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Ecotourism in the Masai Mara: An Interview with Meitamei Ole Dapash

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Meitamei Ole Dapash is the Executive Director of the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition (MERC), an organization founded in 1987 to address ecotourism, environmental protection issues, and Maasai land rights. In an interview with guest editor Megan Epler Wood, Dapash discusses the history, current state, and future of ecotourism in the Masai Mara region.

MEW: Please start by briefly describing the Masai Mara region as a tourist attraction and how it has changed over the years.

MD: There is no doubt that the Masai Mara is one of the best and most popular tourist attractions in Kenya. I think that there are a lot of reasons that led to the Masai Mara becoming a really popular tourist place in the country. The number one reason is security, which the local governing body, the Narok County Council, was able to provide. Also poaching wasn't a major problem in that region for a very long time.

MEW: Do you think it is the best place to view wildlife in Kenya?

MD: No, not at all. The Masai Mara is actually suffering right now. A lot of other areas where wildlife can be viewed are not being visited. Let me just say that the publicity which the Mara has received has obviously contributed to the kind of tourist influx that we have seen over the years. But if security could be enforced in other parts of Kenya, then probably the Masai Mara could be relieved of the pressure it is experiencing right now from tourism.

MEW: What is the history of Maasai land ownership in the Mara? And what is the status of local people's land rights?

MD: I don't know if people really understand what led to the creation of the Masai Mara Wildlife Preserve. What I have heard from my people over the years was that this was a very important grazing area. The Masai Mara, like all the surrounding areas, was communal land used for grazing by the Maasai people. Then, the colonial government found it necessary to start creating conservation areas. The Masai Mara was seen as one of the most attractive places for a wildlife preserve. Let me step back a little to say the land tenure system in Kenya does not recognize communal land ownership, and the Maasai are not known for individual ownership of their land. Their land ownership system is based on communal belonging, based on the community sharing the land and resources found on that land. Therefore, when the Masai Mara was demarcated, it was carved out of the Maasai land, and a number of group ranches were created that are adjacent to the preserve.

MEW: How did the original entrepreneurs that set up tourism camps in the reserve negotiate their right to operate businesses?

MD: There are some lodges that are located in the Masai Mara that were built in the very early days of the Masai Mara, in the '60s. One example is the Keekorok Lodge, and the other is the Serena Lodge. At that time, the deals were between the entrepreneurs and the Ministry of Local Government. The presidency, also, always has a role to play in these things. Now, over a period of time the Narok County Council became very strong, and the Maasai representatives in Parliament realized that actually the Council was beginning to make a lot of money.

MEW: So it would be fair to say that up to that point there was no local involvement in tourism development?

MD: Oh absolutely not. I don't even know if there is any even now. Let me just give you a picture here. The Ministry of Local Government actually gained a lot of prominence after 1978 in Kenya. As a result, a lot of County Councils in the country are in charge of a number of conservation areas. Let's use the Narok County Council as an example. I think it serves as the best example. This County Council became extremely powerful, but their power was by proxy.

MEW: From the top down, not the bottom up?

MD: Exactly, from the top down.

MEW: I guess what I want to find out is, are these counselors representing the local people? And if not, why not?

MD: Unfortunately, no. The political arena in the Council is such that the elected council is actually seen to have more loyalty to the member of parliament. Secondly, the Chairman of the Council actually can single-handedly decide the way things should be run in the Council, so that the issue of community or local people's representation here really doesn't arise. I mean, yes, people go there and vote for it, but that's about it. That's really, really about it. You cannot as a community person go to your Council and say, "You know, what is going on in the Masai Mara is wrong and we want it changed." It does not happen like that, which is very sad. Look at wildlife in that country: 65 percent of wildlife in Kenya is outside the protected areas, 65 percent of wildlife is actually in the communally-owned lands, and that should tell you how important it is for the local communities to have a voice in the decision-making processes of the local authorities.

MEW: Is part of the problem that there is a disconnect between traditional culture and the modern political system?

MD: Yes, about 50 percent of the communities live off the tourist circuits and have maintained a more traditional life. However, there is a lot of pressure for these people to change their way of life. Times are changing, and it's just almost impossible under the current conditions that the Maasai live to continue maintaining their culture. There is far too much pressure from local political and economic interests, from international economic interests, and from the neighboring communities that are demanding more land for agriculture. So I don't know how much longer there can be that 50 percent that still practices most of their traditions. I don't know how long they can be able to hold on.

Let me say, quite honestly, I see a very, very serious conflict between the traditional way of life and the modern political system. And I say a very serious conflict because, first of all, let us understand that the Maasai had their own way of doing things. They had a different type of economic system and form of livestock production and so forth, they had their own form of government, which enabled the Maasai to come this far as far as cultural preservation is concerned.

What happened right from colonial times is that there has been a deliberate effort, first by the colonial government and then by the subsequent governments, including the present one -- there has been a deliberate effort to dismantle all the social and political structures of the Maasai people and replace them with a modern form of government. Now, a chief, a traditional Maasai chief, is replaced with a politically-appointed chief or a counselor, and the power of these traditional leaders has been eroded completely. And the community that doesn't understand this is driven into a state of confusion. So there is a very serious conflict.

MEW: I wanted to get that clearly stated, so that we could talk about why tourism is such a problem in the way that it's managed now. I would like you to address why tourism has brought so much corruption to the Masai Mara region.

MD: Tourism has brought a lot of problems to the Mara region for a number of reasons. One of them is that 90 percent of the persons in the tourism industry are not Maasai people. These are people who are interested in profits, quick profits. These are people who do not look at the Masai Mara and the surrounding areas as a resource that should be there in the next hundred years. These are people who basically are profit-driven, and therefore they do not feel the responsibility, or the need to enhance sustainable forms of tourism. They do not care to plan how to utilize this natural resource without destroying it.

Secondly, because tourism in Kenya really has become a major industry, it has attracted local Maasai entrepreneurs. Some of our own people have seen the potential and in the process have tried to get in the mainstream of the tourism industry. And in the process of that, and in forming alliances with external economic interest groups, they have compromised quite a lot. They have compromised the interests of their own people, compromised the interest of the environment, and the entire Masai Mara region as a resource. Some of our own people are quite responsible for what's going on right now.

Thirdly, we have a government that has a poor environmental record. Actually, I think that Kenya has some of the best environmental policies in the region, but it does not enforce them. And the reason why these environmental policies are not being enforced is because some of

the people who are extremely powerful in the government control tourism in the Mara region. Environmental regulations are seen as an economic threat by these powerful people.

MEW: Do you think the very fact that a traditional society still lives in the region has enabled others to take advantage of the situation?

MD: I would say yes, and I would say no. Once you have a people who clearly do not understand how the modern system works, how things are run in the 1990s, just because they still live the way they have done for centuries, that really puts them in a disadvantaged position, and as a result, it's very easy to take advantage of them. It's very easy to manipulate them, it's very easy to con them, it's very easy to abuse them. So, that is why I say yes.

Now, the reason I say no is that it's almost impossible in Kenya today to stand in the way of powerful people, and especially those that have greater monetary and political power. So whether or not all the Maasai are living like the other Westernized communities in Kenya, as long as those powerful individuals in the government are there and have an interest in that resource, it will not make a difference.

MEW: How aware are local people -- especially the pastoralists -- of the corruption problem, and how have they tried to respond to it?

MD: I think for a long time they were not aware of the level of corruption going on in the Masai Mara, but at some point -- to be very specific, starting around 1990 -- we saw greed and corruption come out in the open, where people were even going to the extent of just annexing land in the adjacent area to the reserve for tourist hotel development. We have seen families being displaced by investors in the tourism industry. We have seen some of the Maasai people themselves collude with either the local County Council officials, or some other outside interest groups to steal land from the Maasai people. There are some Maasais who have education and have been watching this over a period of time and are talking to their relatives. And with just these questions, slowly the people are awakening, and they are much much more aware that there is a lot of corruption going on right now.

MEW: Can we talk about one example? Can we discuss the Boma System?

MD: Well, a Cultural Boma is a village supposedly created by the Maasai people who want to be able to sell their artifacts to the tourists directly without going through the middleman, to display their culture. Bomas are a place where tourists can go and interact with and take pictures of the Maasai people. Those who were involved in the Cultural Bomas say that these Bomas have enabled the Maasai to earn some money through tourism, which is about the only

way that the Maasai earn any money directly from tourism. Now, let me say that the originator of this idea was a fellow that worked for Narok County Council, and he started just one Boma by the eastern entrance of the Masai Mara Wildlife Preserve.

It was just an idea brought forth, and the communities that were given this proposal didn't object to it. But there was no procedure, there was really no clear procedure as to who should collect the money and how it should be used. For example, there are self-appointed chiefs who collect money on behalf of the people and the truth is this money usually ends up just in one or two people's pockets. So unless somebody sells a bracelet or a necklace directly to a tourist, chances are that they will not see any money from this Boma. Over a period of time these Bomas have enriched certain people, but I don't think that it's benefiting the Maasai people at all.

But the concept is good, if the people themselves, the participants, can be allowed to have a say and to play a role in the management and the decision making, I think they would probably change things. But then, there is the other side of things which is the one that really troubles me. And that is these Bomas have provided an incredible opportunity for the people in the tourism industry, the tourists, and other players, to truly abuse the Maasai people, and I have a very serious problem with that.

MEW: In what sense, why is that true?

MD: For example, I can give you one very typical example, and this is not the first time. In 1989, there was a video that was actually going the rounds in Germany, and some Maasai fellow was traveling there and somehow happened to see this video. It was just a very demeaning documentary. It depicted a Maasai couple engaging in sexual intercourse. Which is just...it's terrible. Now, you have to ask yourself, how did this happen?

MEW: How did they [the filmmakers] get the thing [the video]?

MD: Now, here you have tourists and you have a guide, a tour guide, who is talking to these people, and waving money in their face. They tell them, you have to do this, you're going to make a lot of money, you're going to get rich and that kind of thing, and that is how that happened.

MEW: Was this directly related to the Cultural Boma system?

MD: Oh, absolutely. So you can see our concern as a community that while these cultural villages directly benefit the Maasai through the selling of artifacts, they are also the source of abuse and exploitation.

MEW: Is there a way tourism can be in harmony with the Maasai culture and the ecology of the region? What would that be and is ecotourism a possible model?

MD: Believe me, right now, I am quite pessimistic. The truth is that I do not see very much right now in the way of trying to address the problems that are going on in the Masai Mara. Tourism is truly endangering the survival of that park. But it is not just that park; for years people have been talking about the Masai Mara and the surrounding areas. It is tiring. The Mara alone cannot exist without the adjacent communal lands. We must start focusing on the entire Masai Mara region as the area that is having all these problems. I don't see any immediate solutions to this problem.

People have talked about ecotourism. I think it is a concept that I support. I like the idea. However, let me register my very serious reservations about the effectiveness of ecotourism and its ability to address the problems seen in the Masai Mara. The reasons why I am saying this is because, first of all, Kenya has over 2000 tour operators all struggling to bring in tourists, to make a profit and to stay in business. I don't know if these 2000+ tour operators would be willing to comply with ecotourism ideals; I am very skeptical about that. I am skeptical because of my previous experiences with the tourism industry in this country [Kenya] for a very long time. I know how they operate, how they view conservation, and how they view profits. I doubt that they would be willing to comply with ecotourism.

The government itself has not shown support to the ecotourism idea. Even if your organization [The Ecotourism Society] came up with a really fantastic plan, and even if they obtained resources in the form of money or whatever is required to implement the ecotourism idea; I do not see the seriousness of the government (or even the local authorities) to support this endeavor. As long as you don't have that support it is a problem. Is it possible? Yes, it is very possible. It would take serious dedication, involvement, collaboration, and participation from all groups concerned with this. In the absence of any other option we could pursue ecotourism, but I think that first and foremost, there must be a step towards harmonizing the relations between the local community and the local tourism industry. These groups need to come together as equal players, as interested parties. I am sure that with a lot of seriousness and good will this could happen.

MEW: I would like to know about your organization, MERC. What is it, and what role does it play, particularly regarding the issues that we have discussed?

MD: MERC stands for Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition. We are an organization that was founded for and by the Maasai people. We are 100 percent Maasai. The truth is, these very problems that we are discussing here are what motivated a group of us to form this organization. We are working on not only ecotourism and environmental protection issues, but also Maasai indigenous land rights. At the core of all these issues is land ownership, which is our biggest concern. At the rate that the Maasai are losing land right now, I don't know where we will be in the next 20 years. So we advocate Maasai indigenous land rights, we work on general environmental and wildlife conservation issues, and we are interested in empowering more people through economic, social and political development. We are also involved in cultural preservation and all other issues that affect our people. Now, for a very long time, we were not able to make any headway, especially tackling the complex issues that we have just discussed.

MEW: When was MERC founded?

MD: Let me say 1987. But really, we were not able to make any significant impact until 1995. One of our biggest problems is obviously a lack of resources. The local communities in the Maasai areas do not have resources, and as a result, they cannot really support our programs. But we have one great tool that is more than anything else, and that is the will to work as advocates for our people, in all the ways I have just mentioned. That is the biggest weapon we have, and we hope to be around for many more years.

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