

Technology Lab on Wildlife Conservation Opens at Ol Pejeta

Ol Pejeta Conservancy partners with conservation and technology organisations to kick-start a research and innovation centre for wildlife conservation

On 22 May, the Conservation Tech Lab was officially launched at Ol Pejeta Conservancy in a ribbon-cutting ceremony by Maria Mbeneka, the wife of the governor of Laikipia County.

The idea for the Conservation Tech Lab was developed by an engineer from Liquid Telecom, Ben Roberts, and the CEO of Ol Pejeta Conservancy (OPC), Richard Vigne. Roberts has lived in Kenya for seven years and loves wildlife and open spaces. He became interested in how protected areas (PAs) were managed after learning about the threats to wildlife that poaching and PA encroachment by humans posed. He saw that wildlife management was not being carried out in the way an engineer would design it.

"I saw that there were inefficiencies that technology could overcome," said Roberts at the launch. "If you saw the first Jurassic Park movie before everything went wrong, something like that could be developed, but even better."

Roberts went on to explain how the Internet of Things (IoT) technology could be employed to transform into a communications device selected animals, fences, gates, migration corridors, the soil, water, vehicles, in essence, anything that a manager would



Laikipia County First Lady Maria Mbeneka cuts the ribbon to launch the Tech Lab as Richard Vigne looks on.

want information about, using either the Internet or mobile phone network. All data would be communicated to a central command centre, which would allow management decisions to be made. Security to prevent poaching would be a priority, but much more than that would be included.

Richard Vigne has been managing OPC since its inception in 2004, and before that when it operated as a cattle ranch and tourism destination. It is now a Kenyan national land trust with the largest private rhino population in East Africa, in addition to a wide variety of other savannah game, including elephants. Vigne provides the practical management challenges that needed tech solutions.

"Kenya now has about 750 Black rhinos," said Vigne in his address at the launch. "The government has said that it wants 2,000 by 2035. To achieve that we need to secure about 2 million acres (8,094 sq. km). Providing the type of security needed for rhinos with current methods would be prohibitively

expensive. If tech can make security cheaper and more effective there might be resources for 2,000 Black rhino."

But Vigne indicated other areas that could be integrated into the tech management system as well to provide a better tourism product and increase income – marketing, reservations, ticketing, transport, running the lodging, meals and game viewing, accounting and auditing.

Designing and developing the right technology and software would need research, which is the purpose of the Tech Lab. In partnership with Fauna & Flora International, Liquid Telecom and Arm (hi-tech silicon chip-maker), and supported with initial funds from the Royal Foundation, the Tech Lab aims to be a world-leading collaborative hub for the testing, support and development of technologies. ●



Dan Stiles has worked in academia, for the United Nations as staff and consultant and for various NGOs such as IUCN, TRAFFIC, Save the Elephants and many more.

For those interested in participating, research proposals can be sent to: techlab@olpejetaconservancy.org.