

THE TROUBLE WITH LAIKIPIA





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Wildlife are the innocent victims. This elephant was killed out of pure spite as illegal herders overwhelm conservancies. Some animals are poached, but most of them are killed because of competition at water sources, or because bored herders goad each other to shoot animals that provide no tangible benefits.



The second-best wildlife destination in Kenya is under siege. The very foundation of private land ownership, property rights, rule of law and conservation are entwined in ways that the people of Laikipia never expected in the future of this high country.

We are confronted by a challenging combination of a social breakdown in pastoralism, a high percentage of disenfranchised herders, an excess of guns, an excess of livestock (way above what any Kenyan rangeland can carry), a breakdown in livestock markets, an election year, the whiff of long-term land leases up for renewal, and now drought. That's a serious rubric's cube of confounding issues!

Thirty-seven per cent of Laikipia is owned by ranchers of European and African origin -- a third. Almost another third is owned by pastoralist families joined in group ranches -- private community lands. That is almost 70 per cent of the land available to historical land use practices of ranching, tourism, and wildlife conservation.

Many of the private or corporate ranches of Laikipia fall under leasehold -- a long-term agreement with the government conferring some property rights. Many of these leases were granted during an era of colonialism. Some of these leases are up for renewal within the next 10-20 years. Honestly, no one is sure what the Kenyan government will do when leases need to be renewed. Insecurity of tenure is historically associated with minimal land inputs and improvements. And the absence of clarity on lease renewals adds confusion that is easily exploited. This is not what we want or need if a third of this land is generating 4 billion shillings (\$40 million) in annual economic benefits to neighbours, the county administration and the national government.

And moreover, of the \$2 million in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funding provided to this landscape, 90 per cent of this annual benefit is generated by only 7 innovative land use conservancies in Laikipia.

THE DEAL WITH GRAZING

For years, each private ranch has developed and planned some sort of grass and water access for their neighbours. Historically these agreements have been all over the place, and are part of a rangeland matrix of livestock, movement, grass and water. Some agreements helped people coming to Laikipia and some benefited Laikipia residents. Sometimes, Laikipia ranchers took their cattle to Samburu and Isiolo. It varied. Livestock disease risk was managed, and conflicts were few. Discussions prevailed, and



PHOTO BY: SEAN OUTRAM

agreements were handshakes. Drought patterns were cyclical (about every seven years) and some cycles were worse than others. This was a pattern we dealt with in this landscape.

In this century, given Kenya's population growth rate, and the unrestricted growth of livestock numbers, any grazing plan has been over-stretched to meet private and communal needs. By the same token, with changes in large ranch ownership, there has been no consistency or equity in development of community grazing plans, systems or fees associated with outside access. Each ranch is left to negotiate terms, typically with neighboring elites. These agreements don't always benefit the poor. But leased grazing agreements did stand as an historical pledge of engagement by private ranches with their Maasai, Turkana, Pokot and Samburu neighbours.

These cattle perished from drought and disease after arriving in Laikipia and finishing the pasture.

LAIKIPIA'S RANGELAND RESOURCES ARE ALREADY BEING SERIOUSLY STRAINED BY LAIKIPIA RESIDENTS OUTSIDE THE PRIVATE RANCHES; AND NOW EVEN MORE SERIOUSLY BY IMMIGRANT PASTORALISTS AND THEIR HERDS.

THE DEAL WITH LIVESTOCK AND WILDLIFE

Livestock numbers on large, private ranches in Laikipia have remained relatively stable over the last 40 years – quality has been emphasized over quantity. The growth in livestock numbers in this county stems from two things -- an increase in the herd sizes of community ranches, and from immigrant cattle. In 2016, over half of the livestock counted in Laikipia didn't actually belong here! Laikipia was supporting a livestock population twice the normal size.

Late in 2016, and early in 2017, the situation got worse. We estimate that some 225,000 illegal cattle and at least 350,000 illegal sheep and goats were present in Laikipia during the height of the drought. Many large ranches were completely overwhelmed by outside cattle and sheep and goats. Scores of thousands of livestock and armed herders occupied private ranches. Local pastoralist livestock were subsequently forced into the cold reaches of Mt. Kenya, the Abedares and the Kikuyu highlands.

Disaster, mayhem, murder and disease resulted from this “invasion”. Laikipia residents, the “little” people, suffered most; but the large ranches made their plight known with better access to media and the authorities.

Ironically, at the same time as the growth of human and livestock numbers to Laikipia,



PHOTO BY: NORTHERN RANGELANDS TRUST

the total wildlife numbers over the 30 years has not varied dramatically. In fact, they are almost identical. Wildlife tend to be more resilient than domestic livestock.

This is a staggering statistic in a country where, over the same period, wildlife numbers outside and within the protected area system have declined by 60-70 per cent.

But our wildlife too is now starting to suffer. Bovine diseases are impacting impalas, elands, buffalos, hartebeest and zebras. Elephants competing for scarce resources are killed either for ivory or in anger.



PHOTO BY: JOSH PERETTI, MUGIE CONSERVANCY

TOP: The latest in herding gear – the AK47. Pastoralist groups are increasingly using illegal arms to defend their herds and to gain access to non-traditional grazing areas and private property. Cell phones are also the new “weapon” of choice, helping to coordinate attacks and share information about the movement of law enforcement.

BELOW: This buffalo was killed by an armed herder and the “backstrap” taken to make a herding whip.

Healthy rangelands make for healthy wildlife populations – and it is clear that both livestock and wildlife can live side-by-side with acceptable losses from predation and disease. Laikipia's rangeland resources are already being seriously strained by Laikipia residents outside the private ranches; and now even more seriously by immigrant pastoralists and their herds.

We will not be able to sustain these rangelands, let alone our epic wildlife, if free access is expected from our immigrant visitors.

THE ENEMIES WITHIN

The Middle Ages were characterized by warfare, disease and famine. This cataclysmic combination of misfortune gave rise to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Two horsemen for war, and one each for famine and disease.

Many years later, the residents of Laikipia feel another onset of Apocalyptic Horsemen. Our first horseman is lousy land use/land management. More than 50 per cent of our land in Laikipia suffers from *land use suicide*. We are not taking the normal steps to protect our soil cover, water retention, and nutrient values. Our rangelands are denuded by overgrazing and erosion, and our small-holder agriculture by bad soil and water management practices. This horseman needs to be addressed immediately and decisively with all the tools at our disposal.

CONSERVATION

Our second horseman is invasive species. By example, the prickly pear cactus (*opuntia spp*) now festoons most of the community conservancies in northern Kenya. A new book on the invasive species of Laikipia (authored by Arne Witt at the Center for Agriculture and Bioscience International in Nairobi) illustrates just how much at risk we are from exotic plants. Unless we address this scourge, our rangelands will not recover. Again, we know the solutions and can fix this.

Our third horseman is political manipulation of the poor, the uneducated, and the youth. We seem to have lost also the respect for tradition and custom and earned leadership -- the institutions that have provided some semblance of cultural and environmental stability to rangelands. Whether cattle barons enjoying the free-inputs of communal grazing for their private herds, or the political leaders who pledge a world of solutions, but never deliver, there are still too many people who blindly allow themselves to be manipulated by those with money, power, or both.

Our fourth horseman is indifference -- indifference from the new County Government and the politicians who play with their newfound power and purse; the inadequate and

Cows belonging to local herders walk by a carcass of an elephant killed by armed cattle herders in Mugie Conservancy, Kenya.

Mugie conservancy has been committed to Africa's wildlife and people for over forty years. Mugie has increased the population of critically endangered Grevys zebra and Jackson's Hartebeests. Through the preservation of the delicate ecosystem, the sanctuary has boosted populations of lion, oryx, elephant, giraffe, cape buffalo, eland, as well as over two hundred unique bird species.

seemingly indifferent response of the National Government when it comes to the rule of law and the protection of private property. It is also the indifference of neighbours who think they can safely say, "it won't affect me" and sit within their fences and disassociate with their neighbours. This absence of political will and our indifference will be our un-doing.

THE FUTURE

For those of us living and working in this landscape, there is still hope. The new Community Land Act should bring the eventual security of tenure associated with land use care and investment. There is a rising tide of consolidated neighbourhoods in Laikipia that stand together to manage and share rangeland resources and repel armed invasions. The new, national Conservancy movement (Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association) also offers hope as open pastoralist systems turn into successful ranching enterprises that also conserve wildlife.

Wildlife has a future here too, if we can somehow link the proverbial problem of conservation incentives, benefits, and subsidies in a thoughtful and equitable manner, and without further delay. ●

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