

Wildlife first, people last: The Maasai experience with wildlife conservation in Tanzania

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In the beginning there was the Maasai God called Enkai. Enkai created Naiteru-Kop, the first man, and a woman partner. The two were sent to earth with a hundred heads of cattle, goats and sheep to begin a new life. Naiteru-Kop and his partner found earth beautiful and abounding in natural resources – rivers, lakes, oceans, minerals, forests, plains and wildlife. They were given control over all these resources on condition that they be good custodians and hold all creation in trust for coming generations. If they failed to keep this promise, they would bear the full consequences of their irresponsible actions (Olol-Dapash)

Introduction

The United Republic of Tanzania is located on the eastern African coast. It borders the Indian Ocean to the east, and has land borders with eight countries: Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (across Lake Tanganyika), Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. The United Republic is a union of the former Republic of Tanganyika and the Peoples' Republic of Zanzibar (comprising the islands of Unguja and Pemba). The total area, including inland water and Zanzibar, is 945,234 sq. km, of which 886,040 sq. km is land and 62,050 sq. km is water. Over 25 per cent of the land surface area is designated as conservation area in the form of national parks, game reserves and protected areas (as shown in Figure 1).

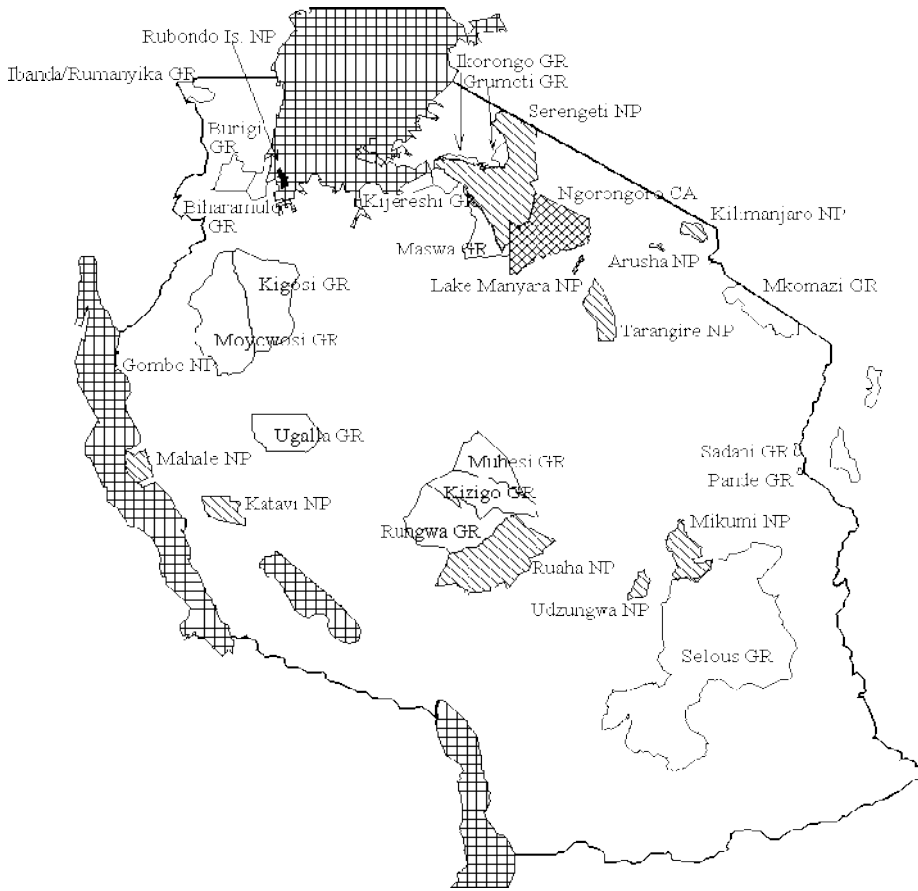


Figure 1 Tanzania's national parks and game reserves

The Maasai

The Maa or Maasai, as they are commonly referred to, migrated into eastern Africa during the 15th century. They occupied the area stretching southwards from the Ethiopia-Kenya borders through the Maasai steppe to central Tanzania, and eastwards from Lake Victoria to the Indian Ocean (<http://www.awf.org/hearlands/kilimanjaro>). Livestock, especially cattle, is central to the Maasai way of life. The milk and blood provide nourishment, the hides and skins provide bedding and shelter, live animals grace social and spiritual functions, and most importantly, they act as dowry.

Coincidentally, the area inhabited by the Maasai is also home to vast numbers of wildlife. For thousands of years, the Maasai coexisted with the wildlife in a harmonious and sustainable way. The Maasai are transhumance pastoralists. They move their livestock seasonally in search of water and pasture. By doing this on a well-established pattern, they allow the land to regenerate, at the same time causing some of the vectors to die because the hosts have been moved. Wildlife, especially in the world famous Serengeti plains, also has a routine migratory system that rhymes very well with the nomadic pastoral system of the Maasai.

Wildlife conservation

Wildlife conservation was introduced in Tanzania by the British colonial government. At independence, the nationalist government not only embraced wildlife conservation, but did so with more vigor. Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, the first president, proclaimed that Tanzania was duty bound to conserve wildlife in trust for all humanity. However, on top of that altruistic reason, there were also economic reasons. Wildlife is a big attraction for tourists and professional game hunters who bring in the foreign currency so necessary for imports.

Both during the colonial and post-independence period, wildlife conservationists perceived people as a threat to the environment in general, and wildlife in particular. As nature and wildlife conservation were deemed important for foreign currency earning, and as the local people were considered to be a threat to them, they had to be physically moved away from their natural habitats.

In Tanzania, the people mostly affected are the Maasai. Maasai land in Northern Tanzania boasts one of the world largest concentrations of wild life. The majority of wildlife conservation areas, designated as national parks, were carved out of Maasai land. These include the world famous Serengeti Plains and the Ngorongoro Crater, Tarangire, Manyara of the famous tree climbing lions, Arusha and Mkomazi. Approximately 350,000 Maasai pastoralist live in this ecosystem (<http://www.awf.org/hearlands/kilimanjaro>). The Maasai have resisted the forcible eviction from their areas of habitation with minimal success. Where they have taken their cases to court, as was the case with the Maasai in Mkomazi, they were merely compensated, and marginally at that.

Impact of wildlife conservation on the Maasai

The eviction of the Maasai from their traditional lands to give way to wildlife, went hand in hand with encroachment on their land by neighboring agricultural communities. This exacerbated the shrinking of land available to the Maasai and the result was the dwindling of the Maasai herds. Smaller grazing land made it impossible for the Maasai to move their animals in search of pasture. This led to overpopulation of animals, overgrazing, degradation of soil and vegetation, higher incidence of diseases, poor nutrition, increased mortality and finally loss of herds.

Of course all these have negative effects on economic life, and therefore the well-being of the Maasai. The totality of the Maasai way of life has been profoundly and negatively affected. To the Maasai, livestock keeping is not merely an economic activity; it is not just about making a living, in the sense that if there are more profitable economic activities, one would opt for them. To the Maasai, livestock keeping is an integral part of a complex way of life.

Personal worthiness is expressed in terms of herds of cattle and other livestock. A person without livestock is 'poor through and through', without any standing in society. Such a person is looked down upon and referred to as '*ndorobon*'. Tragically, once one has been downgraded to a '*ndorobon*', the stigma will always stand. If he does manage to amass cattle again he will gain some respect, but would not rise to the pinnacle of community respect.

Perhaps not wanting to suffer the ignominy of being labeled a '*ndorobon*', young Maasai males without cattle are migrating to the cities. Not that they fare any better there. Without a formal education or skills (apart from cattle rearing in rangeland), they can not get employment in offices or factories. The majority of them cash in on their reputation of fearlessness and honesty to be employed as night watchmen or guards. A quite substantial number of them end up doing 'feminine' work, as braid maids, probably because of their experience in braiding their own hair. Whatever the case, this is regarded as stooping very low indeed!

A case for the Maasai way of life

The big question is, was it and is it really necessary to subject the Maasai to this sorry state? To the Maasai, the answer is an emphatic *no*, with very good reasons. After all, as one Maasai elder put it, 'it is we Maasai who have preserved this priceless heritage in our land. We were sharing it with wild animals long before the arrival of those who use game only as a means of making money' (<http://www.awf.org/earlands/kilimanjaro>). Herein lies the contradiction between the Maasai pastoralists and the conservationists.

The conservationists believe that areas with large concentrations of game should be declared national parks with the dual role of offering refuge for wild life and serving as popular tourist areas (www.greennook.com). The tourists of course bring in revenue to the government. As a refuge for wild animals, the national parks have to be exclusive zones and so the local inhabitants, in this case the Maasai, had to be evicted from their traditional areas of habitation.

By contrast, the Maasai perceive the land as a natural endowment from God and they have a right to its use. The wild animals are also the endowment of God and, hence, the Maasai have to share the land with the wild animals (<http://www.satyamag.com/dec97/maasai.html>). To facilitate this sharing, the Maasai have developed a unique form of livelihood and cultural system popularly known as pastoralism.

Pastoralism

At the core of Maasai life is pastoralism. The transhumance nature of pastoralism, coupled with the seasonal migration of wildlife, ensured that equilibrium is maintained in the ecosystem. The Maasai have a functioning indigenous knowledge system centering on livestock keeping in the midst of wildlife. They are aware of infectious diseases that could be transmitted from wild animals to livestock and from livestock to wildlife. For example, they avoid taking cattle close to areas where wildebeests are calving because the grass would be contaminated by the afterbirth. Thus, the Maasai learned and understand the lifecycle of the wildebeest. At the same time, they do not allow goats to mix with impalas, because they know that they are closely related and would therefore be susceptible to the same diseases.

To a great extent the problems associated with pastoralism in relation to wildlife conservation are consequences of the interference by outside agents, national and international, mostly in the annexation of Maasai territory. By its nature, transhumance

pastoralism requires large tracts of land, and historically the Maasai had such large tracts of land. The expansion of sedentary agriculture, by people other than the Maasai, leasing large tracts of land to mostly settler commercial farmers, and of course the establishment of condoned areas in the name of national parks, drastically reduced the size of the land available to the Maasai to sustainably practice pastoralism.

Even though they lived among wildlife, in the main, the Maasai did very little harm to the wildlife thanks to prevailing taboos, for example, it is taboo to eat game meat (including fish and all types of birds); eating game meat is looked down upon by age peers. A *murr*an (warrior) accused of eating game meat is despised, and is made fun of by girls during the *esoto* dance, where he will not get a dancing partner.

Myth busted

Fierce as they are perceived to be, the Maasai kill wild animals only if there is some good reason to do so, especially if the animals threaten the human and/or animal life. A popular belief among non-Maasai is that a *murr*an must kill a lion to prove his valor and courage before he gets married. Maasai elders dispute this:

If each *murr*an had to kill a lion before he gets married, would there have been any lions remaining in the wild; and by the way, given the number of *murr*ans who want to get married, would there be enough lions to go round? (interview with Makuyuni Maasai elder)

Way forward

The theory, as enshrined in state policies and the practice of wildlife conservation is based on two misconceptions. First, that wildlife can best be conserved bureaucratically, by excluding the local people living in, or adjacent to wildlife habitats. It is now becoming increasingly accepted that the involvement and participation of the local populations is critical to sustainable wildlife conservation. However, the current efforts at community participation in wildlife conservation are mostly limited to sharing just a fraction of the benefits, mostly income accruing from paying tourists. Certainly this does not go far enough to satisfy the needs and demands of the Maasai. The Maasai need and demand an integrated framework that will allow them to coexist with wildlife, not to enjoy fringe benefits.

Second is the misconception that pastoralism is merely an economic activity; this ignores the fact that to the Maasai, pastoralism is a way of life, at the heart of being a Maasai, and heavily intertwined in their cultural and value systems. Moreover, over time the Maasai have built up an ingenious knowledge system that enabled them to harmoniously and sustainably co-exist with wildlife. An understanding and appreciation of transhumance pastoralism, as practiced by the Maasai, will lead policy-makers to rethink their positions and formulate policies to accommodate it.

In the past, the Maasai lost out because they were overwhelmed by the forces against them. Governments, both colonial and post-colonial, could impose decisions with impunity, and the prevailing wisdom on conservation was based on the exclusion model. More important, the Maasai, proud as they are, were not adequately informed

or well organized. A better organized, informed and articulate Maasai community could better pursue the community case, and with the support of enlightened civil society and the NGO community, they can begin to effectively lobby for their rights.

References

Olol-Dapash, M. *The Future of the Maasai People and Wildlife*, www.satyamag.com/dec97/maasai.html.