



Kenya's Original Sin: Root Causes of Rising Human-Wildlife Conflicts

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There's a book that came out recently that's been causing a stir and shaking tables. It's [The Big Conservation Lie](#) by John Mbaria and Mordecai Ogada. In it, the authors explain that conservation has deeply racist roots and that the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and other organs of government responsible for conservation in Kenya are not only criminally inept, but also completely at the mercy of foreign interests that are using conservation as a money-making strategy at the expense of the poor.

The book strongly criticises the conservancy model aggressively championed by the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT). The authors controversially make the claim that NRT is nothing more than a cover for land grabs in the name of conservation. The book has sparked a huge debate on who owns natural resources in Kenya and who should manage them and to what end. Indeed, even the Tourism Cabinet Secretary, Najib Balala, was live on television, [proclaiming](#) that the forces behind big conservation would not destroy him, essentially laying the blame for the recent massive [rhino relocation disaster](#) at the feet of these powerful and shadowy interests.

In this article, I take up the authors' challenge to get Kenyans talking about their wildlife and natural resources by discussing the historical events that have led us up to this moment. In particular, I dig deeper into the underlying causes behind the catastrophic wildlife decline and

analyse why the neoliberal responses championed by NGOs are so ineffective. This is because I believe that what is happening in the rangelands is the most visible and emotive part of the environmental crisis that Kenya is facing, with consequences that are potentially far more serious than the loss of the emblematic species that we all love and cherish.

What's going on with our wildlife?

Visitors to Kenya's parks and sanctuaries are not aware that we have lost and are continuing to lose most of our wildlife. Indeed, research carried out by Joseph Ogutu and others has found that wildlife populations have declined on average by 68 per cent between 1977 and 2016. And despite the dramatic shoot-to-kill decrees and the war against poachers, Ogutu and other researchers are fairly certain about what is causing this decline - a rising population and corresponding needs, particularly for agricultural land, settlements and infrastructure.

The team of researchers found that between 1962 and 2009, Kenya's rangeland population grew by nearly five-fold, from about 2.6 million to over 12.5 million. Since rangelands are primarily pastoral areas, they also found that the number of sheep and goats had increased by 76 per cent, while the number of wildlife decreased by 68 percent on average. The fact that some species, such as eland, oryx, impala, Grevy's zebra and waterbuck, were found to have declined so severely that their future viability is under threat indicates that poaching is not the major cause of this decline. From this, they confidently concluded that livestock is essentially replacing wildlife.

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However, this Malthusian view is incomplete - sure, there are a lot more people in the rangelands, and that number will continue to grow. But it is not strictly the number of people that is the problem; it is the quality and quantity of resources these people have available to them that is the real challenge. And, as I will demonstrate, this rising population is increasingly being forced to share an ever diminishing quantity of resources, as they are increasingly hemmed into smaller and less productive areas while being denied access to social goods and services. This is largely due to a pattern of elite interests capturing the best land, forcing crowding and environmental degradation, and then turning around and blaming the very people they have robbed. This leads us to ask...

How the hell did we end up here?

As David Ndiu frequently points out, Kenya is a land-poor agrarian society. More than 80 per cent of the population depends on agriculture for its livelihood, yet most of these people have access to just three hectares of land or less, while 20 per cent of Kenyans own more than half of all fertile land in the country. And since most wildlife lives outside of protected areas, they too, indirectly, become victims to Kenya's messy land politics and trends in our so-called development.

It would not be too far-fetched to speculate that this state of affairs is a result of Kenya's "original sin". Jomo Kenyatta, as described in Joe Khamisi's book, Looters and Grabbers, was a man singularly focused on amassing as much land and wealth as possible for himself and his inner circle of Kiambu patriarchs, while other independence heroes and villains alike snatched up the farms and estates left behind by departing settlers. Estimates vary on how much land was improperly acquired, but a CIA report compiled in 1978 states that Kenyatta alone owned at least 4,000 hectares of land, while his

wife Mama Ngina and his daughter Margaret Kenyatta owned another 115,000 hectares of land between them.

While the injustice and the poverty caused by land grabbing is immediately obvious to most Kenyans, the impact on the natural resource base and wildlife is less clear. Aside from the obvious excisions into protected forests by the elite, the concentration of fertile land in the hands of the few means that growing numbers of people must compete for marginal land in order to make a living. The theft of urban land also cancels out any chance of a rational, long-term urban development strategy, since land is considered an asset to loot, and not a resource to exploit for the public good. Eventually, peasant farmers and the urban poor settle where they can, often encroaching on forest lands, river valleys and on the margins of the rangelands, where conflict with other land users inevitably begins to brew.



Read Also: [A DARK TRUTH: The racist dynamic at the heart of Kenya's conservation practices and policies](#)

By fusing their interests with those of the remaining land-owning colonial settlers, the political elite are simply not in a position to enact meaningful land reform. They thus must perform theatrics, like periodically evicting the Ogiek and other marginalised groups from Kenya's forests and demolishing buildings constructed on public land for political expediency - but leaving the fundamental structure of land ownership in Kenya unchallenged.

Kenya's legacy of neglecting the arid and semi-arid former Northern Frontier District began with Kenyatta's famous [Sessional Paper Number 10 of 1965](#), which continued the colonial policy of investing in productive agricultural areas, supposedly to accelerate economic development. This introduced staggering inequalities between geographical regions, and although [social mobility](#) is virtually non-existent in Kenya, it becomes that much harder if you happen to be born in northern Kenya, where isolation and a lack of access to even mediocre education and health services essentially locks out a large number of people from ever being part of the mirage called Kenya. Kenyatta's environmental legacy, therefore (aside from his wife's rapacious appetite for ivory, rhino horn and charcoal) was planting a seed of dysfunction that would continue to grow, watered by the incompetence of his malevolent successor.

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A few years after Daniel arap Moi came to power, Kenya was forced to implement the International Monetary Fund-imposed Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in order to prop up Kenya's failing economy in 1980. SAPs forced many African governments to slash public sector spending in education, health and agriculture in return for bailouts due to past decades of government waste and poor economic performance occasioned by oil shocks and fluctuations in global commodity prices. The IMF's extraction of its pound of flesh was highly corrosive, so much so that the 1980s are considered a "lost decade". It was during this time that life expectancy dropped in Africa, as these cuts drastically increased poverty, inequality, conflict and food insecurity in many countries.

Although SAPs did not directly target the environment, many of their effects had a direct impact on our natural resource base. Mass layoffs meant a reduction in the number of people engaged in environment and wildlife management, while the remaining workforce was left with almost no operational budget to carry out their mandate. By 1990, for example, the Forestry Department was [spending between 80 to 85 per cent of its budget on salaries](#), with almost nothing left for maintenance or anything that would allow the department to reasonably perform its duties. Training and research budgets were also sacrificed, leading to the stagnation and deterioration of capacity within these departments. Instead of increasing efficiency, this reinforced the kind of indifference and demoralisation, and maybe even rent-seeking behaviour, that government agencies are so well known for today.

More broadly, SAPs focused primarily on improving "efficiency" but did nothing to encourage the drivers of economic productivity and growth. The stagnation that followed, together with shrinking opportunities in the formal sector, meant that for those without access to education and social capital, the only real livelihood options were either to remain dependent on low productivity agricultural activities on ever shrinking parcels of land, or to take up informal service jobs catering to the elites in the city.

At the same time, Kenya embarked on the process of individualising land tenure in the group ranches found in arid and semi-arid areas. This was in response to increasing elitism and dissatisfaction with group ranch management, as well as to a push from external actors underpinned by the belief that private land tenure would deliver better results. Land was hence subdivided and sold or leased out without any coherent strategy, creating land use conflicts between agriculture, development, pastoralism and wildlife.

An example of this is the establishment of [commercial wheat farms](#) on critical breeding grounds for wildebeest, arguably responsible for part of the decline of wildebeest populations today, and also a clear example of how commercial interests, and not exclusively livestock numbers, impact wildlife. Elsewhere, some districts in Kajiado [lost up to 40 per cent of their grazing land](#) during the individualisation process, leading to increased vulnerability of both pastoralists and environmental degradation due to the loss of pasture. More broadly, the development of the [Kitengela plains](#) eventually led to the sealing off of Nairobi National Park from the greater ecosystem, transforming it into little more than an open air zoo.

And since Kenyatta had proven ruthlessly efficient in appropriating most of the country's prime land, Moi's innovation was the excision and encroachment into public land, either directly or through irregular allocations to his constituents to win votes, setting the scene for today's nightmarish cycle of farmer evictions from the Mau Forest.

It was also during this time that these sectors began to increasingly rely on donor funding, and hence began to shape their priorities in order to attract more donor funding to remain operational. Indeed, the establishment of the KWS was supported by a World Bank-funded project in 1989, largely in response to a dramatic rise in elephant and rhino poaching, as well as to the government's

increasing reliance on tourism revenue. The newly established KWS was allowed financial autonomy through park revenue collection, but more importantly, wildlife management came to be seen as an integral part of national life, and not something that goes on in isolation and in conflict with local interests.

The consequences of these decisions and events can thus be interpreted as the state's inability to coordinate the effective management of the country's natural resources for the benefit of either humans or wildlife, the official neglect of a third of the country's population, as well as the capture of most of the country's natural wealth in the hands of a few. As a result, open rangelands are contracting due to land subdivision, cultivation along the more fertile margins, unchecked settlements and urbanisation, reflecting an absence of a coordinated wildlife management strategy outside of KWS-protected areas. The rangelands themselves are degrading, and are losing their capacity to support wildlife, livestock and the people that depend on them. This is due to the interaction between overcrowding, increasingly difficult seasonal mobility and the more frequent and severe droughts due to climate change.

As wildlife is forced to live in closer proximity to humans, human-wildlife conflicts arise, with local communities absorbing losses due to livestock deaths, damage to property and personal injury. Yet they receive little or no compensation from the national government, and very little revenue from the wildlife. Effectively, we are asking communities living in close proximity to wildlife to subsidise our use and enjoyment of our said national treasure.

Our most serious challenge when it comes to wildlife is, therefore, not poaching - it is finding a reasonable way to ensure that wildlife protection does not interfere with people's livelihoods, and vice versa. Or, as Ogotu puts it, "Kenya is flipping very rapidly from being in an 'empty world' to being in a 'full world' but the institutions for managing wildlife, and indeed wildlife range, in a full world have not correspondingly evolved".

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The current administration's response is to use coercion and obfuscation - instead of dismantling the smuggling networks that facilitate poaching. The KWS response is to harass, kidnap and even disappear people in the name of anti-poaching activities, while their Kenya Forest Service counterparts brutalise the Ogiek and other communities living in our public forests, pointedly leaving timber smugglers and tea plantation owners untouched.

Is there a win-win solution?

Conservancies and other community-based natural resource management initiatives were born from the failure of top-down protection strategies from earlier periods. Elinor Ostrom's work [on collective action](#) and her eight principles were used to inform this collective management strategy. The eight principles of successful self-organising are empowerment, public participation, equity, conflict resolution mechanisms, congruence with local conditions, effective monitoring, collective choice arrangements and sanctioning activities for the use of common resources.

In practice, however, it is extremely difficult to meet all of Ostrom's principles. The fact that they are

introduced by external actors immediately puts into question whether real community ownership can be achieved. In this sense, therefore, conservation is a lie because ownership of ideas cannot be taught or imposed. Covert land grabs or not, it is important that people truly own their ideas and strategies, and not simply play along with NGOs in exchange for schools and other much-needed social amenities.

However, aside from having wildly varying results, non-state conservation initiatives tend to suffer from several major deficiencies. Firstly, and probably most importantly, they greatly overstate the financial benefits of exclusive conservation. Secondly, they tend to fall prey to “elite capture”, where the most privileged and socially connected individuals benefit from whatever financial gains come in from the project. Thirdly, they criminalise activity that was previously acceptable, without providing viable alternatives.

This dynamic is exemplified by the NRT programme – pastoralists find themselves excluded from grazing land that has been turned over to the NRT conservation programme by their leaders. And while the NRT runs a livestock purchasing scheme, there are allegations that cattle are purchased from the poorer members of the community, leaving wealthy owners’ vast herds of livestock intact. Moreover, while the NRT claims that the programme is meant to provide local stakeholders with a dependable income and to reduce the dangers of transporting cattle to distant markets, sceptics can’t help but question whether the programme is actually an effort to destock the rangelands in order to [free up space for conservation and tourism](#).

The NRT programme also criminalise activities that previously benefited the local community, for example, by restricting local communities’ access to grazing lands set aside for exclusive wildlife use. Taken together with the minimal revenue drawn from community-based tourism initiatives, and the political machinations of emerging county leaders, this kind of effort has the potential to further destabilise the region and leave people worse off than they were before.

Lastly, and most importantly, these conservation efforts are simply not compelling enough, given the actual challenges that they are trying to address. Critics argue that these programmes are doomed to fail because the idea that conservation and development objectives can be met simultaneously is wishful thinking. But I believe that only a vast improvement in the lives of the majority of Kenyans will ultimately produce a more secure future for the country’s wildlife.

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In this sense too, conservation is a lie – simply because the NRT cannot, as a non-state actor, address the fundamental problems behind the decline of wildlife. Creating enough space for wildlife to roam freely necessitates relieving some of the pressure off these lands, and this can only happen through two means – as is currently practised, through forceful evictions or aggressively oversold incentives, or by ensuring that rural populations are provided with goods and services to intensify their current production levels or by creating avenues that allow people to earn a livelihood not directly tied to land use.

This means that conservation must be supported by a larger development plan that is invested in

improving the lives of all Kenyans. All efforts should be made first and foremost to deal with Kenya's biggest challenges – food insecurity and low productivity. At a minimum, this should include making serious investments [in small-scale agriculture](#) and pastoralism in order to increase household income and job opportunities by addressing environmental problems affecting these groups and their livelihoods first. There must also be investments in education and healthcare to reduce social and economic inequalities. This is important because of the demographic shift that we are about to experience, and we need to ensure that the social fabric is not torn apart by increased competition for diminished resources.

This would also entail the full devolution of land and natural resources and of the financial benefits that come with devolution. Ostrom's principles will still be useful here, as they are general enough to be modified for application based on the local context. But as witnessed with the land subdivision experiments, this will necessitate negotiating and accepting some trade-offs that will eventually emerge as people take full ownership of their resources.

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