its potential impact on the tourism industry that has garnered the attention of East African governments concerning the vital involvement of local communities. “Ultimately... it is the rural people of Africa who will determine the fate of Africa’s wildlife,” the World Bank report continues, echoing a 1980 World Conservation Strategy report published by the IUCN acknowledging the importance of including indigenous people in conservation work.²⁴

East African governments have made efforts to build bridges. In 1992 the federal Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) established its Community Wildlife Services program “to enforce sustainable wildlife conservation and management outside protected areas through community participation and partnership.” They have met with limited success, one such example being the involvement of local communities in anti-poaching programs and compensating Maasai who have lost cattle to wildlife. Although the implementation of government compensation projects has been seriously criticized, their intentions represent a critical step toward collaboration.²⁵ These types of projects recognize that Maasai people must now survive off of their land under the stress of development. However, these gestures rarely include Maasai people in decision-making, giving rise to criticisms that they lack true commitment to partnership.²⁶ Our conversations with KWS leadership painted a more complex picture: with barely enough staff to protect wildlife in the parks, KWS has not had the resources necessary to do the work of building consensus with Maasai communities and benefiting from Maasai experiences.²⁷

But there are many hopeful signs of what is possible with more resources and the essential inclusion of local knowledge at the table of discussion. Maasai communities and Cynthia Moss’ well-known Elephant Trust are addressing human-wildlife conflict occurring on community land around Amboseli through a dialogue and consolation plan. Now, when a Maasai herder loses a cow to an aggressive elephant, for example, a local conflict-resolution committee comes together to identify the underlying cause of the problem, such as overlapping pathways

²¹ Conversations with Meitamei Olol Dapash and Daniel Laturesh, Masai Mara, 5/18/05

²² In making this statement, the author draws on the work of J.C. Ribot, in “Decentralization, Participation and Accountability in Sahelian Forestry: Legal Instruments of Political-Administrative Control.” *Africa* 69 (1): 23-65

²³ Goldman, “Partitioned Nature”

²⁴ Kiss, *Living with Wildlife*: 1

²⁵ At present the federally managed compensation projects allocate only \$480 USD per human life lost due to wildlife conflict. In the past 40 years, 56 individuals have been killed and only 16 of their families have been paid.. Conversation with Meitamei Olol Dapash 10/15/05

²⁶ Goldman, “Partitioned Nature”

²⁷ Conversations with Ole Perrio and Joel Lasalley of Kenyan Wildlife Services, Nairobi 5/11/05

to water, and to agree on a strategy for solution. This Conflict Resolution Committee (CRC) facilitates the mediation process with representatives from all stakeholders, including the elephant, whose interests are promoted by Maasai Elephant Trust project manager Soila Sayaialel. The CRC works, ultimately, to rebuild the eroded trust between humans and wildlife in Maasailand. That renewed trust is being reflected by another joint effort between KWS, non-governmental organizations, local businesses and local communities, through the Amboseli Game Scouts program. Through this unique merging of interests, a government program has been transformed by the inclusion of local Maasai perspective and communities in Amboseli are invested in the result.

Hunting has been illegal in Kenya since 1977, but poaching is a problem; many animals such as rhinos and elephants are poached for valuable horns and tusks, sold on an international market, while gazelle and zebra may be killed for their meat. The Amboseli Game Scouts draw on their cultural knowledge of the land to catch and dissuade those who are harming animals and illegally logging sandalwood in community forests. Game Scouts are warriors and young elders who spend months away from their families, combing thousands of hectares on foot, spears in hand, protecting Kenya's wildlife. Despite the general impoverishment in Maasailand, these scouts devote months that could be spent working for subsistence to work patrolling for poachers—completely without pay. During the spring quarter of 2005, with only 80 rangers covering 6000 hectares (14,826 acres), Amboseli Game Scouts saw to the arrest of 22 poachers and 3 loggers, and they disbanded 130 snares.²⁸

These efforts and many others are being supported by a grassroots organization of Maasai activists, the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition (MERC), which has coordinated conservation and social justice work on many fronts for over 18 years. MERC, which has one international office in Washington D.C., and otherwise is represented by scores of volunteers living in Maasai villages, works to preserve the integrity of the ecosystems of Maasai homelands and the survival of Maasai people. MERC has focused its work on reforming the Kenyan tourist industry, recognizing that tourism holds the key to restructuring international relationships and effecting positive change in Maasailand. Their approach to reform involves working closely with ethical ecotourism programs and designing projects that educate and create community across cultures.²⁹

Conclusion

At the intersection of these many perspectives and stakeholders, there is a critical opportunity to recognize the influence and resources of the tourism industry as potential means to benefit Kenya's economy, scholars and conservationists, Maasai communities, and the land. Where potential points of collaboration were historically eclipsed, the structure of tourism in Kenya and its inextricable ties to wildlife conservation now offer a forum for establishing partnerships. This important development can only occur if all parties, including local communities, are able to invest in and benefit from tourism. The current infrastructure of tourism must also be explored, and issues of inequity and accountability questioned. As supported by the recent trend in some scholarly work and community actions, the process and presentation of this exploration must also be inclusive and transparent.

²⁸ Interview with XX, Game Scout Chairman, Amboseli, 5/15/05

²⁹ Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition at www.maasaierc.org.

Part II: The Impact of Tourism on Communities in Masai Mara

In this second part, we present here our findings on the impact of tourism on Maasai communities in the vicinity of the Masai Mara Game Reserve. We offer this work in response to a request from the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition and Narok County Council. In presenting our findings, we draw on recent scholarship and on our own qualitative research based primarily on interviews, conversation and observation. We spoke with Group Ranch leadership, Members of County Councils in both the Kajaiido and Narok Districts; traditional leadership; National representatives of Kenya Wildlife Service; local Game Wardens in Masai Mara and Amboseli; management and staff of tourist lodges in both parks; community campsite management; tour operators; dozens of tourists, drivers, teachers on Maasailand; bead sellers; elders; HIV/AIDS educators; Game Scouts; and activists. We observed and recorded the behavior of tourists and tour drivers in the park and in cultural bomas.

Environmental Impacts

On one level, the entire world benefits from the maintenance of East African ecosystems that sustain their wildlife. Stakeholders who directly benefit include the following: 1) All Kenyan citizens. Safari tourism, primarily located on Maasailand, is Kenya's second largest industry and vital to its economy. 2) The government, and particularly the Kenya Wildlife Service, is also the recipient of the majority of park fee revenues paid by tourists. 3) Outside entrepreneurs (both non-Kenyan residents and Kenyans of Asian and European descent) own the largest tourist facilities on Maasailand and realize the greatest direct profit from the industry. 4) Maasai Group Ranches distribute the portion of game fee revenues earmarked for Maasai communities and allocate other revenue from community-owned tourist concessions. 5) Narok County Council, an elected body with 32 members, oversees the management of the Masai Mara Game Reserve, the operation of Kenya Wildlife Service within the closed portion of the Maasai reserve, the maintenance of roads, and collection of park revenues. 6) Lodge management and staff, the majority of whom are not Maasai, are dependent on the industry. 7) Private tour operators are the face of the industry to many tourists and have tremendous power to direct where tourists shop and what they see. 8) Tourists themselves have an interest in maintaining the health of the industry, and many return for subsequent safaris.

All of these stakeholders share a common interest: to preserve the health of the tourist industry, which requires the continued health of the Mara ecosystem, including the group ranch land, and the wildlife that it supports. However, the Mara's wildlife is in jeopardy. 73% of wildlife has been eradicated from the Narok District since 1977 when legal hunting ended.³⁰ Many factors described above are responsible, including the loss of habitat to agriculture. Tourism also has direct negative impacts on the environment. Visitors to the Mara, we were told repeatedly in adjacent lodges, expect their drivers to chase cheetahs and lions off road for better viewing, a practice they assured us, was not possible on safari in Tanzania. Driving off road stresses animals and interferes with their ability to hunt and breed; it also destroys nests of many birds and small animals. Tourists arrive with a goal of seeing and photographing "the big five" animals and drivers oblige them. It is usual during the high tourist seasons of July and August to see a dozen tourist vans crowding around a single leopard, because tour operators call and alert each other when a harder-to-see animal is located. In response to this situation, the Narok County Council has recently designated areas of the park off limits to tour operators and has blocked some off-road tracks that have received heavy use to allow the land to recover.³¹

Clearly one of the greatest environmental impacts of the industry on Maasai people is the loss of the areas on their land with the most reliable sources of water to the game preserves. In the semi-arid landscape of Maasailand, water can never be taken for granted. Rainy seasons see monsoon waters flooding large expanses that were bone dry for much of the year, as rivers and streams spring back to life for a precious window of opportunity. Water sources move and the people follow. But the human migration route, which once included the swamp areas within the game reserves, was circumvented by the creation of the parks from which the people and cattle are generally excluded. Maasai women, charged with providing water for their families, often carry 20-liter jugs by ropes slung across their scalps, walking as much as 15 kilometers each way every day. People get sick and die from water-borne diseases, such as typhoid, because wood for boiling water is equally precious. Visitors quickly become aware that Maasai

³⁰ Michael Norton-Griffiths, "Property Rights and the Marginal Wildebeest: An Economic Analysis of Wildlife Conservation Options in Kenya." *Biodiversity and Conservation* 5, 1996: 1561.

³¹ Conversation with Councilor Saoli in Masai Mara 5/29/05

people living in villages tend to be thirsty; a cup of water offered is always accepted gratefully. Beyond the people, watering cattle in dry seasons imposes real hardship. A lucky few herders and their cattle are allowed into the parks at certain hours of the day to water, but the vast majority resort to migrating further from their homes in search of water and watered grass.³²

Our research suggests that the tourist industry has negative environmental impacts in Masai Mara. The most significant impact is that of the large tourist lodges. Although recent government policy has encouraged environmental standards nationwide, including mandatory water meters, reforestation programs, and waste disposal plans, many of the lodges we visited during our study revealed significant impacts, especially around resource use and management.³³ For example, the Mara Simba Lodge claims to be the “only environmentally friendly lodge in Kenya” because of its on-site water treatment plant, a good selling point for many eco-conscious tourists. The plant treats wastewater to be used for irrigation throughout its 45-hectare (111-acre) lot, suggesting possible groundwater recharge. Despite this contribution, the 176-visitor-capacity hotel uses between 20,000 and 50,000 liters (5,283-13,209 gallons) of water daily. Even at its most modest rate of consumption, the lodge is pumping from a below-bedrock well enough to afford each guest 114 liters (30 gallons) of potable water each day.³⁴ While this usage is not nearly as ecologically devastating as the 179 gallons (678 liters) consumed daily by the average individual living in Arizona, USA,³⁵ it still highlights the dramatic gap in resource allocation between the tourist lodges and surrounding communities.³⁶ Similarly, the use of diesel fuel at lodges such as Mara Simba have a significant impact on the environment, where roughly 400 liters (106 gallons) are burned each day, requiring 2-3 diesel tankers to make monthly deliveries of over 10,000 liters (2,642 gallons.) Again, the issue at hand is not entirely focused on the amount of resources consumed, but rather the method of consumption as it relates to surrounding Maasai communities. This point is particularly critical on the issue of waste management. Like most establishments and residences in rural East Africa, the Mara Simba Lodge burns all non-recyclable solid waste, in this instance using a wood-fired incinerator. The daily burns require significant amounts of wood, which the lodge openly admits to harvesting from Maasai land outside the lodge’s portion of the reserve.³⁷

Although regenerative resource management has intrinsic value as a means of protecting delicate habitats and ecosystems, it is also becoming a practice that catches the eye of ecologically-minded tourists. Kenya’s ban on hunting and anti-ivory campaigns have already helped make it a desirable destination for environmentally concerned travelers. Many lodges, tour operators, and souvenir shops already market the ecotourism concept, but the direction of this green-industry is still shifting. At present the integrity of the ecotourism industry is under some scrutiny, as some tourists seem to be looking for more options that actually live up to their promises of environmental (and often cultural) sensitivity. In our assessment of tourist establishments throughout the Mara, we found the transitioning Basecamp eco-lodge to be maximizing this niche market. One of the founding directors, Lars Lindkuist, emphasized that the Basecamp model (including solar-heated water, composting toilets, and tree-planting projects) is a “business concept with integrated social development.” Aspects of the lodge, such as the beadwork program that has trained over 110 local women, serve to create a marketing advantage and build partnerships, rather than act as a Non-Governmental Organization or charity. Basecamp is one of 5 other lodges under the Explorer travel agency developing this socially- and ecologically-minded spin on traditional safari-like vacations.

A great deal of research remains to be done on this very important question; it is one that our group can take up again next year.

Economic Impacts

The most potentially positive impact of tourism on communities surrounding Masai Mara is income generated from the industry. First, Maasai group ranches receive a share of the fees collected from tourists who enter the parks on safari. Those fees, which were recently increased to \$37 per tourist per day, brought in \$3.52 million USD in 2002.

³² Multiple conversations with Maasai people and author observation.

³³ Interview with a lodge manager who requested anonymity, 5/17/05.

³⁴ Interview with lodge management, requesting anonymity, 5/30/05.

³⁵ AZ Dept of water resources, www.azwater.gov

³⁶ AZ Dept of water resources, www.azwater.gov

³⁷ Interview with lodge management, 5/30/05

19% of the total revenue is distributed annually by the Narok County Council to nine group ranches that border the reserve. Group ranch boards are then charged to channel their share of the funds to community services like education and health care.

All parties agree that these services are severely under-funded. For example, most Maasai children have yet to benefit from the newly government-funded primary education because of a lack of schools in Maasailand.³⁸ But differences of opinion exist about the cause of the dearth of resources. Many outside researchers have laid blame on “local elites,” especially members of group ranch boards, county council members, and village leadership, for misappropriating funds intended to benefit the entire Maasai community. One report on land use in Masai Mara suggested “local elites” gain revenue “through social influence, insider knowledge, access to official administrative channels, legal enforcement, control of information and in some cases, manipulation of processes or documentation.”³⁹ Local leadership is particularly blamed for obtaining access to the most desirable land—that which borders the game parks. While political leaders pursuing personal interest is not unknown throughout the world, Maasai leadership has come under particular scrutiny, and some scholarship has blamed them for the poor condition of Maasai schools, roads and other services.

There are factors, however, often unseen by outsiders, that help to explain why community service needs are not met by park revenue income: the high cost of doing business in Maasailand, coupled with an extreme lack of general resources. The 19% of revenues distributed to Narok District equates, on average, to a \$60,000 USD allotment to each group ranch. Out of that amount, group ranches must pay exorbitant costs for services taken for granted in the developed world. In a land of shockingly poor roads, very few vehicles, and no electricity, land phones, or computers except in towns (and scarcely available there), communication and travel are extremely expensive. For example, one cannot rent a car, even one that is barely road worthy, for less than 15,200 KSH, or \$200 USD per day, not including gas, which typically costs more than 722 KSH, per liter (\$9.50 USD per gallon). 14-passenger vans in poor condition cost 3,040,000 KSH, or \$40,000 USD to own. Phone service is achieved using a cellular phone; itself expensive and subject to theft, or purchasing cards that average \$0.50 per minute. Because so few Maasai people own phones,⁴⁰ arrangements for meetings or other work must be made through repeated visits to multiple areas without roads. Meetings are typically arranged months in advance to facilitate travel. Maasai leadership faces overhead realities that are difficult to imagine for those of us raised in a society with an abundance of communication and technological resources that, with ingenuity, one can get donated or loaned. When one considers the time and resources needed to, for example, build, license and staff a primary school, it is easy to see why funds fall short.⁴¹

Outside scholars must understand the gap between salaries in Kenya, which, particularly in rural Kenya, are extremely low by western standards, and the costs of basic needs, which are often higher than those experienced here. Average salaries for Maasai lodge employees typically average at around 100KSH per day (\$1.30 USD). Typical salaries for county council members range between \$150 - \$500 USD per month. Since most Maasai people do not work for wages or salaries, earned funds tend to be spread broadly among family members. Most Maasai people have very limited access to the cash that is needed to pay board for school children, or medical expenses, which remain high. To provide a university education for one child costs \$10,000, an astronomical sum unaffordable by all but the lucky few.⁴² Medical care, especially surgery, can cost more than the typical deductible paid by people insured in this society. It is easy for outsiders to criticize the ways that revenues are distributed by local leadership when they do not take all of these factors into account. One research team reported in a critical tone that in one year a particular wildlife association spent 25% of revenues derived from its tourism enterprises

³⁸ www.homelands.org/worlds/maasai

³⁹ Michael Thompson and Katherine Homewood, “Entrepreneurs, elites, and exclusion in Maasailand: Trends in Wildlife Conservation and Pastoralist Development.” *Human Ecology: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, March 2002 vol 30, il p107: 6

⁴⁰ National statistics for Kenya show 1.6 cell phones per 100 pop, 1.0 telephone lines per 100 pop, 0.6 computers per 100 pop, and 0.2 internet hosts per 1000 pop. Averaged numbers that would be much lower in Maasailand. Compare this to United States: 44.4 cell phones per 100 pop, 66.5 telephone lines per 100 pop, 62.3 computers per 100 pop, 375.1 internet hosts per 1000 pop. *The Economist World in Figures 2004* pub. Profile Books Ltd, 58A Hatton Garden, London

⁴¹ Based on multiple conversations with Maasai people and our own experience.

⁴² Norton-Griffiths, “Property Rights and the Marginal Wildebeest”: 1563

providing, on average, \$4,000 USD allowances for its own board members.⁴³ While the funds may or may not have been allocated poorly, the amount of the allowances is not unreasonable, especially considering the high cost of doing business in rural Kenya.

Also, the relative powerlessness of many local Maasai leaders in relation to the tourist industry is not always recognized, and that can lead to gaps in understanding the management and use of financial resources. One of the most startling examples we experienced has to do with the distribution of profits from tourists who visit cultural bomas. Cultural bomas are villages that host tourists and demonstrate aspects of Maasai culture in exchange for money. Cultural bomas were originally created by Maasai village leadership as a way to bring tourist revenues to the direct benefit of villages. However, in recent years, tour operators have begun to take all but a fraction of the profits. We had heard from many Maasai sources about this practice and decided to investigate. We found that tour operators recruit tourists in lodges and charge them roughly \$20 per person to visit a village. Upon arrival, tourists see the operators turn over the total amount collected to the village leader—tour operators explain that they are bringing tourists to the villages out of the “goodness of their hearts,” that they do not receive payment for their time. What tourists do not see is that the entire amount of up to \$200 is returned to the tour operator once the tourists’ attentions are occupied elsewhere, and the village leader receives back only 400 KSH, or roughly \$5 USD. Of that total profit, the village leader often must host the tour operator later that evening in a local bar in order to retain his business. Tourists that we spoke with who visited cultural bomas had been told that their money would be used to improve a local school or in other ways provide services to villagers. They expressed shock and judgment at the poverty of the villages, and most assumed that their money was being squandered by the village leader. Villages that complain about their treatment are quickly blacklisted by the network of tour operators and denied even the small sum of income.⁴⁴

During in our investigation into the boma scam, we interviewed many tourists on the entire process of visiting the villages and their impressions of what they saw. Over and over we recorded tourists reporting they felt “ripped off” or “cheated” by the experience. One visitor said, “[the visit] left a bad taste in my mouth about the Maasai. They obviously can’t manage money. I mean, I was counting in my head, if each of us in this van is giving you 20 bob [US\$] and maybe 2 or 3 vans come here a day, then why are they still showing us a run-down old school?” Another tourist questioned even the validity of the boma itself, stating, “I don’t even think they are real villages. Nobody would want to live like that, in those houses. The homes are made of mud and cow dung; there’s no electricity or running water. No one in their right minds would actually live there.”

Each conversation confirmed the procedure of being approached by a tour operator and asked to pay between \$15 and \$20 per visitor, and even being asked to donate further to special funds (organized by the operator) for building schools. In one instance, our Maasai colleague was solicited by a member of a cultural boma to bring our van of students to a village, saying it would only cost him a few dollars. “A few dollars?” he repeated in English, and the solicitors nervously hushed him saying, “You charge them whatever you want and keep the difference.”

Further exploitation connected to the tour operator system includes tour drivers discouraging visitors from purchasing jewelry and other crafts within the bomas. Operators recommend buying from specific roadside shops where they receive commission from the shop owners in exchange for consistent business. This not only diverts critical income from Maasai artisans, but also encourages the production of fake Maasai products to be sold throughout East Africa. Often tourists are not aware of such practices or decide to buy directly from the many Maasai women selling goods on roadsides or at the gates of the park entrances. Like the boma situation, however, these women make a sale for perhaps 500 KSH (\$6.50 USD) for 10 handmade bracelets and then immediately are forced to pay out 90-95% of their earnings to a middleman waiting nearby.

The combination of insufficient resources and privatization of property is leading to a fracturing of interest among and within Maasai communities, as it has in other indigenous communities throughout the world, and to a growing gap in relative income among Maasai people. As in other instances of systemic oppression, however, it is difficult

⁴³ Thompson and Homewood, “Entrepreneurs, Elites and Exclusion in Maasailand”: 31

⁴⁴ see published article

to focus blame on how resources are distributed among Maasai people when one looks at the larger economic realities of the tourism industry.

The park fees generated by tourists are relatively insignificant compared to profits generated by the private sector. The tourist industry currently generates roughly 2,280,000,000 KSH (\$30 million USD) in total revenues each year; the larger part of that money remains in the hands of entrepreneurs and leaves Maasailand. Of more than two-dozen large lodges and luxury camps in and around Masai Mara, the vast majority is owned by large corporations and chains. For example, the twelve Serena Hotels in Kenya and Tanzania, all but one of which are on or near Maasailand, are a division of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development. The Sweetwaters Game Reserve, one of the twelve, was once “the private domain of famed millionaire Adnon Kashoggi.”⁴⁵ The Governors’ Family has six lodges in Kenya, four of which are on Maasailand. The first Governors’ Camp, the company proudly acknowledges, was built “on the spot once reserved for Kenya’s colonial governors.”⁴⁶ Double rooms range from \$200 to \$1,000 per night in high season.

To estimate profits generated by the lodges, we interviewed management in several different lodges of varying price; all requested anonymity. In one example, the lodge saw 45,870 guests between January and December 2004. At \$260 USD per double room, their most modest annual income estimate is close to \$6,000,000 USD, but is most likely closer to \$10,000,000 USD. Operational costs are obviously higher in rural Kenya than more industrialized areas, but like most lodges in the area, this establishment is pumping “free” water from ground springs, using intermittent generators for electricity, harvesting wood from Maasailand for their incinerator and paying employees bare minimum wage. Similarly sized lodges charged rates of \$220–\$250 USD per night and reported consistent capacity enough to generate roughly \$8-10,000,000 USD annually.⁴⁷

Maasai villages see very little of this profit. Lodges typically hire few people from surrounding villages, and those employed are paid unlivable wages-- typically \$40 USD per month. In the communities surrounding Masai Mara, the average income for households with one or more members employed in the tourism industry is \$1,145.73 USD. Maasai villages also make various arrangements with tour companies, such as the one described above, to bring income into the community. In the group ranches surrounding Masai Mara, one-third of Maasai households benefit through arrangements with tour companies. Families received on average \$971 USD per year (equal to value of 10 acres of corn.) Only families lucky enough to be located in certain areas have this option. 63% of households get no revenue.⁴⁸

Among those that do, a particularly exploitative employment practice is common throughout the lodges, resembling a form of indentured servitude. At each of the lodges we visited, no more than 27% of the staff hired were local Maasai, despite the fact that the Narok County Council recommends at least 75% local employment.⁴⁹ A significant portion of those Maasai working in lodges do so under the title of “casual” or “training” employment. The former status operates mostly as seasonal or part-time work, usually in positions of grounds maintenance or entertainment for guests. These “training programs” are often ways for lodges to avoid giving raises to full staff or promoting those in lower stations. Typically a Maasai trainee is hired on a contingent basis and asked to prove dependability and qualifications for a trial period; at each point of review, the trial period is extended, and the lodge is exempt from providing salary.

Our interview with a Maasai employee “Joseph” exemplifies the conditions of working as a trainee at a major lodge in Masai Mara. Joseph has a Nairobi University degree as a Naturalist and was hired as a trainee to lead walking safaris and act as a wildlife resource for guests. Joseph walks close to 2 hours to work each day for his 6-8 hour shifts. The Lodge charges \$10 USD per person for his daily tours. At the time of our interview, Joseph had been working as a trainee for 15 months without receiving any pay. When asked why he has not complained more to the management, he explained, “The need for work is so high. They can let you go if you don’t like your pay.” At the

⁴⁵ www.serenahotels.com/kenya/sweetwaters/home.

⁴⁶ www.governorscamp.com

⁴⁷ Interview with lodge manager, 5/17/05

⁴⁸ Thompson and Homewood, “Entrepreneurs, Elites and Exclusion in Maasailand”

⁴⁹ Interview with lodge manager, 5/17/05 and staff at the Mara Simba lodge, 5/30/05

same establishment we found at least 2 other trainees willing to disclose their situation, each working for close to 2 years and receiving little to no compensation.⁵⁰

While Kenya's tourist industry could be a tremendous boon to Maasai communities and help them maintain their culture while meeting their basic needs, Maasai people are excluded from the industry's profits. Though Maasai communities own the land therefore theoretically have leverage, they lack the resources to make use of it. They are unable to compete for tourist dollars because the playing field is unequal. As one researcher notes, "there are such manifest inequalities between the initial endowments of the parties in terms of wealth, information, political connections and experience in commercial negotiations that the free market approach cannot effect either an optimal or a sustainable outcome."⁵¹

But Maasai communities do own the land, and they are getting their needs met; unfortunately, they are often doing so at the cost of conservation. The problem, according to a 1995 analysis of Maasai economic options in the Mara region, is that tourism does not provide enough benefit to Maasai people, and so they are developing their land for higher gain. This study calculates the real cost to Maasai people of maintaining their land for conservation, as opposed to developing it for agriculture or other more lucrative options. It reaches a startling conclusion: if Maasailand were fully developed, Maasai people in the Mara group ranches would receive annual income of \$28.8 million dollars, compared to the \$1.3 million that they currently receive in profits from their land. The report states that this amount "represent[s] the compensation due each year to the Maasai or freezing their land development at its present stage." It equals 89% of the total tourist revenues of \$30 million generated in the Mara area, and is equal to \$80 per visitor per day. However, the author argues that the true benefits of keeping the Mara area under conservation are much greater than the lost opportunity costs—that "benefits from biodiversity conservation in the Mara Area... amount to some \$93 million USD..." In other words, if the true economic value of maintaining wildlife habitat on Maasailand were calculated, that amount would far exceed the amount that might be paid to Maasai people to compensate them for their lost opportunity. The \$93 million USD includes benefits to Kenya, through forestry, watershed erosion and flood control and the value of "yet undiscovered pharmaceutical products" and direct support to "biodiversity conservation in Kenya from the international community."⁵²

The Next Steps

The research presented here is not intended to be conclusive or to encompass the obviously complex situations in Maasailand. Rather, this report has been drafted as a means to survey what issues need further investigation by our team, other scholars, and all parties concerned with the preservation of East Africa's wilderness, Kenya's tourism industry, and the future of Maasai people. Our methodology is a demonstration of the primary intention of this work; to include Maasai voices in the scholastic and political conversations about their land. Finally, we have compiled this information to bring a sense of urgency to the investigation of tourism in Maasailand and address the devastating exploitation of both land and local people that is continues to occur at this very moment.

⁵⁰ Interviews 5/17/05 and 5/18/05

⁵¹ Norton-Griffiths, "Property Rights and the Marginal Wildebeest": 1564

⁵² Norton-Griffiths, "Property Rights and the Marginal Wildebeest": 1568