

THE KENYA WILDLIFE SERVICE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PROTECTING GLOBALLY SIGNIFICANT AREAS AND RESOURCES

John Waithaka, guest editor

Historical Factors that Shaped Wildlife Conservation in Kenya

John Waithaka

Introduction

KENYA LIES ACROSS THE EQUATOR AND BORDERS SOMALIA, ETHIOPIA, TANZANIA, UGANDA, Sudan, and the Indian Ocean. The country did not exist until 1920, when the British East Africa Protectorate officially became Kenya and the current borders were established. However, the events that led to the creation of Kenya date from the Berlin Conference of 1885, when the European powers first partitioned Africa into spheres of influence and the area now called Kenya became part of the British Protectorate.

British rule in Kenya lasted for nearly 70 years, between 1895 and 1963. Their style of governance; their approach to land acquisition, ownership, use, and management; their philosophy and patterns of wildlife conservation, utilization, and establishment of protected areas; their relationship with the native people and attitude toward African cultures; and their approach to law enforcement and response to resistance by discontented communities—all played a crucial role in shaping the attitude of many Kenyans towards wildlife, and continues to have a bearing on how conservation issues are perceived and tackled.

The George Wright Forum, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 21–29 (2012).

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Traditional lifestyle

Kenya comprises 42 ethnic communities, each with its own unique values, language, and cultural practices. Before the arrival of the Asians and Europeans, each of these communities either stayed in one place for generations or moved from one place to another according to seasonal dictates. They depended on tilling the land, herding, hunting, fishing, and gathering for subsistence. Food, water, diseases, and droughts shaped their demographics, while intercommunity hostilities defined ethnic boundaries.

Land in most cases was communally owned and every person had an ancestral land base. There were no cases of landlessness among the people.

The land was used for many purposes, and had physical, intellectual, and spiritual values; hence no land was considered wasteland. By combining these values, indigenous communities, whether pastoral or agricultural, had developed norms, rules, and practices that achieved sustainable resource use within their environments. These regulations were mainly based on long-term, empirical knowledge acquired from experiences, observations, and practices over countless generations, and were mainly adapted to local conditions and embraced local variation.

Responsibility for enforcing community regulations was usually vested in the elders who were empowered to exercise control over the land and prevent over-exploitation. Village councils also existed to settle disputes over use of resources.

Respect for the environment was almost universally practiced. From childhood, people were taught to respect nature and the world around them. Wild animals were used on a sustainable basis for the provision of food, clothing, shelter, medicine, weapons, and other needs, including tribal ceremonies and rituals. Some of the traditional natural resource management approaches were based on a belief system that included prescriptions for restraining excessive resource use. It was a taboo, for example, to kill a living organism without cause.

Although wildlife was common property until killed or captured by a hunter, taking more than was necessary for survival was prohibited and was perceived as a bad omen that would bring natural disasters such as drought, famine, and diseases to the entire community.

Wild animals were regarded as “second cattle” in some pastoral communities and were not hunted for food except during periods of drought when cattle was scarce. In the absence of natural catastrophes such as disease or drought, livestock was enough to sustain the populations of such communities.

Each group related with the environment in distinct ways, and was able to sustain ecologically viable resource management systems with considerable success.

Wildlife featured prominently in most cultural activities, ceremonies, and folklore. In most communities, folklore based on various aspects of wildlife was an important mode of imparting cultural and social norms and morals to the youth. Some animals were recognized as community totems and were protected from any form of destruction.

Cultural differences existed that spared some species from use in some parts of the country. Some myths forbade the hunting, killing, or interfering with certain animals, their young or habitats. Others despised the use of some resource types and looked down upon communities that used them. For example, some communities considered it a taboo to eat

fish, birds, primates, or certain species of mammals, while others valued them greatly. These cultural differences ensured survival of species in regions where they were less preferred and exploited.

These traditional resource management systems remained strong until 1895 when Kenya became a British protectorate. They declined very rapidly thereafter, and have faded into insignificance in most communities.

Outside influence: The Arabs, Portuguese and the British

The east coast of Africa has long attracted international maritime trade, with records of trade missions going as far back as 3,500 years ago (Hall 1996). The rise of Islam in Arabia marked the beginning of a more enduring Indian Ocean trade epoch, with the presence of a significant 9th-century Islamic civilization in Kenya that has endured to the present day. The coming of Arabs gradually gave rise to a distinct culture and civilization in the coastal areas, and Swahili language and culture developed. Trading in animal skins, ivory, and agricultural produce for cloth, metals, ceramics, grain, ghee, and sugar was introduced and increased with time. The need for porters to carry the ivory from inland areas to the coast gave birth to a slave trade. Oddly but luckily for Kenya's people and wildlife, the Arab traders appeared to have had little or no interest in the Kenyan interior, which remained unknown to the outside world until the 19th century. However, coastal towns in Kenya were used as points of transit for slaves captured from present-day Tanzania.

Portugal was the first European power to forge a maritime route to Asia in the 15th century around the African coast, but battles with the Arabs who controlled trade along the east coast probably kept them too busy to have time to venture into mainland Kenya.

The Asians introduced bananas, yams, and rice, while the Portuguese brought American crops: corn, cassava, and tobacco. These food crops hugely raised the potential for the increase of the country's population while enabling a greater degree of permanent settlement, factors that would beleaguer wildlife conservation in the years to come.

Over the course of the 18th century, Britain became the dominant European power in the Indian Ocean. However, Europe still knew little about the Kenyan interior. It was only in the 1840s that German missionaries first reported the existence of Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya, and their descriptions of snow on the equator met with open ridicule in Europe. Over the next 40 years, British missionaries and explorers undertook a series of pioneering expeditions into the East African interior, prompted by a renewed obsession with the mystery that had intrigued geographers since Roman times: the source of the River Nile. The period of exploring mainland Kenya had begun.

The explorers went back to Europe with stories about Kenya's immense game populations that appeared almost inexhaustible. These stories drew European hunters in droves. Many hunting parties, some employing a hundred or more porters, went on the hunting expeditions, killing wildlife for trophies, food, and for pleasure. By the 1880s, concerns were already being expressed over the decline in wildlife in the region, and suggestions made that some kind of control measures were needed to save wildlife (Noel 1963).

Scramble for Africa: Kenya becomes a British colony

By this time, European powers had laid claim to parts of the continent, and were aggressive-

ly trying to spread their spheres of influence. In late 1884, a conference was convened in Berlin, Germany, to negotiate a settlement regarding the political partitioning of Africa. Fourteen nations participated, including France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal. The area now known as Kenya fell under the British.

The British had set in place the fundamentals of colonial administration in 1888. A British trading company, Imperial British East Africa Company, was established and posted to administer Kenya and Uganda under the name “British East Africa Protectorate.” The company was granted permission to undertake commercial operations in Uganda, as the British were more interested in Uganda because Kenya seemed like a wasteland that was largely inhabited by hostile tribes. Uganda, on the other hand, was strategically important for the control of the River Nile. The company made treaties with several tribes and quelled others into submission by military force. However, it was unable to contain Kenya’s hostile communities, forcing the British to declare the country a colony and protectorate on 1 July 1895 and to post a colonial governor to establish a formal British administration. Sour relationships between Kenyan communities and the British had already developed.

Following the formal declaration of Kenya as a British protectorate in 1895, the colonial government immediately made two crucial decisions that were to define the future of wildlife in the country. The first was to construct a railway line from the Kenyan coastal town of Mombasa to Uganda, and the second was to tighten measures for protecting wildlife.

The railway: Arrival of European settlers, land appropriation, destruction of wildlife

The building of the railway commenced in 1896 and reached Kisumu on Lake Victoria in 1901, reducing the journey between Mombasa and Lake Victoria from months to a single day. The completion of this £5 million investment completely transformed the future of Kenya, its people, cultures, economy, politics, and wildlife. The enthusiasm of the colonial government to develop trade with the distant, yet unknown Uganda waned, and the opportunity to develop the already accessible, cool, and fertile Kenya highlands became more attractive. The government made a policy decision: the railway was to be used for opening up the inland areas to farming, hunting, and tourism as a way of making returns on investment. This policy changed the shape of Kenya forever. Under the policy, the British government encouraged white settlers to farm large tracts of Kenyan highlands that the railway had made accessible. In 1907, the government designated the fertile highlands of Central Kenya and parts of the Rift valley as “White Highlands,” and the traditional owners were forcibly concentrated into newly created tribal reserves. Any show of discontent was ruthlessly discouraged by sheer military might. Parts of the White Highlands not occupied by settlers were declared “Crown Land” and the native occupants declared “tenants at will” of the Crown and liable to summary eviction.

In their colonial conquest, the British devised a policy of “divide and rule,” turning some African groups against others. They classified people into ethnic groups called “tribes” based on linguistic variations and locality, creating divisions and boundaries that had not existed previously. The government appointed “chiefs” over each of the groups, whose main duty was to collect taxes from the people, forcing men to seek employment in European

farms to get money for taxes as Africans were not allowed to grow cash crops under the “Colour Bar”—a policy of racial discrimination.

In the years leading to World War I, large tracts of land had been allocated to European settlers who began to decimate wildlife populations in order to create room for crop and live-stock farming. As more land was put under agriculture, wildlife habitats and populations declined. Animals were also killed in large numbers to protect crops and eliminate predation of livestock. Only animals in the inhospitable savannas that lacked water and harbored sleeping sickness were spared. Wherever wildlife was in conflict with farming, it stood no chance.

Hunting had also become a big-time business. The prospects of commercial profit from Africa’s great charismatic African wildlife lured professional hunters, mainly from Europe and America. The so-called Big Five—buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion, and rhino—were the main attraction. For example, former US President Theodore Roosevelt sailed to Mombasa in 1909 to embark on the most elaborate hunting safari East Africa had ever seen. With a large contingent of professional hunters, taxidermists, and over 500 porters to carry loads of trophies, he embarked on a safari that lasted the best part of the year, killing animals to the extent of attracting controversy on account of the sheer number of animals shot. The expedition opened Kenya for sport hunting by Americans like never before.

The clearing of land for settler occupation, hunting extravaganzas, expropriation of African land, forced labor, and extinguishing of African traditional rights over land and resources opened a chapter that would have lasting effects on Kenyan society and its wildlife even after the end of the colonial era. The building of the Uganda railway was where all this began.

Tightening measures to protect wildlife: Creating game and forest reserves

As mentioned above, the colonial government took immediate steps to protect wildlife soon after declaring Kenya a British protectorate in 1895. It placed restrictions on hunting of wildlife and created game reserves to protect wildlife habitat. In 1899 and 1900, respectively, the Southern Game Reserve and Northern Game Reserve were established, covering nearly 70,000 square kilometers.

Extermination of vermin

Britain also took the fight to protect wildlife outside its sphere of influence. It organized an international convention in London in 1900 that was attended by representatives from colonial powers with African dependencies—Great Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Germany, and Italy—with the goal of facilitating the creation of uniform game regulations and law enforcement procedures within the African continent. Among many decisions reached, the conference called for the establishment of game reserves within 18 months of the treaty’s ratification, in which it would be unlawful to kill wild animals “except animals such as lions, leopards, hyenas, wild dogs, otters, baboons, some monkeys, large birds of prey, crocodiles, poisonous snakes and pythons” which were categorized as “vermin” and were to be eradicated both inside and outside protected areas (Sorrenson 1965). The “vermin” policy had devastating impacts on wildlife in Kenya.

In 1907, a Game Department was established and charged with the responsibility of enforcing game laws and protecting the reserves, efforts that were nevertheless hobbled by a shortage of personnel and minuscule budgets. A major problem arising from the establishment of the reserves was human-wildlife conflicts. Animals ventured outside the reserves and caused damage to people and property, destroying their crops, killing livestock, spreading diseases to livestock, and even killing people (Weller 1931).

The Game Department was given the responsibility of controlling dangerous and crop-raiding animals (vermin), and overseeing the clearing of animals from large tracts of land to permit settlement and agricultural development. By the mid 1930s, thousands of so-called vermin had been eliminated by farmers and government officers. The scale of such schemes is evident from the control program the Game Department undertook in Makueni area, where 996 rhinos were killed between 1944 and 1946 to open up an area of 200 square kilometers for settlement (Hunter 1952). Other such incidents are described by Western and Waithaka (2005). There were also massive killings of game to feed troops, prisoners, and laborers during World Wars I and II, incidents that went unreported though they may have been “the most intense legal game use of the twentieth century” (Parker and Bleazard 2001). These efforts created the odd situation of having a Game Department that spent more of its time and money killing wildlife than protecting it.

Protection of forests

The forests were also affected by the railway and settlers. The 1897 Ukamba Woods and Forest Regulation was the first forestry legislation in Kenya. The regulation placed forests within one mile of the railway line under the control of the railway administration to ensure fuel supplies for railway locomotives. Forests beyond this were placed under the local government administration. The government then initiated a move to place all the major forest areas in the country under the control of the Crown, emphasizing that “the public good was best served through the protection of forests and water resources, even if this meant the displacement of the local communities” (Logie and Dyson 1962). A forest department was created in 1902 and mandated to curtail forest destruction by shifting cultivators and pastoral groups. By 1908, most major forest blocks had been declared forest areas. Also by 1908, over 264,000 acres of prime forest land had been alienated to the settlers. This prompted the chief conservator of forests to stress, in vain, the need to demarcate all the forests to stop the settlers from destroying them. Over time, a total of 43 forests were defined as government forests, and a law was passed that provided for the creation of nature reserves within forest reserves (Logie and Dyson 1962).

Clamor for parks

Alarmed by the widespread cultivation and the huge numbers of animals killed to protect crops, the British government started to explore the possibility of a new accord that would focus on more effective ways of protecting wildlife. A committee established by the British government in 1932 called for the establishment of “national parks and reserves where hunting, killing or capturing of fauna, and the collection or destruction of flora would be limited or prohibited.”

Unfortunately for the Africans, the land that was available to them became the target for establishing national parks.

A local campaign to create national parks was initiated but was greeted with apathy and opposition by the local colonial administration whose priority was to set aside land for farming, mining, and to accommodate a growing African population. Through public support and spirited persistence, the campaigners forced the government to appoint a Game Policy Committee in 1938. The committee planned for part of Nairobi to be designated as a national park but its work was derailed by the outbreak of World War II. It was not until it ended that enabling legislation was enacted and Nairobi National Park was established as Kenya's first in 1946. The era of establishing parks had begun.

Kenya's first national park and park service

According to Parker and Bleazard (2001), the Game Department was never particularly intellectual. Civil servants in colonial Kenya were required to pass both oral and written exams in Swahili if they wished to advance in their career, but game wardens were exempted from this requirement. It is reported that they had a particular dislike for paperwork, and had very little time for filing systems. The wardens were also treated differently in other aspects. Many of them were posted to stations without any housing facilities and often used their own funds to run their offices when their allocations were delayed (probably due to late submission of accounts). Most interestingly, they were the only government officers who were required to provide their own vehicles for service in the field as a condition for employment. This rule was relaxed in 1956 for wardens recruited for the anti-poaching campaign of 1956–1957, and the last time a warden was required to provide his own transport was in 1962, a year before Kenya became independent (Parker and Bleazard 2001). To make matters worse, they were the lowliest paid among the civil servants, but they competed to have these jobs due to the status and honor they carried. This was the state of affairs at the Service Department that transitioned into independent Kenya. With poorly paid wardens who had no material prospects but were in charge of vast treasures, it is not a great surprise that they participated in the poaching of the very resources they were entrusted to protect.

The colonial legacy

The legacy of the 70 years of colonial rule in Kenya was the alienation of people from wildlife and other resources they had traditionally relied on. Throughout the colonial period, the law played an important function in the legitimization of policy, particularly with respect to land acquisition. A series of land laws were passed to justify expropriation of lands from indigenous people to give to settlers and to create game and forest reserves. The wholesale forcible removal of entire populations from their native lands was carried out without any form of compensation. Foreign governance systems and institutions were imposed on the native people.

Political structures were established that disempowered the native peoples, paving the way to the unhindered access and acquisition of the natural resources of the country. The tough legislation in favor of wildlife created conflicts that linger today. Hunting laws devastated traditional subsistence hunting, since the vast majority of indigenous people could not

afford licenses. Subsequent game laws banned traditional hunting techniques, on the grounds that these techniques were cruel to animals, effectively declaring subsistence hunting illegal. The introduction of sport hunting was strongly detested by the native people who could not understand the basis for killing animals for self-gratification while they were denied their traditional means of livelihood and subsistence.

Imposing foreign rule brought about the erosion of indigenous cultures; destroyed long-established traditional natural resource management systems that had ensured the survival of the soils, plants, and creatures which they needed in order to live; introduced wildlife management laws that failed to address the social and ecological contexts within which wildlife had thrived; and created conflicts arising from the transfer of power from traditional governance systems to a centralized power base.

Eventually, it became almost impossible for the Africans to co-exist with wildlife without breaking the law. Many adult males were punished and imprisoned for petty offenses, experiences that solidified the negative attitudes toward wildlife and the colonial regime. Game Reserves were surrounded by hostile people who had no sympathy for them, the wildlife, or conservation in general. By the 1950s, the desire to reclaim control of their natural resources reached its zenith, and the struggle for political liberation was unstoppable.

Independent at last

As Kenya's independence approached, many people expressed pessimism that conservation would not be given the priority it deserved by the new African government. These fears were alleviated when the government of Jomo Kenyatta unveiled the government policy on wildlife protection during the General Assembly of IUCN in Nairobi in September 1963, three months before Kenya attained full independence. The announcement read:

The natural resources of this country—its wildlife, which offers such attraction to visitors from all over the world, the beautiful places in which these animals live, the mighty forests which guard the water catchment areas so vital to the survival of man and beast—are a priceless heritage for the future.

The Government of Kenya, fully realising the value of its natural resources, pledges itself to conserve them for posterity with all the means at its disposal. We are confident of the cooperation of other governments of East Africa in this important task, but at present, we are unable, unaided, to provide the specialist staff and money that are necessary. We, therefore, invite other nations and lovers of nature throughout the world to assist us in honouring this solemn pledge.

Fulfilling the pledge

The articles in this journal illustrate how Kenya, through the Kenya Wildlife Service, is using “all means at its disposal” to honor the promise of the above solemn pledge.

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