



The Wildlife Utilization Task Force Report: Is This Land Grab Through Conservation Policy?

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In February 2018, following a reorganization of the Kenya Government, the conservation and management of wildlife was moved from the Ministry of Natural Resources (MENR) to the Ministry of Tourism. With that move, the statutory wildlife conservation agency, Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) became the major line parastatal under this ministry. I have always felt that the pairing of Tourism and Wildlife is a ridiculous supplication of government structure to the aspirations of foreigners in the management of natural heritage. My skepticism was fueled by the fact that the Cabinet Secretary (CS), Mr. Najib Balala is someone with decades of experience in the tourism sector (even prior to joining politics) but none in the wildlife conservation sector.

In a rare display of honesty from a member of the Kenya Cabinet during his maiden visit to KWS headquarters as CS, he stated that he needed time to fully understand the goings-on in the organization and the sector at large. My skepticism at the initial realignment of wildlife under the tourism ministry quickly turned to consternation when after just one month in charge of the wildlife docket, [the minister said that we should revert to serving game meat](#) in high-class restaurants in order to improve the foreign tourists' experience in Kenya. Many of the conservation fraternity in Kenya reacted to this statement with revulsion at the thought of officially sanctioned 'bushmeat

poaching', while others were bemused that anyone could suggest something so ludicrous.

I was stunned into silence on the 29th March 2018 when the CS appointed a task force to look into the issue and report back to him, not least, because the power of the conservation elite over Kenya's conservation policy was shamelessly displayed. The catharsis I had felt after John Mbaria and I published the '**The Big Conservation Lie**' about a year earlier instantly evaporated. Those who have read the book, or closely monitored the conservation sector in Kenya will know that the sector never responds quickly (if ever) to requests or issues raised by indigenous Africans. Nonetheless, I rapidly got my thoughts in order, with the aim of submitting my negative opinions on this scheme as clearly and forcefully as possible. I was ready to do this, until I saw the mandate of the task force -

"... to assess and advise on the modalities of implementing the provisions of the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act, 2013 (WCMA 2013) on sustainable, consumptive wildlife utilization (CWU). CWU within the WCMA 2013 includes deliberate mechanisms by which wildlife resources in Kenya can be used to provide benefits to wildlife, the national economy, and individuals and communities living with wildlife".

The task therefore, was not to collect any views but to work out ways of implementing a racist and selfish piece of legislation sneaked into place by conservation pirates as a ruse to colonize Kenya's rangelands. So what's new or unique about this? Personally, I haven't in my years experienced any such blatant self-interest pushed through government organs and structures by people who aren't part of the system. It is important for us to understand that for the past 5 years, Kenya's conservation sector has been operating within a policy vacuum where conservation decisions and actions are undertaken by KWS based on personal whims of the management, or the personal desires of whoever is funding the process being undertaken.

In light of this, a good place to start the interrogation of this process is to examine and unpack the composition of the task force itself:

Dr. David Western, Dr. John Waitthaka (Chairman), Dr. Benson Okita-Ouma, Ms. Caroline Kariuki, Ms. Gladys Warigia, Dr. Holly Dublin, Ms. Munira Bashir, Dr. Shadrack Ngene, Mr. Stephen Manegene, and Mr. Solomon Kyalo.

To do this, first we must first exclude Dr. Ngene and Mr. Kyalo who are both KWS staff and Mr. Manegene, the Director of Wildlife Conservation in the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife. As I stated earlier, there was no policy decision to be made by this committee, and these gentlemen simply comprise the 'facade of government'. Whether or not they knew about the nature of their role, is a story for another day. Next, we have Ms Caroline Kariuki, the CEO of Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA). Kenya currently suffers from a case of what education scholar Wandia Njonya refers to as managerialism- that senseless belief that anyone with a knowledge of management and business administration can fit into any position, hence the rampant appointment of business people to provide leadership in any sector, and the feigned surprise at the spectacular failures that ensue.

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A case in point was the appointment and unsuccessful tenure of the banker Kitili Mbathi as Director-General of KWS. Ms. Kariuki presence gives the whole wildlife decimation scheme a 'business face', conferring a certain human, yet dispassionate commercial cachet that can be used to portray any

opposition to it as 'emotional' or 'unreasonable'. Apart from that, there is nothing in her background that suggests that she could competently discuss the impacts of this decision on our natural heritage. Dr. David Western is a highly experienced wildlife ecologist and a former director of Kenya Wildlife Service. His KWS tenure was curtailed by a bitter war between the old primitive wildlife colonial project, and the new, sophisticated wildlife colonial project, which lost that particular battle, but is now in ascendancy. The wildlife colonial project in Africa is simply the use of wildlife conservation and wildlife-related recreation as a tool to exercise control over the lands inhabited by wildlife. This 'tool' is especially effective in the annexation of rangelands shared by wildlife and pastoralist livestock producers. In recent years, Kenyans have become pretty erudite in matters conservation and tourism, so the primitive old project that rode on personalities like George Adamson, Richard Leakey, and other white people with 'bush experience' (as opposed to academic qualifications) has become obsolete. The colonial project had to go on, and Dr. Western with his strong academic credentials, Caucasian extraction and Kenyan citizenship fit the bill for this particular assignment.

He was appointed Chairman when the task force was initially constituted, and of all the members, is the one most likely to have mooted the idea to the minister. He immediately opted out of the Chair for unknown reasons. We can only speculate that voicing the arguments would have betrayed his personal role and that of the colonial project in the whole scheme. His next best option was Dr. John Waithaka, a former KWS scientist who Dr. Western had mentored in the past, but had since made his name, working with distinction as a senior biologist at Parks Canada. Many in the know felt reassured that a man of Waithaka's stature would see the hole in this scheme and advise against it. In light of this, it felt fortuitous, if not deliberate that after a few weeks, he got appointed Chairman of the KWS board, effectively removing him from the position, which was taken over by Dr. Ben Okita, the head of monitoring at *Save the Elephants*. With Dr. Waithaka's exit, everyone left in the committee, apart from the 'government people' represented the aspirations of different players in conservation colonial project.

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Dr. Okita's role as the third-choice chair of the group does not imply any expectations amongst the powers-that-be that he will do anything other than toe the set line. Dr. Holly Dublin is a representative of the conservation colonial project, working for an amorphous group of international capitalists called the "B-Team" www.bteam.org. Keen observers will notice that the 'B-Team also included the late Bob Collymore, immediate former CEO of Safaricom, a major "investor" in conservation through various conservancies and NGOs in Kenya. Dr. Dublin works as the B-Team's 'sustainability expert' which basically means she advises on how this capitalist group can commodify natural resources, invest in management structures and exploit it in the long term for their own benefit. She chaired the African Elephant Specialist Group of the IUCN for 25 years and was instrumental in getting Dr. Okita into that position in the same year (2018) that he assumed the chair of the task force. It is important to note that she is a special advisor to the Zeitz Foundation, founded by Mr. Jochen Zeitz, the German millionaire investor, and former CEO of Puma sportswear. Zeitz was also appointed to the KWS board of trustees. A puzzling appointment, until one understands how Kenya's wildlife is the tool through which global capital has chosen to colonize our lands.

Mr. Peter Hetz is the director of Laikipia Wildlife Forum, which was a grassroots conservation NGO,

but now functions as a lobby group for the (white) large scale land owners in Laikipia, Kenya. A prominent member of this group is one Jochen Zeitz, owner of the 55,000-acre Segera Ranch and member of the KWS board of trustees. Next, we have Ms. Munira Bashir, the country director for The Nature Conservancy (TNC), probably the world's prime example of conservation capitalism. Last but not least, there is Ms. Gladys Warigia, a lawyer and joint secretary of the task force. She works for the Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association (KWCA), one of TNC's proxies in Kenya that is helping them take over and exercise their hold over rangelands through the 'community conservancy' model. Through the latter two, TNC will have a finger on the deliberations and the legal 'pulse' of the task force and its deliberations in real time.

Peter Hetz is also on the board of KWCA, so this committee that looks diverse to the lay person is actually a complete convergence of the interests of the conservation colonial project, accompanied by a few 'window dressers' who have no say in its machinations, but are content to enjoy the largesse that comes with membership of such committees in Kenya. Another perceived advantage is that if the conservation colonial project gains power in Kenya, they will be in pole position for the plum 'gun-bearer' jobs as these avaricious foreign elite pillage our natural heritage. I have long lamented the intellectual vacuity that resides in the leadership of our statutory authority, Kenya Wildlife Service. However still, this didn't mitigate my consternation at seeing its officers willingly participate in a process that is leading their institution to the gallows.

The report itself is a startling collection of contradictions, obfuscations and reference to privileges that are only available to the "conservation 1%". This is the sector of our society that have own large tracts of land in wildlife habitats, are plugged into international tourism markets, are licensed to hold high-velocity firearms, hold current licenses to capture, kill, or otherwise handle wildlife and lastly, overwhelmingly white.

Environmental journalist and co-author of *'The Big Conservation Lie'* author Gatu Mbaria says that in Kenya, the truth about conservation (and many other things) lies within what isn't said or written. A very powerful and dishonest message lies in the photos in the report, starting from the cover, where the collage includes bamboo and aloe, betraying a startling level of hubris and underestimation of Kenyans' intelligence. The second (dishonest and pretty insulting) picture message is on the title page where there is a headline "Consumptive Wildlife Utilization" and a photo of a Maasai man holding a spear while watching a herd of wildebeest. This is the most important page to the capitalists who will be expected to fund this plan - "Give us money to take ownership of this wildlife and use it before the black savages eat it all". Forget the fact that the Maasai frown on consumption of meat from wild animals, and are among the best custodians of wildlife in Kenya.

The insults to Kenyans' collective intelligence begin right from the preamble;

".... the Task Force's terms of reference emphasized that trophy hunting in Kenya remained banned and that there are no intentions of re-opening it. Therefore, its further consideration was not taken up by the Task Force".

Trophy hunting is not defined by regulators, but by the intellectual circumstance of the killing. If I kill a rat, it is the individual, NOT the government that decides whether I am doing pest control, trophy hunting, or consumptive use. The killer is the one who decides whether to throw it out, eat it or mount its head on the wall.

As an instructor, a part of my teaching method has always been to ask students to read and analyze all literature in detail, but this report requires a change of tact, for two reasons; Firstly, one needs to ignore the nonsensical details therein, which are designed to obscure, rather than illuminate the

true objectives. Secondly, one needs to pick up on the subtle details which reveal the truth.

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Here is an example of the latter; The 'all options considered' chart purports to propose a framework through which authorities will govern the way we use our wild plants! Is KWS now seeking to even police the way in which we harvest *managu* (African nightshade) as a vegetable, eat wild fruits, and gather medicines and mushrooms from our environment? This spurious notion is not designed to convey any meaning but as a distraction to the reader. These are some of the sections to ignore. Another part of the flowchart claims that this 'consumptive wildlife utilization' will increase "cultural and religious benefits" of living with wildlife, implying the presence of some savage cultural and traditional religious beliefs that demand the killing of wildlife. Racial prejudice has always been par for the course in African conservation practice, but it is seldom expressed so pointedly in official government documents. Racial slurs, however painful it is to black or brown people around the world, should never be ignored in conservation, because it is a reminder of the conservation colonial project's Achilles heel -hubris.

These distracting details are too many to enumerate, so it is more efficient to look at the telling ones. Firstly, there is the oft-quoted research from Dr. Joseph Ogutu (a biostatistician, not a biologist) at the University of Hohenheim which is always a favourite of proponents of sport hunting wanting to hide the 'whiteness' of their aspirations behind statistical gymnastics, educational qualifications and an African name.

Quoting from the report:

"Ogutu et al.'s (2016) report shows that the numbers of mammals with an average body weight greater than 3 kg have declined by 68%. More recent data suggest that this trend is continuing and that population growth, habitat loss, bushmeat poaching for subsistence and commercial purposes, inadequate institutional and technical capacities, institutionalized governance challenges, insufficient regulations to devolve user rights to landowners with wildlife, the absence of benefits and incentives for landowners to maintain wildlife, and the general absence of awareness and knowledge of mechanisms and benefits of CWU undermine the potential of CWU in the country".

Crudely translated, this means 'There are too much pressure exerted on wildlife from black people. Also note that 'bushmeat' is something only eaten by black people -when white people eat wildlife, it is 'game meat' or 'venison'. Secondly, that KWS is useless and unable to fulfill its mandates. Consequently, the only way we can conserve wildlife outside parks is to create instruments that can confer stronger ownership to the white people, so the blacks can conserve it in the service of white people.

This is the much-vaunted 'job creation' we are told will accrue from the slaughter of our wildlife. Game scouts, trackers, skinners, meat inspectors, and the like. This is what is seen as a fair exchange in return for our natural heritage. Probably the most insidious recommendation is hidden under the innocuous-sounding sub-title "Innovations". It states that KWCA should be given the mandate for the following aspects of consumptive wildlife utilization; management planning services, business planning services, Wildlife and biodiversity monitoring efforts and audits for conservancies employing non-consumptive and consumptive wildlife uses.

The hubris raises its ugly head again when the authors disingenuously added the statement “This could complement government efforts in CWU implementation and management”.

This doesn't complement KWS efforts -This is the total replacement of KWS by The Nature Conservancy through proxy.

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One of the key lessons from this entire caper is that the conservation colonial project is very calculating, and nothing, even the most minute detail that happens around the wildlife sector in Kenya is random. As is apparent from the composition of the task force, the substantive members all share a connection to capital interest in conservation, and that's where the danger to our societies lies. The wildlife in question here does not fly in the air, but lives in lands shared by rural indigenous Kenyan communities. If any of this is implemented, they will lose their land, for the simple safety reason that it won't be possible to graze your animals or go about your livelihoods in the same place where this avaricious global elites will be indulging their bloodlust. It is worth noting that this plan didn't begin in 2018, it began nearly a decade earlier, and how it was thwarted by the former President Mwai Kibaki is a story for another day.

The lesson here is that the conservation colonial project is *committed*. They are relentless and well-endowed with resources. That is why for the last few years the office of director-general of KWS has been so thoroughly protected from being occupied by anyone who can intellectually participate in this discourse and fully understand the goings on in the sector.

The late historian Patrick Wolfe wrote in 2006 that settler colonialism is “*the process in which the exogenous settlers displace Indigenous peoples for access to their lands and resources*”. This is such an elegant definition of the conservation colonial project that he may as well have been writing about the miasma that is Kenya's conservation sector. The most important part of Wolfe's findings is that settler colonialism is a structure with ongoing effects rather than a single or past series of events. In this manner, the [Wildlife Utilization Task Force Report](#) is simply a proposed structure for conservation colonialism in Kenya.

The members of Wildlife Utilization Task Force have attempted to facilitate the blatant colonization of our lands through wildlife management chicanery. Whether their respective roles were deliberate conspiracy, or unwitting, remains to be seen. However, we will never forget their names. We Kenyans deserve better and should never accept this shame they have visited upon us. Neither intellectual vacuity nor dishonesty are acceptable in the stewardship of our natural heritage. Whatever opprobrium accrues now and in the future to everyone involved in this is richly deserved.

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