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“THE STATE OF THE GAME”

Observations on Conservation of Large Mammals in Kenya

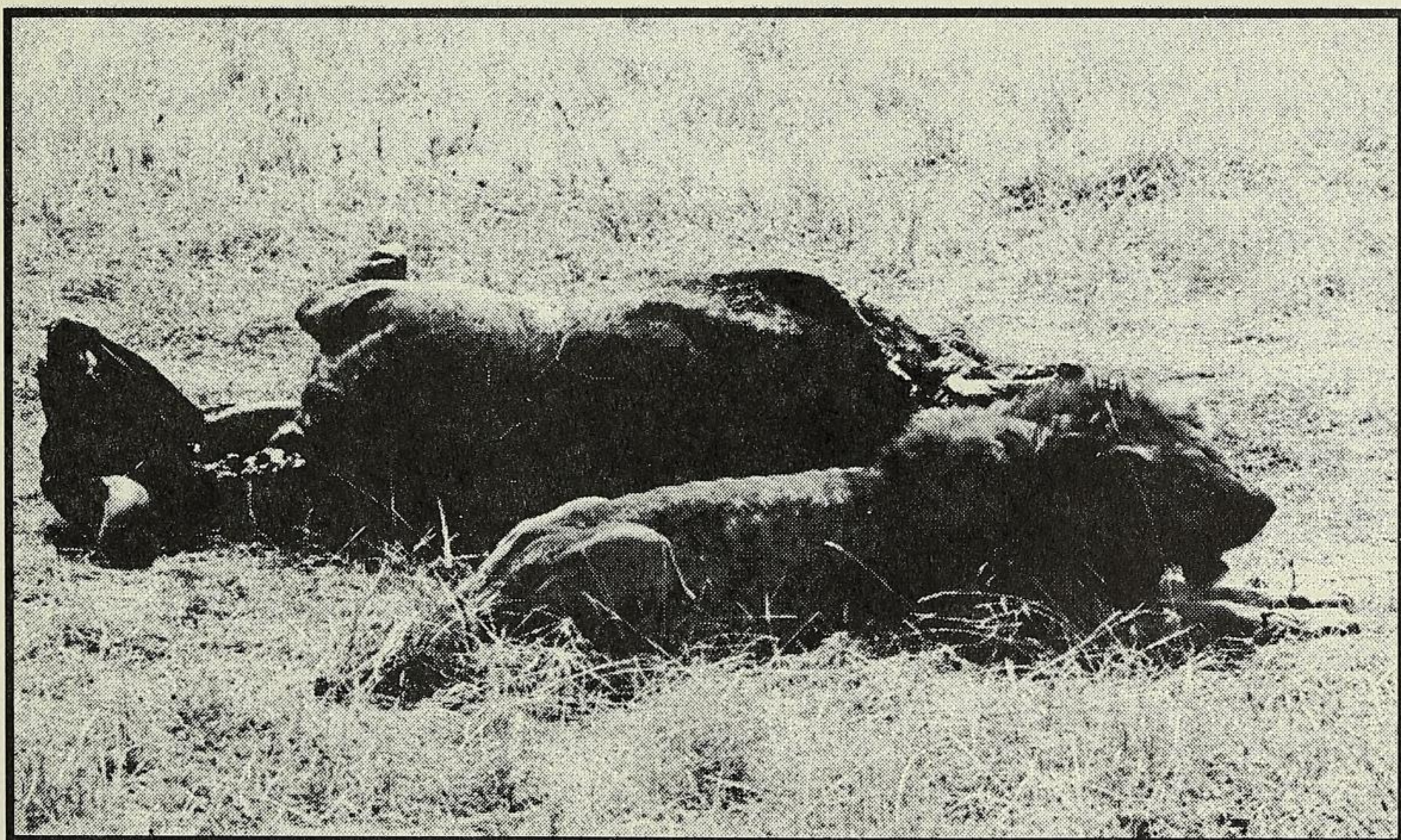
By

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East Africa remains the ultimate travel experience for natural history tourists, large mammal conservation biologists and zookeepers. Together, Kenya and its neighbor Tanzania contain more large mammals (gazelle size or larger) than the rest of Africa combined. I have taken eight trips to Kenya: one as a researcher, two as a tourist and five as a tour escort. My first trip was in 1979 and I have traveled to Kenya three times in the past two years with my most recent safaris in February/March and June of 2002. Changes are happening with wildlife conservation in Kenya; some are negative and some positive. This article will address my observations and what I believe the future holds for Kenya's efforts to conserve one of the largest wildlife populations remaining on the planet.

I will begin with Nairobi National Park (Nairobi N.P.), located on the doorstep of one of the largest and most vibrant cities in Africa. The city of Nairobi's neighboring reserve has always fascinated me. Nowhere else on earth can any country claim a natural ecosystem complete with large predators literally a 20-minute drive from its major international airport or its national capital. With a bit of luck you can hire a taxi in either the Nairobi city center or Jomo Kenyatta Airport, enter the park, and not only see a diverse collection of large animals but have the chance to see a large predator. During my 19 trips to Africa the only successful large mammal kill I ever witnessed was from a taxi at the Nairobi N.P. Observation Point where I saw a full maned lion pull down and throttle a wildebeest in November 1989. I have always imagined the U.S. equivalent to that sighting would be spotting a mountain lion taking down an elk while driving on the Washington D. C. beltway. Nairobi N.P. remains an exceptional wildlife experience. I always prefer to start my Kenyan safaris for first-time visitors here since participants are assured of seeing most of the common East African safari creatures—baboon, vervet monkeys, impala, giraffe and zebra. Nairobi N.P. is also the best place (and probably the best protected) in the wild to see the black rhino. I have seen at least one in every visit I've made to the park and, on occasion, up to a half dozen during a single game drive. Other frequently observed animals include eland, African buffalo, hartebeest, waterbuck, bushbuck, both Grant and Thomson gazelle and Nile crocodile. Seeing predators, particularly lions, was once a fifty/fifty proposition but no longer.



Nairobi National Park - male lion at buffalo kill, an increasingly rare sight.

For years the migration routes for a large population of migrant herbivores- wildebeest, zebra, eland and African buffalo that used the park during central Kenya's dry season have slowly been constricted by settlement and agriculture. The park is fenced on three sides and the migrants moved in and out of this partially forested and well-watered conservation area (a small reserve of only 44 sq. miles/ 114 sq. km) to the unfenced seasonally dry open plains to the south (an area more than ten-times the size of the reserve). However, the park's migrants had always managed to find their way around the obstacles human development placed in their path and concentrated in the reserve when water sources on the surrounding plains dried up. The predators, particular lions, would have a plentiful supply of prey during the dry season and this temporary bounty allowed lionesses to successfully rear litters of cubs.

As a result of the migration, the park had one of the highest recorded predator densities in Africa. The migration, however, has not entered the park since the year 2000. The cause was not the final cutting of the game paths into the park, as many feared, but the building of a large water impoundment for livestock south of the reserve. The impoundment now provides a year-round water source so the migrant herbivores no longer have to leave the short grasses (which are ideal for avoiding predators) they prefer for the long grasslands of the park (excellent cover for predators). Meanwhile, because of the lack of grazing by the migrant herds, the grasses of the reserve grow longer and therefore become less palatable, less nutritious and more dangerous to the resident grazers (hartebeest, impala, waterbuck and Thomson and Grant gazelle) whose numbers are now dropping as well.

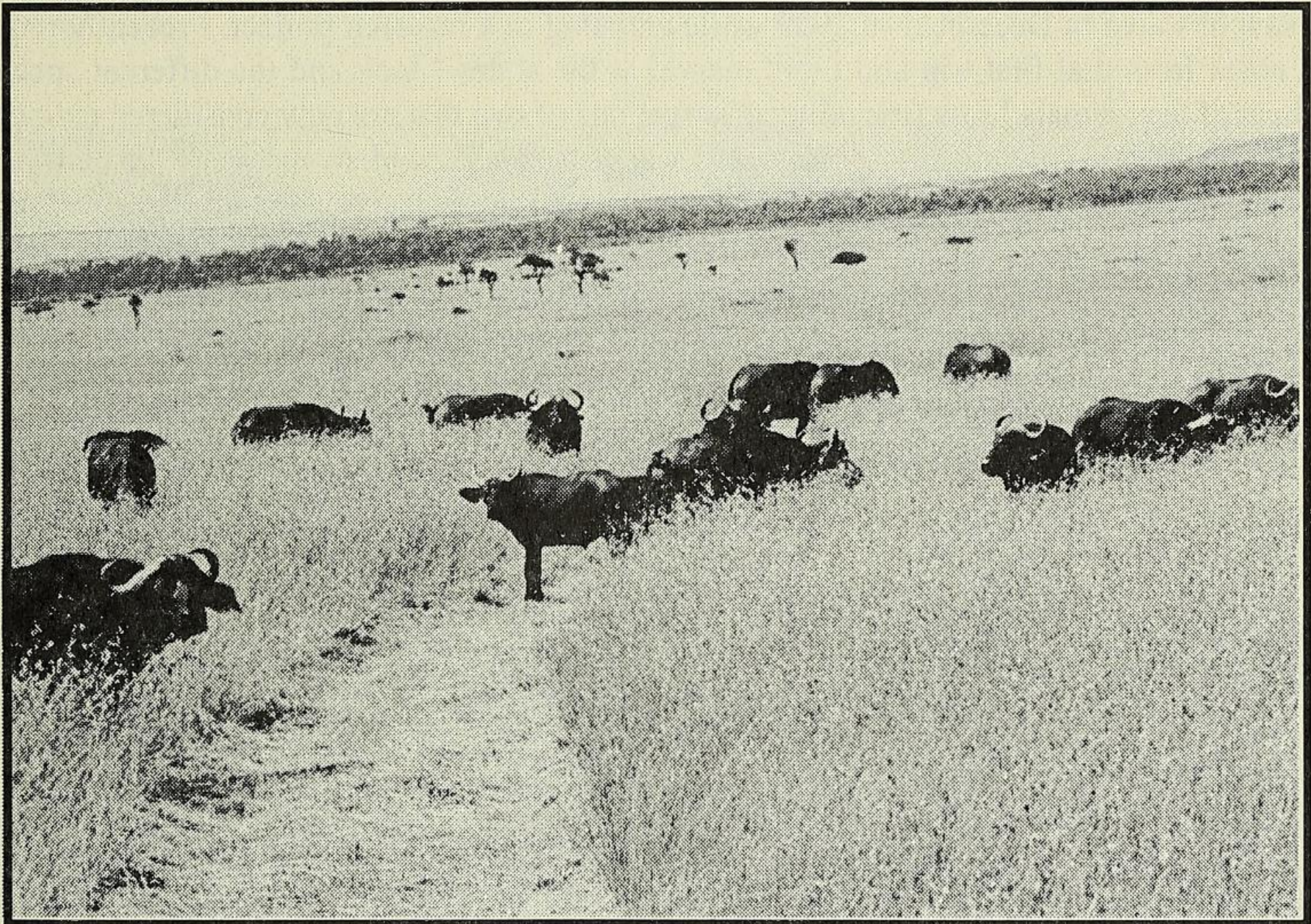
The lions have responded by leaving the park for the open grasslands to the south where they, unfortunately, often end up in conflict with local livestock herders and are shot or poisoned. Several conservationists have suggested that the Kenya Wildlife Service acknowledge the inevitable and totally fence the Nairobi Park, restock it with game, and intensely manage the area for the benefit of the great cats, thereby attracting more tourists to the reserve. Others hope to manipulate the park's ecology through controlled burning to enrich habitat for grazers and hopefully provide the same former bounty that supported the previous large number of predators. Whatever course is chosen, Nairobi N. P. will no longer be a naturally functioning ecosystem, a pity but, in my opinion, an unfortunate reality.

To see the future of Nairobi National Park (Nakuru N.P.) one need only look to its sister reserve, Nakuru National Park located a bit to the north in Kenya's Great Rift Valley. Once renowned for its diverse avifauna, particularly immense flocks of flamingos, Nakuru N.P. was also known as the best area in Kenya to see the elusive leopard. The reserve retains these exceptional features and has added others. The park, now expanded to cover over 100 square miles (259 sq. km), has been stocked with various species of game. Within the reserve's confines can be found large herds of African buffalo, eland, zebra, gazelles and Rothschild's giraffes that have joined the resident impala, waterbuck and reedbuck. White rhinos from South Africa were introduced in the early 90's and now number over 50. They now share the park with a smaller number of their black rhino relatives. A few reintroduced cheetahs, spotted hyenas and lions have joined Nakuru's resident leopards. The lions are very active and are frequently observed on a daily basis stalking the park's large herds of buffalo, making Nakuru N.P. among the leading places in Kenya to see the great cats' hunting behavior. This increase in predators has produced some subtle changes to the ecology of the reserve. The open shoreline of Lake Nakuru was once one of the best places in Africa to see the bohor reedbuck, but the increase in predators has lowered their numbers and forced them to heavy cover. This, incidentally, is the same habitat and behavior that the reedbuck uses in other predator-heavy regions of East Africa so the introduction of lions and cheetah seems to have restored a more natural balance.

All of this wildlife is located a mere ten-minute drive from the downtown of Kenya's fourth largest city- Nakuru. The reserve is now what Nairobi Park was 20 years ago with one exception - the entire boundary is fenced. I ask my tour groups whether the leopards, lions, buffalo and rhino they observe in Nakuru N.P. are less wild and therefore less meaningful to them since the entire reserve

is fenced. No, they tell me, they get the same thrill seeing the wildlife at Nakuru as they do on the open ranges of Samburu, Amboseli and Masai Mara. Even though Nakuru is fenced and managed, the lions still earn their food the hard way by taking down and killing large dangerous prey. Nakuru has become one of the most striking and visitor-friendly wildlife reserves in Africa. If such a diverse, scenic, well-managed, accessible and profitable reserve were found in any West African country (a region that is for the most part a conservation "basket case" for large mammal conservation) it would be considered both a national and world-wide treasure. In Kenya, Nakuru N. P. almost seems to get lost among a number of more remote and "wilder areas".

One of these wilder areas, the Masai Mara National Reserve (Mara N. R.), is the best known of Kenya's wildlife areas. The Mara may, in fact, be the most spectacular wildlife area in the world (at the moment) and in the opinion of some conservationists (myself included) the Reserve is at a crossroads. The Mara eco-system is actually two separate entities. The first is the Mara N. R. - an area of over 600 sq. miles (1554 sq. km); the other is the surrounding Group Ranches- an area that totals over 1,400 sq. miles (3626 sq. km). Even when the numbers of game from the renowned Serengeti migration are dropped from wildlife counts, this combined area holds the greatest number of large mammals in Kenya and one of the largest wildlife populations in Africa. Those who are familiar with the Mara eco-system know that more plains game (wildebeest, zebra and gazelle) can be seen outside the Mara N. R than within its confines. When the Serengeti herds enter the Mara (usually during the months of July through September) more wildlife occurs within the reserve. The Mara N. R has been set aside for eco-tourism while within the Group Ranches, the local Masai live and follow their traditional livestock (cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys) herding culture. This traditional pastoral lifestyle of burning grazing lands and the suppression of predators have created ideal conditions for plains game.



African buffalo herd in Mara Triangle of the Masai Mara Game Reserve

In theory payments from tourist visits to any area of the Mara region are split among the local Masai communities. These payments are considered compensation for not allowing development on Group Ranch lands. In reality, the payments that the Masai are entitled to barely equal what the local communities could get by renting their grazing lands for wheat and barley production. What complicates conservation in the Mara even further is that these tourist fees seldom reach the

communities intended for them. The Mara region is under the control of the Narok County Council, which has had a long history of corruption and of siphoning off payments intended for local Group Ranches. Thirty years ago the Group Ranches held much more wildlife than the reserve, however recent surveys have shown a decline that reaches 90% for some antelope species. This drop in wildlife appears to be the result of increased livestock numbers, some poaching and the conversion of areas to the north of the Group Ranches (a region once used for Masai Group Ranch seasonal grazing) to grain production. Much of this crop of wheat and barley is sold to Kenya Breweries (the makers of Tusker Beer) and their competition, South African Breweries, (the makers of Castle Lager).

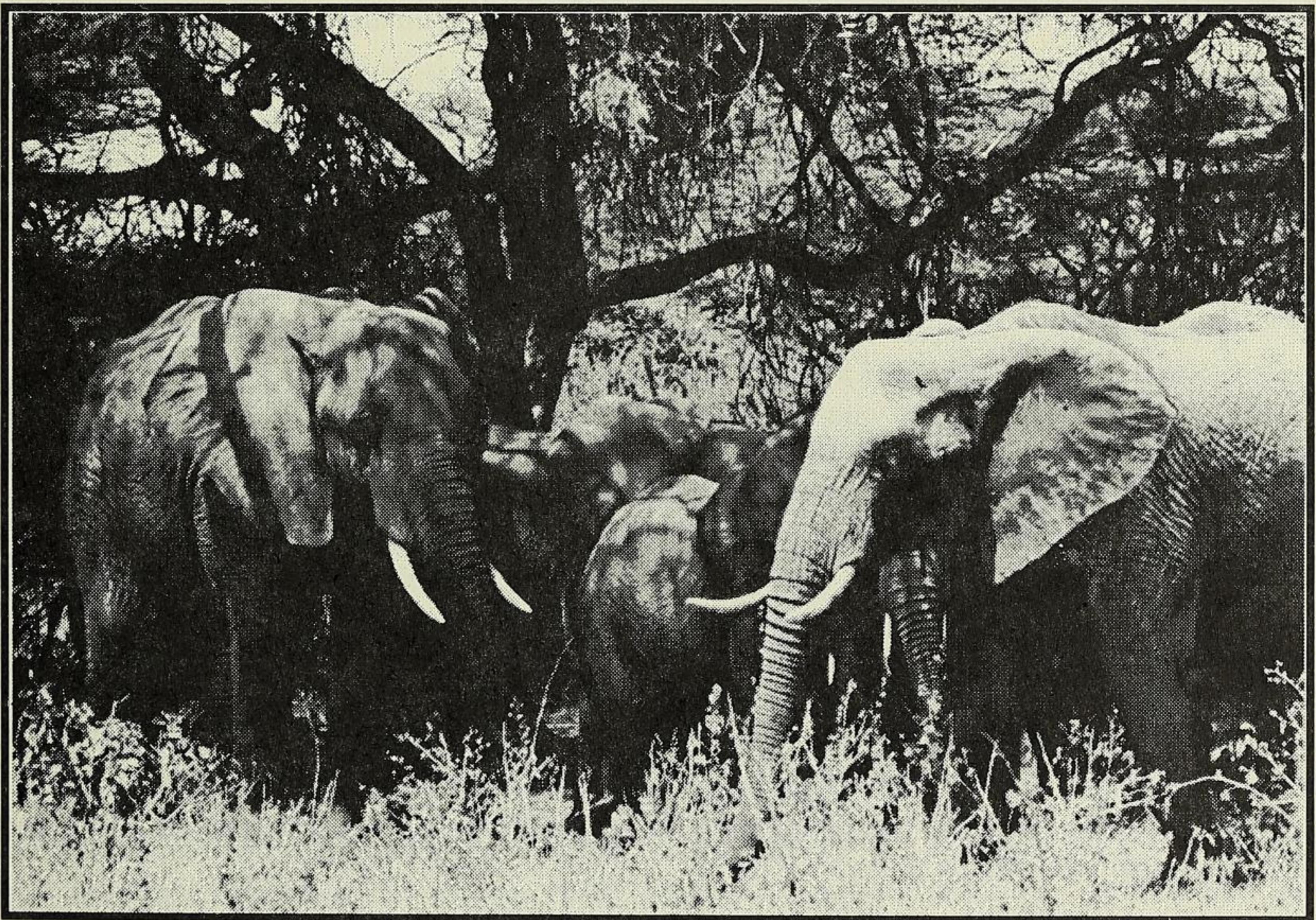
Three of my last four safaris to the Mara were to the eastern section of the reserve. On both trips I observed Masai cattle herds grazing within Mara N. R boundaries. The first time I saw this was in June of 2000 when a devastating drought had gripped Kenya. Allowing grazing within the reserve is therefore understandable since the Mara's very existence is due to the permission of the local Masai. However, in February and again in March of 2002, a time of ample rain and plentiful grasslands outside the reserve, I again observed cattle herds being grazed within the boundaries of the reserve. I have heard reports that the local Masai are asking to have a section of the Mara be de-gazetted (including the area that I observed) and be returned to the local Group Ranches. This request has a precedent since in the 1980's a section of over 100 sq. miles (259 sq. km) was removed from the reserve. I am not sure how much of this sentiment is due to the lack of support (i.e. tourist dollars) from the Narok County Council but I suspect it may be significant. Within this area of the reserve predator numbers, particularly lions, are high. Each of the lion prides that my groups observed had numerous well-fed cubs. If this area is removed from the Mara N.R., the Masai, who are generally intolerant of lions and hyenas, will likely limit the numbers of both species of predators.

Overall I consider the western Mara the most spectacular wildlife area I have ever experienced. I first saw this area in December of 1989 while assisting in a research project. I recently reread my field notes from that first trip and I still marvel at the slides I took and the different species and numbers of the animals I saw (including observations of two that are now considered extinct in the Mara- African wild dogs and roan antelope). I visited the western Mara again in 1995 and while this was not as spectacular as my first trip there, it was still impressive. On my latest safari to the western Mara in June 2002, I was immediately struck by the lower numbers of game and the amount of development in the village of Rianta, located near the entrance of the renowned Mara River Camp. What were once a few ramshackle wooden buildings and adjacent Masai bomas is now a small developed settlement. The road that was difficult to drive in 1995 I am sad to relate is now an even worse bone-jarring ordeal. I can remember the managers of the Mara River Camp, where I stayed previously, bitterly complaining then how some of their rental payments to the Narok County Council were intended to improve the road to their facility.

The battered rutted road continues until it crosses the bridge over the Mara River when all of a sudden you enter the friendly confines of the "Mara Conservancy". Entering this area you immediately see recently graded roads and readily visible wildlife. The Conservancy (a private enterprise) has changed the status quo dramatically and now directly manages this 180 sq. mile (466 sq. km) section of the Reserve called the Mara Triangle. The Conservancy has improved the roads, financed and organized anti-poaching patrols and has turned over 60% of the tourist fees it collects directly back to the adjacent communities bordering the Triangle. As a result, the local Masai now support the Reserve and have even leased a small portion of their communal grazing as a tourist concession area for nearby Kichwa Tembo Camp. Kichwa Tembo is part of a South African tourist consortium that follows a policy of involving local communities in the operation of its lodges and conducts conservation projects in the vicinity. One can also take night game drives in the concession area, something that is not allowed in Kenyan National Parks and Reserves. Unlike the other areas of the Mara I have visited recently, the Conservancy's Mara Triangle program, only 18 months old, appears to be a tremendous conservation success.

Similar progress appears to be happening in the Amboseli region. Two visits that I made here in 1991 and 1992 resulted in a dearth of predator sightings. This was after a period when the local Masai, angered at a rash of attacks on their livestock, launched a poisoning campaign against local predators. I was told that only two lions, both old and post-reproductive, were residing in the Park. I saw and photographed these two old cats and saw one spotted hyena during my visits. I returned to Amboseli in June of 2000 and saw lions and hyenas every day. The change in predator numbers was dramatic and is due to a concentrated effort to involve the local Masai in the operation of Amboseli National Park. This, again, is due to tourist revenues being given directly to the neighboring Masai communities. They also receive compensation for livestock losses and have been encouraged to set aside private concession areas for camping or lodges. As with the Mara Conservancy, wildlife numbers, particularly predators, have increased. Similar to the western Mara, some areas of communal grazing lands have become local community game sanctuaries as well.

My last three safaris included stops at the Buffalo Springs and Shaba National Reserves in the Samburu region of northern Kenya. This area of Kenya was, until the last few years, under assault from Somali poachers and bandits and the numbers of both tourist visits and wildlife populations dropped dramatically as a result. On my recent trips elephant family groups were particularly abundant and approachable. So were reticulated giraffe, oryx, gerenuk, Grant gazelle, waterbuck, desert-warthog and both the common and Grevy zebra. I saw herds of African buffalo here for the first time on my March and June trips along with cheetah and lion. I believe that the sharing of tourist fees (local communities receive at least half of tourist fees paid to enter the reserves) along with increased security, have allowed wildlife numbers to improve. In the Shaba Reserve game remains sparse since anti-poaching teams have only recently begun patrols. My tour drivers insist the lack of game is due to the disturbances and demands made on Shaba during the filming of the TV series "Survivor Africa". That filming did, however, bring much needed income to this impoverished region of Kenya and attention to the little known and previously neglected Shaba Reserve.



Buffalo Springs Reserve - Elephant numbers are increasing in this region of Kenya.

Another reason for the improvement in both the amount of wildlife and the security for tourists in this region of Kenya is the support and advice provided by the private game ranches located just to the south in the Laikipia region. Among the properties here are the Sweetwaters Ranch (which I got to visit for the first time this past spring) and the Lewa Conservancy (well known to AAZK members and "Bowling For Rhinos" supporters). The Laikipia region is the only area in Kenya where wildlife populations have actually increased in the past ten years. An elephant census has recently been completed and elephant numbers in Laikipia ranches and the Samburu/Buffalo Springs/Shaba Reserves have increased from 3,500 to over 5,000 in five years, an exceptional conservation success story. The same trends are holding for plains game and predators and Laikipia now has the most visible and perhaps the largest population of the greatly endangered African wild dog in Kenya. The Lewa Wildlife Conservancy has been a great part of this success. The Conservancy's emphasis on community education, with community security being essential to successful wildlife conservation, has provided an excellent model for regional conservation. By empowering local Kenyans with increased educational opportunities and training security teams that serve as a combination anti-poaching, anti-stock raiding and anti-bandit force, local people and wildlife have benefited.

In addition, last year elephants from Sweetwaters and Grevy zebras from Lewa were successfully reintroduced to Meru National Park, an area to the east that until recently experienced extraordinary poaching and neglect. Both white and black rhino (again animals drawn from breeding programs on the Laikipia Ranches) will shortly follow and if the current progress continues, Meru National Park will become one of Kenya's most spectacular wildlife reserves within the next ten years. The Lewa Conservancy believes that if security concerns in this region of Kenya continue to improve, the Laikipia Game Ranches could also provide wildlife to restock the rest of Northern Kenya. This region of Kenya will always be available for wildlife. The arid conditions make crop growing nearly impossible and the concentration of local cattle herders into settlements with schools and hospitals means that the region is slowly becoming depopulated. Managed with similar conservation programs now operating successfully in other regions of Kenya, this area, which comprises about one fifth of the country, could become a wildlife stronghold.

The entire AAZK organization, and particularly Andy Lodge (who first brought Lewa to the attention of AAZK), Patty Pearthree (who has kept "Bowling For Rhinos" going), the support of past and present AAZK boards and presidents, and the numerous AAZK Chapters of the organization, deserve our admiration for the long-term support of what I consider to be one of the most successful conservation programs in the world.

The long-term success of conservation in Kenya and the survival of its large mammal fauna are not assured. Kenya still has one of the highest birth rates in the Africa, although that rate declines year by year. Corruption within the country makes effective conservation and human aid programs costly and sometimes ineffective. The forests of the country are under heavy pressure. These forests are essential for watershed protection critical for agriculture (which not only feeds Kenya's people but also provides greatly needed export income) and the water sources for its conservation areas. What impressed me the most during my visits to Kenya is that the diversity and numbers of wildlife continues to hold on in spite of the odds against them. Kenya remains one of the few countries in Africa where wildlife is still commonly sighted outside National Parks and Reserves. Ultimately it will be Kenya's people who will decide the fate of its conservation programs and its fauna. However, successful community-based conservation projects now taking place adjacent to Amboseli National Park, the Mara Conservancy, the Samburu reserves, and particularly the Lewa Conservancy, give me a feeling of cautious optimism that Kenya's parks and reserves will contain ample visible wildlife for the foreseeable future.