

Wildlife as a Lifeline to Kenya's Economy: Making Memorable Visitor Experiences

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Introduction

USUALLY, HARMONIZING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP is a delicate balancing act governed by the need to ensure sustainable long-term development. This is nowhere more true than in the poorest parts of the world.

Wildlife fulfills critical ecological functions that are important for the interconnected web of life-supporting systems. Significantly, Kenya's major water towers (i.e., sources) are found in protected areas focused on wildlife. Wildlife also has sociocultural and aesthetic values (Government of Kenya 2007: 5).

In a manner of speaking, wildlife tourism is the proverbial goose that lays the golden egg in the Kenyan economy—it's the lifeline. Indeed, Kenya owes its global reputation as a leading safari destination to its magnificent wildlife and the memorable visitor experiences it provides for tourists. Wildlife conservation is thus inextricably linked to Kenya's economic development and the livelihood of its people. In this context, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) is a key player in the national economy as a custodian of its natural resources.

Historical background

For nearly a century, visitors from around the world have been heading to Kenya for the big-game hunting experience, and more recently to enjoy the spectacular diversity of our flora and fauna. Kenya has hosted noteworthy visitors, such as Theodore Roosevelt, Ernest Hemingway, and Queen Elizabeth II.

Modern wildlife conservation in Kenya dates back to 1898 when a law controlling hunting was first enacted after Kenya became a British protectorate. These laws regulated wildlife off-take, hunting methods, and trade, with some endangered species being protected (Government of Kenya 2007: 7–12).

These origins coincide with the arrival of the railway in 1899 in Nairobi as the hub of the safari industry. One way for the railway to earn its keep was to encourage the wealthy to hunt Kenya's immense game populations. The enthusiasm of the hunters was fired by the writing of adventurers such as E.C. Selous. Following the completion of his terms as US president, Theodore Roosevelt sailed into Kenya's seaport of Mombasa in April 1909 to embark on one of the most elaborate hunting safaris East Africa had seen to date.

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An outstanding legacy of Roosevelt's safari was putting East Africa, especially Kenya, on the global map as a big-game hunting destination (Kenya Wildlife Service 1997: 9). Twenty years later, the American writer and essayist Ernest Hemingway, who made his first safari to Kenya in 1933, notably brought images of Africa and chronicles of his safari exploits to millions of readers across the world through such books as *Green Hills of Africa* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. The latter was made into a film in 1952 starring Gregory Peck, Susan Hayward, and Ava Gardner.

Further interest in Africa's wildlife spectacle was sustained by films, books, and thousands of returning tourists. Other famed writers who thrust Kenya's wildlife into the global spotlight included George and Joy Adamson, whose intimate relationship with Elsa the lioness formed the basis of another feature film, *Born Free*.

America exports the national park idea

The concept of the national park has been variously called America's "best idea," "invention," and "greatest export" because it represents the first such decision by any nation (US Department of State 2008). When Yellowstone National Park was set aside in 1872, it was the first time in history that a federal government had decided that a large tract of land be reserved "unmarred for future generations."

In colonial Kenya, the first game ranger was engaged in 1901, followed six years later with the formation of the Game Department to administer game reserves, enforce the hunting regulations, and protect settler farmer communities' property and crops from wildlife (Government of Kenya 2007: 7). In 1945, the Royal National Parks of Kenya Ordinance was promulgated to provide for the establishment of national parks.

The Yellowstone example was explicitly picked up on December 16, 1946, when the 117-km² Nairobi National Park was gazetted. This is Kenya's oldest national park, and the first to be established in East Africa. Indeed, it's the jewel of Kenya's conservation system given its unique opportunities for visitor experience. No other capital city in the world boasts of natural wilderness, teeming with wildlife, barely 10 km from the city center.

Barely two years after the creation of Nairobi, Tsavo National Park was proclaimed in April 1948, and split into East and West Tsavo national parks in May 1949.

Soon to follow were Mount Kenya and Aberdare national parks in December 1949 and May 1950 respectively. Within five years of Kenya's independence from Britain in 1963, three areas (Meru, Mount Elgon, and Ol Donyo Sabuk) were declared national parks and two areas, Malindi and Watamu, marine parks.

Since then, Kenya has steadily increased its protected area estate to 65 national parks and reserves, earning Kenya bragging rights as one of the best national park systems in the world (Kenya Wildlife Service 1997). The number of marine protected areas has grown to 10.

The institutions charged with the protection of Kenya's wildlife have evolved from colonial-era Royal National Parks, post-independence Kenya National Parks, the Game Department, the Wildlife and Management Department, and finally the current custodian, KWS.

KWS role in the economy

KWS is a state corporation that was formed in 1990, through the Wildlife (Conservation and

Management) Act of Parliament, Cap 376, with a mandate to conserve and manage wildlife and its habitat in Kenya. This requires multiple roles in various cross-cutting sectors, as follows.

Parks and reserves. KWS manages about 8% of the nation's total landmass. This land contains 22 national parks, 28 national reserves, and five national sanctuaries. Also under KWS management are four marine national parks and six marine national reserves. In addition, KWS manages 125 field stations outside wildlife protected areas.

Tourism. Tourism is the second largest sector of Kenya's economy. Wildlife managed by KWS forms the backbone of the tourism industry, since most visitors come first and foremost to view wildlife.

The tourism industry accounts for about 10% of the gross domestic product (GDP), making it the third largest contributor after agriculture and manufacturing. It is also Kenya's leading foreign exchange earner, generating about Ksh65.4 billion in 2007, up from Ksh21.7 billion in 2002. As an institution, KWS accounts for 90% of safari tourism and about 75% of the total tourism earnings. Within the 65 national parks and reserves spread across the nation, Kenya hosts some of the most ancient, fragile, and diverse wildlife species on earth.

Because of the diversity of the country's ecosystems, Kenya is categorized as a mega-diverse country under the Convention on Biological Diversity, along with countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, Congo, Madagascar, and Tanzania (Government of Kenya 2007: 5). A number of factors have combined to make Kenya so rich biologically. These include variability in climate and topography, and the diversity in ecosystems and habitats, ranging from mountain ranges to semi-arid and arid areas to marine and freshwater.

Kenya is endowed with a unique combination of tourist attractions, comprising tropical beaches, abundant wildlife in natural habitats, scenic beauty, and a geographically diverse landscape. Kenya is one of the few destinations in the world to offer such a wide range of different water sports: from wreck-diving to snorkeling, sailing to paragliding, deep-sea fishing to glass-bottom boat safaris, whitewater rafting to fishing.

Kenya's wildlife is one of the richest and most diversified in Africa with a number of its protected areas and wetlands being internationally recognized and protected as World Heritage sites, Ramsar sites, and biosphere reserves. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, to which Kenya is a party, provides a framework for the wise use of wetlands. Kenya has five Ramsar-listed sites, namely lakes Nakuru, Naivasha, Bogoria, Baringo, and Elementeita. The Tana Delta is in the process of being listed. These wetlands help to make Kenya an ornithologist's paradise, with at least 1,137 bird species.

Such is the range of diversity in Kenya that it is possible to see patrolling secretary birds, dancing crested cranes, nectar-sipping sunbirds, diving kingfishers, ostriches, and floating rafts of pelicans. On the glittering Rift Valley lakes live over 4 million lesser and greater flamingos.

Kenya's tourism sector has been identified as one of the economic growth areas that can contribute significantly towards poverty alleviation. This is because wildlife conservation provides an alternative and more effective use of marginal areas. Besides, the spatial distribution of tourist attractions contributes to more equitable distribution of economic development. This revenue contribution arising from tourism has the highest multiplier effect

because of its connection with other key sectors of the economy, including the protection of critical water catchments and vast genetic resources. Tourism generates jobs faster than manufacturing or agriculture because of its tremendous trickle-down effect and instant impact on other related sectors (IMC Switzerland 2007: 147).

Tourism is one of the only industries in the world where the “good” or “service” is consumed at the site of production. For this reason, local people are at an advantage to reap the benefits associated with the sector. The import content of the sector is estimated at 20%, meaning that 80% of its earnings are derived from local resources (IMC Switzerland 2007: 155).

This means the sector benefits from a relatively lower capital/output ratio and import content per unit of output compared with most other sectors (Government of Kenya 2007: 27, 2008b: 58).

This gives the sector a higher yield than any other in the economy. Being labor-intensive, any marginal expansion in the sector generates more job opportunities than other similar initiatives.

According to the United Nations Environment Program, travel and tourism are human-resource intensive, employing directly and indirectly 8% of the global workforce. It is estimated that one job in the core tourism industry creates about one-and-a-half additional or indirect jobs in the tourism-related economy (United Nations Environment Program 2011).

KWS also helps communities outside protected areas develop ecotourism and other income-generating ventures, bringing critically needed jobs and income to rural areas.

Water. Besides safeguarding wildlife, KWS is also charged with the responsibility of protecting the environment in general. The organization is responsible for managing and protecting critical water catchments of Mount Kenya, the Aberdares, Mount Elgon, Chyulu Hills, Marsabit and the Mau Forests complex. Given the fact that Mount Elgon National Park is the source of major rivers in East Africa, including Nzoia, Suam, and Turkwell, it serves as a vital source of water for millions of people in eastern Uganda and western Kenya. The mountain also acts as a major water catchment area for lakes Kyoga, Turkana, and Victoria, and eventually for the Nile River. Besides, the mountain is important to people who live around it, who harvest forest products and medicinal herbs there.

Energy. KWS safeguards the source of much of our nation’s energy. Some 70% of Kenya’s electricity comes from hydroelectric dams. Most of these are sited on the Tana River, which flows from Mount Kenya and Aberdare national parks. The second largest source of hydroelectric power is the Turkwell Gorge, in Nasolot National Reserve. Geothermal power is generated in Hells Gate National Park.

Coastal economy. The 10 marine national parks and reserves that KWS manages are critical breeding areas for delicate sea life, sustaining the country’s thriving fishing industry. The industry is a major source of livelihood for communities.

Social services. By visiting national parks, many seek to escape from the superficial distractions that clutter daily life and experience something of a deeper, enduring value. The parks act as places to reduce stress as well as unwind from the drudgeries of life and bond with family and friends. They are also good areas for conservation education.

Genetic resources. As reservoirs of genetic material and islands of naturalness, national parks are veritable “ecological laboratories” and “gene pools.” By protecting habitat and wildlife, KWS conserves genetic resources that could be used to develop new or improved food crops, medications, and other products. Wild relatives of crop plants, for instance, may provide genes that increase drought, flood, or salt tolerance. Biotechnologists can use such genes to make food crops more resilient. Besides the scientific value, parks act as repositories of geological and biological diversity and knowledge.

National security. KWS is a disciplined and uniformed force, supplementing national security. KWS protects wildlife, tourists, local communities, and property.

Transport. As an agency of the Kenya Roads Board, KWS is charged with the responsibility of developing and maintaining 9,000 km of roads within the national parks and reserves.

Review of wildlife-related policy and legislation. With its wealth of experience on the ground, KWS contributes to policy on land, tourism, forest conservation, fisheries, and environmental management.

International conventions. Kenya is a signatory to a number of environmental conventions and protocols. As the designated national authority, KWS is called on to interpret international conventions and adapt them to local conditions, policy, and law.

Foreign historical links

Various Kenyan national parks and reserves host historically important sites. Their location in the wild has reinforced Kenya’s attraction as a tourist destination.

For instance, Aberdare National Park has a special place in the British monarchy. It has one of the most famous trees in the world: The Treetops, a lookout among the branches of a *mugumo* (wild fig) tree overlooking a water hole. This is the tree hotel where the 25-year-old Princess Elizabeth ascended to her tree bedroom a princess and descended the next morning a queen, for it was here that she learned of the death of her father, King George VI, and became Queen Elizabeth II of the UK. This year marked the 60th commemoration of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Prince Edward visited the hotel in 2002 during the 50th commemoration to the throne as her representative. Its location in the wild and links to the royal family have had a multiplier effect on tourism in Kenya (Mutanu 2012: 3).

The actual news of the ascension was delivered to Queen Elizabeth II the following afternoon at Sagana State Lodge. The fishing lodge at the foot of Mount Kenya was given to Princess Elizabeth by the colonial government as a wedding present.

The Aberdare range was named in 1884 by the Scottish explorer Joseph Thomson, after Lord Delamare, then president of the Royal Geographical Society (Kenya Wildlife Service 2003a: 15). In the neighborhood of the Aberdares is the former home of Lord Baden Powell, the founder of the worldwide Boy Scout Association movement. He first visited Kenya in 1906 and fell in love with the Aberdares and “the wonderful views of the plains to the bold snow peaks of Mt Kenya. Upon his death in 1941, he was buried in Nyeri at St Peter’s Anglican Church, ‘facing Mount Kenya’ in the time-honoured local Kikuyu community tradition” (Kenya Wildlife Service 2003a: 21).

Given its wild beauty and atmospheric landscape, Aberdare National Park has had its share of Hollywood fame. Both Gura Waterfall, the most precipitous falls in Kenya, and the spectacularly lovely and long Karuru Falls, which fall in three steps, were portrayed in the Oscar-winning film *Out of Africa* starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford. The film was based on the book of the same name written by Karen Blixen in 1937.

The Aberdare Range was also used in the filming of the *Gorillas in the Mist*. The antics and debauchery of the so-called “Happy Valley” set of the 1920s were featured in the novel *White Mischief* by James Fox. This later was made into a film with the same name, starring Greta Scacchi, Charles Dance, and Joss Ackland.

In Ol Donyo Sabuk National Park on the outskirts of Kenya’s capital city Nairobi lies the grave of Sir William Northrup McMillan, a wealthy American farmer, whose burial place on the mountain’s summit had to be abandoned when the clutches of vehicles accompanying his hearse burned out on the steep slope.

Other national parks such as Sibiloi, which was gazetted in 1973, have been universally recognized as the “Cradle of Mankind” and the most likely site of the biblical Garden of Eden. The park, 800 km north of Nairobi on the shores of Lake Turkana, was created to protect the sites of many remarkable hominid fossil finds revealed by its searing winds.

Sacred sites for pilgrimage

Some national parks in Kenya are more than mere mountains, forests, savannah plains, lakes, and geologic wonders. They represent a piece of the local people’s souls; they act as cultural icons of heritage and identity.

In addition to their scientific value as repositories of geological and biological diversity and knowledge, national parks and reserves have profound spiritual and cultural significance for many Kenyan people. Communities attach deep spiritual values to sacred places, beliefs, practices, and traditions to lands that are now within national parks.

Apart from being the nation’s namesake and highest mountain, Mount Kenya National Park holds a special place in local people’s beliefs and culture. To them, it’s the home of their traditional god, Ngai, and the location of their creation mythology. Indeed, many still come on pilgrimages to the mountain for rituals.

In the same breath, the 16,916-ha Mount Elgon National Park, which was gazetted in April 1968, has been long considered a sacred place of worship and home of the gods by people who inhabit its slopes. The unique caves on its lower slopes have long been used for traditional ceremonies by the local Sabaot and Bukusu people.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Mount Elgon was the scene of the first sparks of Kenyan resistance to British colonial rule. The heart of the religious movement, known as “Dini ya Musingu” (Cult of the Ancestral Spirits), led by a charismatic prophet and folk hero, Elijah Masinde wa Nameme, was based at the foothills of the mountain.

Besides its historical richness, the mountain also hosts unique elephants that have been visiting its caves that have been sheltered from rain showers for millennia. The cave soils and rock aggregates are said to contain up to a hundred times more salt than the leaves of the surrounding forests. The elusive elephants travel deep into the caves usually at night, negotiating steep, rocky terrain to “mine” the caves (Kenya Wildlife Service 2003b: 43).

Vision 2030: The foundation for a prosperous Kenya

The Kenyan government launched the Vision 2030 development blueprint on June 10, 2008, to drive the country's economic growth by 10% by this year. The blueprint identified tourism as one of the six key sectors to deliver on the targets. The country wants to leverage on its endowment with a unique combination of tourist attractions (Government of Kenya 2008b). In this sector, Kenya aims to be one of the top ten long-haul tourist destinations in the world, offering high-end, diverse, and distinctive visitor experienced (Government of Kenya 2007).

Role of KWS in Vision 2030

KWS is implementing a number of initiatives towards realization of Vision 2030:

- Premium parks initiative to provide more high-end tourists with a unique experience in popular destinations, such as Amboseli, Masai Mara, Samburu, and Lake Nakuru.
- Under-utilized parks initiative: To upgrade the standards of attractive but seldom-visited parks such as Meru, Mount Kenya, Tsavo East and West, Mount Elgon, Marsabit, Rimoi, Nasaolot, Sibiloi, Saiwa Swamp, and Ruma to reduce congestion in the premium parks.
- Niche products initiative: Provide 3,000 beds in high-cost accommodation in Kakamega Forest, Ruma, Mount Elgon, Lake Turkana, Marsabit, Tana River, and Lake Victoria for tourists interested in cultural tourism and ecotourism as well as water-based sports. Develop tourism in bird watching, cruise, heritage, and historic sites.
- Water catchment management initiative: Rehabilitation of Kenya's five water towers, namely Mau Forests Complex, Mount Kenya, the Aberdare Ranges, Cherangani Hills, and Mount Elgon.
- Securing wildlife corridors and migratory routes initiative.
- Land cover and land use mapping initiative: Comprehensively map land use patterns.

Parting thoughts

Thanks to its alluring scenery, magnificent wildlife, pleasant year-round climate, and warmth of its people, Kenya has more than its share of the earth's endowment. From the experience of the world's longest-studied elephants in Amboseli, the thrill of conquering Mount Kenya, the tallest standing structure on the equator, to the drama of the famed man-eaters of Tsavo. From the cave elephants of Mount Elgon to the Cradle of Mankind in Sibiloi on the shores of the world's largest desert water body, Lake Turkana. For historical architecture, the Portuguese legacy in Fort Jesus near Kenya's seaport of Mombasa old town serves the purpose as does old-town Lamu, the longest surviving settlement in Kenya and best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa. What's more, with more than 40 fine golf courses dotted across the nation, Kenya stands tall among other countries..

Lovers of travel and tour are spoiled for a choice during a visit to Kenya: sports, beaches, conferences, magnificent wildlife and culture.

Join us in conserving these precious natural treasures while returning with a unique and memorable experience.

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