

Why conservancies matter for wildlife conservation in Kenya



Tom Lalampaa is KWCA founding chairperson. He is the first African to receive the

prestigious Stanford University bright award that recognizes environmental pioneers and a 2013 TUSK Trust conservation award winner.

Space, or lack of it, is the elephant in the room in conservation all across Africa. While emotive factors such as human-wildlife conflict, poaching, and trafficking of wildlife products often capture newspaper headlines, loss of space is in fact the silent driver responsible for our rapid loss of biodiversity.

In Kenya this reality is stark. Habitat loss has decimated more than half of our wildlife, and few people are aware that only 8.2 per cent (47,820km²) of the country's land mass is under parks and

reserves. One park -- Tsavo National Park -- contributes nearly half this area with the rest spread across 23 terrestrial parks, 4 marine parks, 32 terrestrial reserves, 6 marine reserves, and 4 sanctuaries.

In contrast, Tanzania and Uganda have designated for conservation 32 per cent and 16 per cent of their terrestrial landscapes respectively.

Under Aichi target 11, Kenya, like all other countries signatory to the Convention on Biodiversity, made an international commitment to designate 17 per cent of its landscape for conservation



A black rhino in Lewa Conservancy. Today, as a result of extensive poaching, there are only about 540 left and most of them are concentrated in sanctuaries where they are protected from poachers.

by 2020. Considering that it is nearly impossible to create new parks without infringing on the land rights of people, we need to emphasize alternative forms of protected areas. Conservancies may provide the much needed approach to realizing this commitment.

Wildlife by nature require huge spaces to feed, breed and hide from predators, and keystone species like lion, cheetah and leopard require large territories and will kill any other individual of their own species strolling into their clearly marked area. An elephant can cover up to 80km a day in search of food and water, while a cheetah home range can exceed 150 km² to have enough

room to search for prey and avoid being killed by lions.

It is therefore a big challenge that parks and reserves cover an insufficient area compared to the needs of wildlife. In the Masai Mara ecosystem (6,650km²) -- where 30 per cent of the country's wildlife is found -- the formal protected area only represents 23 per cent (1510km²) of what is required by the migrating wildebeest and elephants.

Similarly, in Amboseli, the iconic and longest studied elephants in Africa roam an area of 5,700 km², while the national park only represents a mere seven per cent (392km²) of the ecosystem. If the land outside the park were to suddenly become inaccessible to wildlife, and this is a reality that is quickly emerging, the elephant population could potentially crash or go locally extinct.

In the Laikipia ecosystem of central Kenya -- home to the 2nd largest wildlife population in the country -- only 1.7 per cent of the ecosystem

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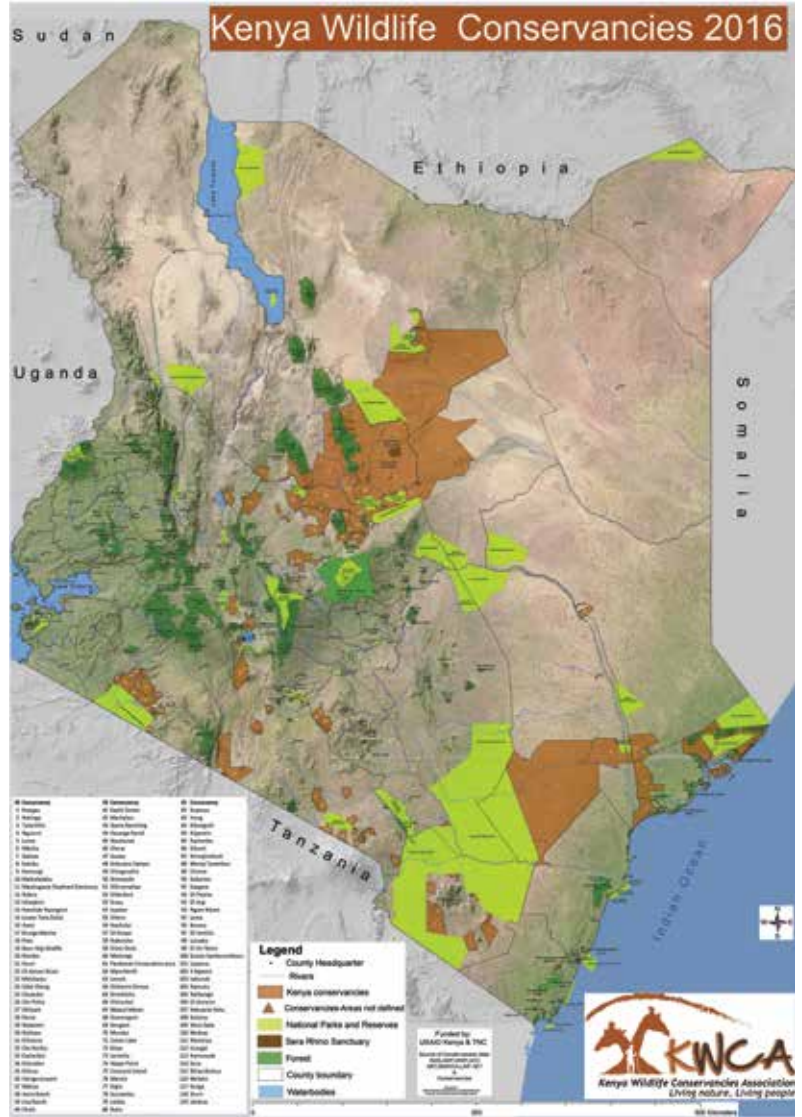
CONSERVATION

is gazetted under yet to be operational Laikipia National Reserve (165km²). The stable wildlife population in this area, along with over half of Kenya's rhinos, rely on the goodwill of the private conservancies, ranches, and community conservancies in this area.

While the parks and reserves in the country remain the cornerstone of Kenya's conservation effort and are central to the protection of sensitive species such as lions, elephants, rhino and other species that require wilderness habitat, the conservation battle will be won or lost on land that is privately or community owned. Land ownership ascribes private rights to the landowners and hence the ability to determine their preferred land use. Technically this means landowners can exclude or drive out wildlife and adopt other non-wildlife compatible land uses. This is generally the norm, except where culture, local lifestyles, or the goodwill of landowners, has aligned with the presence of wildlife.

In Kenya, as elsewhere in Africa, people and wildlife co-evolved, and co-created the savannahs as we know them today. This co-evolution of human and beast is a matter of global heritage whose existence must be encouraged for purposes of conservation, research and tourism. There is consensus that for wildlife to exist and for Kenya to firmly retain its position as the conservation leader of Africa, securing space on community and private land has to be a major part of the conservation effort. This is where the conservancy concept becomes vital.

The Wildlife Act 2013 defines a wildlife conservancy as land set aside by an individual owner, group of owners, body corporate or a community for purpose of wildlife conservation. To date nearly 6.4 million hectares of land (10.9 per cent of Kenya's landmass) is under conservancies spread across 27 counties.



TOP: Map by KWCA showing all the conservancies in Kenya.

In the Mara, conservancies have doubled the area under active conservation by incorporating some 184,799 hectares of privately owned and community land adjacent the Masai Mara National Reserve, allowing wildlife to access pasture 50km from the reserve edge and generating an annual income of 340 million Kenyan shillings (\$3.3 million) in 2016. Adjacent to this area where conservancies haven't sprouted, the previous wildlife habitat has either been partially or completely fenced off, corridors have been closed and the fences have become traps that capture and kill any animal that dare to cross.

Further north, 708 community rangers have worked to improve wildlife security in the 4.4 million acres under the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) -supported conservancies. Similar successes have been reported in Amboseli, Naivasha, Taita Taveta, Laikipia and Lamu regions.

6.4

MILLION

Hectares of land in Kenya under conservancies in 27 counties.

708

Number of rangers working to improve wildlife security in the 4.4 million acres under the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) -supported conservancies.

ENTRY POINT FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

But conservancies have been more than just space for wildlife. They contribute to Kenya's Vision 2030 objective of diversifying tourism and tripling the number of visitors. Some 142 iconic high end camps have added 2,397 beds to Kenya's tourism portfolio, and the majority of these camps are winning international awards and leading on Trip Advisor ratings.

Conservancies provide other economic incentives as well. As the history of pastoralism shows, this kind of land use is compatible with wildlife, and conservancies can be the entry point for the development of grazing plans and livestock value chains. This is seen in Ol Pejeta Conservancy's livestock breeding, fattening, and community program, NRT's livestock-to-market programme, and Enonkishu's Conservancy Mara Beef programme.

Conservancies are mostly located in remote areas often under-served by government services. Perceptions of neglect and lack of livelihood alternatives create insecurity for both people and wildlife. Recent sad events in Laikipia, Baringo, Samburu, Isiolo and Marsabit, West Pokot and Turkana Counties illustrate how this reality can so quickly become violent. In these regions, conservancies show that they can act as critical community institutions positioned as intermediaries between local communities, their environments, and the government. As a democratic institutions, conservancies offer an entry point to communities for county and national governments, development partners,



TOP: Zebras quenching their thirst in a lake in Ol Pejeta.

BELOW: Male lions Mara-Naboisho-Conservancy.

and the private sector. Schools, water projects, health centers, and other community programs have been a healthy spinoff.

CHALLENGES

In spite of these successes, challenges abound. Conservancies today operate under weak land tenure and overlapping and conflicting natural resource policies. The conservation arena in Kenya is characterized by disincentives as opposed to incentives for local people to engage in conservation, and this alienation is exacerbated by inadequate political will and community capacity challenges. It is baffling that to date, despite wildlife conservation being a national function and contributing to our national heritage, conservancies are yet to receive direct support from the exchequer. ●

