

The History and Evolution of National Parks in Kenya

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THIS HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF NATIONAL PARKS IN KENYA will cover early preservation of wildlife in the then-British East Africa Protectorate to the current re-orientation of conservation in the country. Six topics will be discussed:

1. Trading of wildlife resources and early conservation efforts;
2. Royal efforts to promote wildlife conservation;
3. The evolution of safari sojourns to ecotourism in parks and community lands;
4. National parks as drivers of the country's gross domestic product (GDP);
5. National park management and resource devolution; and
6. New legislation.

Trading of wildlife resources and early efforts towards conservation

Kenya has a rich abundance of wildlife that thrives in habitats stretching from the Indian Ocean to forested ecosystems, vast savannah woodlands, mountain peaks, to the bottom of the Great Rift Valley. A cross-section of the country shows considerable diversity of habitats and ecosystems, right from the ocean bed to the snow-capped Mount Kenya, to the Chalbi and Turbi deserts.

Local communities in the 1800s and in recent history used wildlife for food, with hardly any evidence of monetary factors influencing trading in wildlife resources. There are arguments for and against the impacts of early humans on wildlife species composition, populations and the environment. But in retrospect, a lot of factors may have favored the co-existence between early humans and wildlife in what is now Kenya:

- Human populations were too small and scattered to have had an adverse impact on wildlife species, whether through direct consumption or hunting for secondary products such as feathers, eggs, shells, etc.;
- The space used by humans was small in comparison with the vast country that was free for wildlife;
- Human use of wildlife was directed at satisfying basic necessities, so that trading in wildlife, in whole or in part, was limited; and
- Human activities in the period stretching from the early 1800s to the early 1900s consisted mainly of shifting cultivation and nomadic pastoralism.

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The interest in official protection of Kenya's wilderness and its resources went hand in hand with the emergence of the British imperial rule in the 1890s. Western travelers arrived in the newly created British East Africa Protectorate to undertake huge hunting safaris, which resulted in the wholesale slaughter of wildlife (Honey 1999). The British wanted protected lands so that they could continue their big-game hunting safaris while the locals acted as guides, porters, and servants. Over the years, the British passed laws in order to cater to their recreational needs as well as providing for hunting safaris (Honey 1999).

Following the formal declaration of the British East Africa Protectorate in 1896, the colonial government issued a declaration to set up wildlife game reserves. The South Game Reserve (13,000 square miles) and North Game Reserve (13,800 square miles) were established.

With the entrenchment of British rule in the East Africa Protectorate, the need arose to set up more areas under protection and this led to the formation of a game department in 1906. In 1945, the British Protectorate passed the National Parks Ordinance that paved the way for the establishment of more protected areas. This was followed by the establishment of Nairobi Royal Park the following year.

Royal efforts at preserving wildlife

The East Africa Protectorate not only offered the best returns to the expansionist British, but was also strategic in reaching Uganda, the Nile State that had vast resources the British needed. As British interests increased in the region, so did the need to not only offer hunting safaris but also much-needed recreation to ever-increasing settler population.

The National Parks Ordinance of 1945 provided the energy with which the game department drove the establishment of protected areas in the country. Aberdare Royal Park and Mount Kenya Royal Park (later renamed National Parks) were established not only for protection of wildlife but to also to offer exclusive recreation to the settlers.

The birth of Kenya's protected areas did not bode well for the local communities who were immediately faced with challenges of displacement and human-wildlife conflict (Honey 1999).

Safari sojourns to ecotourism in Kenya's parks and reserves

With the trend of preserving wildlife resources and setting out of areas for protection gaining popularity, there was also nostalgia among the rich and famous in Britain and America to continue with hunting safaris in the British East African Protectorate. Among those who came for hunting and safari expeditions included an American president and the queen of England. In fact, her daughter, Princess Elizabeth, became queen while on a visit to Aberdare National Park in 1952 when news reached her of the death of her father.

In the years leading to Kenya's independence, concern for the continued preservation of Kenya's wildlife was in the minds of both colonial leaders and Kenyan nationalists.

Upon attainment of independence in 1963, there was a strong move to establish national parks and reserves, and to promote wildlife safaris and recreation. Over the years, Kenyan communities have become increasingly engaged in ecotourism and wildlife conservation through the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries.

Parks driving Kenya's GDP

As the world gets more industrialized, the number of people seeking recreational opportunities is increasing.

From the early days of wildlife hunting safaris, Kenya's park infrastructure has improved to allow for lodges and hotels, ecolodges, and home stays that attract more people to visit parks than ever before. The government, through the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, has adopted policies that have increasingly made Kenya one of the most attractive tourist destinations globally. Today, wildlife-based tourism has become the cornerstone of the country's GDP.

The tourism industry has been identified as one of the key pillars under the government's near-term blueprint for economic development—popularly known as Vision 2030. The annual gross revenue of the tourism industry is over US\$1.5 billion, with still-unrealized potential remaining.

While opinion is still divided on whether to lift a ban on wildlife hunting that was put in force in 1977, there is no doubt that now and for the foreseeable future wildlife-driven tourism will greatly contribute to the GDP and economic growth of the country.

Park management and resources devolution to the people of Kenya

Historically, park management in Kenya tended to be based on the assumption that preserving wildlife by the state in parks and reserves for the common good would be enough. Over the last two decades, however, many individuals and community groups have demonstrated the willingness to conserve wildlife on their own land, resulting in a broader perspective that augments state-run protected areas with other efforts. Reasons that have been advanced to explain the changing attitude and trend include:

- The fact that most of the animals in parks and reserves move out of parks and into neighboring areas at some point, where they come into conflict with people;
- The need to develop enterprises to counter the negative impacts of wildlife on people; and
- The realization that ecotourism has positive impacts on the socioeconomic well-being of the people and contributes to the revival of traditional Kenyan art.

The Wildlife Conservation and Management Act recognizes the state as the sole regulator of matters related to wildlife, a position perceived as restrictive and insensitive to the realities of wildlife conservation, particularly the potential role of local people. In order to address this gap, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) was created through subsidiary legislation that allows private people to participate in wildlife conservation and ecotourism subject to compliance with appropriate legislative requirements. Initiatives such as the community wildlife service and corporate social responsibility came into being as mechanisms for delivering the government mandate of conserving Kenya's biodiversity. Since the formation of KWS in 1990, a lot of effort has been made to accommodate the role of local people in the management of wildlife, an initiative that has been supported by many conservation partners, including nongovernmental organizations and donors.

Despite the gains resulting from this subsidiary legislation, a more realistic new wildlife bill would be preferred by both the state and the various actors in the wildlife industry.

New legislation

Realizing the limitations of the existing legislation framework, KWS has initiated efforts to create a new wildlife policy and bill that would address the current shortcomings.

The new bill, currently awaiting consent from parliament, holds a lot of promise for the people of Kenya. If approved, it will allow greater participation by local communities, business, and private persons in matters related to wildlife conservation and tourism. While the state will ultimately continue to exercise its regulatory mandate, a lot of ground will be ceded to local people and other competent authorities. The enactment of the bill will place KWS in a more desirable position—envisioned as “KWS 2.0.”

Reference

Honey, M. 1999. *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington, DC: Island Press.

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