

Handing Over the Homelands by Kaitlin Noss

Prescott College students forge public policy, strong bonds as they help the Maasai to regain stewardship of the Amboseli wildlife refuge.

It's dawn, and our van full of students, teachers, and College board members bounces over unpaved park roads in the Amboseli National Park. A pair of grey-crowned cranes extends their wings near the edge of a precious and dwindling swamp. Just behind them, a group of zebras takes turns bowing to the water and keeping an eye out for



lions. We drive away from Mt. Kilimanjaro, its ice cap turned pink by the rising sun, and out of Amboseli. During our six weeks on course in Kenya, we have seen over a hundred species of birds, have come to know the intimate conversations of several families of elephants, and have been woken in the night by the sound of wildebeest bones cracking in hyena jaws outside our tents.

But, while the wildlife is breathtaking, it is not the only reason we're in Kenya. This morning we are driving to Kajiado town to present our research to the Olkajiado County Council, the locally elected representatives of one of the largest areas of Maasailand. We've collected evidence supporting the return of the Amboseli Wildlife refuge to control of the Maasai, traditional inhabitants and stewards of the region.

Each summer a Prescott College class travels to Maasailand to undertake a new research question that has been identified by the Maasai as particularly critical to the well-being of the people and environment of the region. The questions are identified in a consensus-based process facilitated by the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition. This year's class of 15 comprises the second year of PC's field study program in Kenya. The program has emerged from a years-long relationship between Cultural and Regional Studies faculty Mary Poole and Maasai activist and visiting faculty Meitamei Ole Dapash. The collaboration continues year round, from both Prescott and Maasailand, to support community-initiated projects dealing with clean water, HIV/AIDS, women's micro-lending cooperatives, and culturally competent education.

The course, *Maasailand: Community Perspectives on Conservation*, immerses students in foundational cultural and environmental studies curricula, but the deepest learning comes from the process of researching and writing a paper that will have direct impact on a current issue among Maasai people. The research is approached across disciplines, encouraging Resident Degree Program (RDP) students from Environmental Studies, Cultural and Regional Studies, Arts and Letters, and Adventure Education backgrounds to get involved and share their particular expertise. Through this process students make connections across the disciplines, develop authentic relationships within the community they are visiting, and immediately share the benefit of their education.

At the end of the dusty drive, our van pulls up to the County chambers, where we are greeted by Maasai representatives in suits. We are led into a mahogany-paneled room where we will turn over the culmination of our summer's work to the most powerful and recognized governing body for over half of Maasailand. They have been awaiting our finished product. The issue at hand has become increasingly urgent since we began our work, and we are aware of the potential national impact.

This year, the future of Amboseli National Park itself, with its legendary elephants, rebounding cheetah population, and one of the most photographed horizons on the

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planet, is the issue we've been requested to investigate. Last November, President Kibaki proclaimed that the park would return to Olkajiado Council, who, in fact, hold the legal title to it, and therefore to the communities that share their surrounding homes with the wildlife.

The presidential decision met with hot opposition, especially from international conservation groups who claimed that Maasai leadership was unfit to manage the prized park. The local Maasai communities recognized the turnover as a political tactic, but they saw the opportunity to readdress the issue of governmental land-grabs by fighting for the rightful return of park revenues, without which communities have suffered for the past 30 years. While international non-governmental organizations waged a million-dollar media campaign against the turnover of the Amboseli, PC students and faculty combed through the Kenya National Archives, interviewed dozens of Maasai elders, surveyed World Bank water projects, visited government schools, and worked nearly round the clock to help bring Maasai perspectives into the debate. After weeks of living with Maasai communities, taking classes from Maasai experts, and meeting with Maasai university students, our PC class compiled the research and wrote a lengthy report on the history and current status of the Amboseli area.

In the chambers there is an air of excitement and profundity as students realize the crucial role they and their classwork play in this social action. After Professor Poole presents the key findings, we hand over the document. The Maasai leadership immediately begin making phone calls. They're distributing the findings, generating publicity around the Maasai communities' position on the park turnover, bolstering the Maasai lawyer's current court case against the international NGOs, and informing the national Parliamentarians who review indigenous land rights.

The Maasai share in the excitement of the students. "We have worked with many universities over the years," said Tarayia Ole Kores, Chairman of the Olkajiado County Council. "We have helped many students put together dissertations and get their Ph.D.'s, but until today, we have not received any tangible product in return."

The benefits of this collaboration are just as tangible for the group from Prescott College. We are asked to participate in a Nairobi press conference on our findings, and find ourselves on Kenyan national television discussing national policy. We have also stayed with Maasai families and learned about their pastoral land management strategies, and learned about the land from indigenous experts while immersed in the Amboseli ecosystem. Far more than through the typical safari or field study experience, Prescott College students have been able to find deep hope as they forged a partnership between communities across the globe.

At the end of our meeting with the Olkajiado County Council, RDP student Maria Cunha speaks on behalf of



the class, saying, "We want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts, for helping us realize what a privilege and gift we have in our educations. We want to thank the Maasai community for empowering us to use our education as a tool for social change."

The great outdoors that we were enabled to enjoy while in Kenya, living among the flora and fauna of the Great Rift Valley, has survived for millennia in large part because of local indigenous management. Prescott College is working to conserve that landscape by supporting local Maasai initiatives and helping to address the social issues that are inextricably linked to environmental preservation.