

Soap Box

Use of illegal methods in Kenya's rural communities to combat wildlife damage: a case study of Laikipia

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Wildlife depredation in Laikipia, Kenya

KENYA'S LAIKIPIA DISTRICT is located on the equator in the central part of the country, northwest of Mt. Kenya (Figure 1). It is a region with one of the highest diversities of wildlife in the country and one in which wildlife depredation is a common occurrence (Sifuna 2009). Wildlife-based tourism is an especially valuable resource for Kenya's economy (Government of Kenya 2009). In 2008, for instance, the tourism earnings were approximately \$658 million, an appreciable part of which was attributable directly or indirectly to wildlife (Government of Kenya 2009).

Despite these benefits, wildlife in Laikipia, as in many other regions in the country, have negative impacts on rural communities when they cause damage to people or their property. Most of Laikipia, like many other areas of Kenya, is rural and comprised of tens of villages characterized by poverty resulting from unemployment and low income per capita (Government of Kenya 2009). Most of the people in the region are peasant farmers who rely primarily on small-scale subsistence crop farming and livestock raising for their livelihood. These people reside either on small farms or on tribal land that is communally owned.

The overall attitude of the rural communities in the region toward wildlife is generally negative. The people with a positive attitude toward wildlife are those who are considered the elite. On the other hand, rural folk, who bear the brunt of wildlife losses, have a rather hostile attitude toward wildlife. In many areas

of Laikipia, they feel strongly that wildlife is a curse instead of an asset, and they are bitter toward wildlife authorities, especially the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). Rural communities are particularly dissatisfied with the way KWS handles wildlife matters, and especially the issue of depredation. Referring to wildlife, Paulo Lenges, a Samburu tribesman and herdsman in Mukogodo division, said in an interview with this author, "The problem with the Kenya government is that even if their cows eat your cows or kill you, it does not care."

Despite the huge sums of money that the government and people in the wildlife and tourism sector earn, the rural communities hardly receive any tangible economic benefits. Unfortunately, most of the revenue from wildlife tourism goes to urban-based tourist companies instead of the rural peasants who

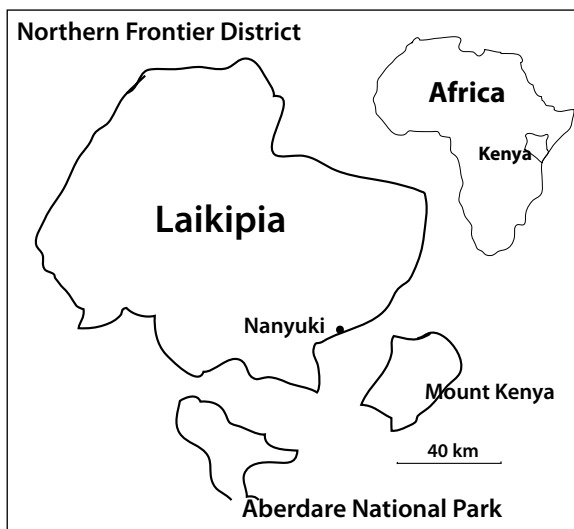


Figure 1. The Laikipia District in Kenya has one of the highest diversities of wildlife in the country.

interact with wildlife daily and bear the brunt of wildlife depredation (Akama et al. 1994).

The Kenya government in 1977 attempted to control poaching by imposing a general ban on hunting and any consumption of wildlife (KWS 1996). The ban, which was imposed through Legal Notice No. 120 (1977), remains in force to date. It means that, in Kenya, the only forms of wildlife utilization are nonconsumptive ones, such as photography and viewing game. Even Kenya's Wildlife Bill of 2007, which is currently pending before Parliament and is perhaps the country's most progressive law on wildlife, expressly prohibits all forms of hunting. The hunting ban changed the historic relationship between people and wildlife, in which people hunted wild animals for food, bedding, and clothing as a trade-off for the damage that these animals posed through their depredation activities.

In Laikipia, the negative public attitude toward wildlife seems to be reflected in some of the methods used by the rural communities to combat wildlife depredation. Some farmers employed illegal measures, such as lacing crops with poison or placing harmful objects, such as long nails and traps on paths used by the animals. Below, I examine some of the methods that the rural communities in the region employ in combating the wildlife menace.

Use of illegal methods by rural communities in Laikipia to combat wildlife depredation

Through interviews and focus-group discussions, I sought to find out how rural communities in Laikipia commonly combat depredation by wildlife. I also obtained information through questionnaires, observation in the field, as well as a survey of the literature. Participants in the study included 80 households selected by a combination of nonrandom, purposive, and chain or snowball sampling. To qualify as respondents, subjects had to fulfill at least one of the following 3 criteria: (1) be permanent residents of Laikipia, (2) own or occupy of land within the region, or (3) be victims of wildlife depredation. While people surveyed for this study may not represent the entire population of Laikipia, they are the people who have suffered or have been affected by depredation by wildlife.

I found that rural communities in Laikipia use many methods to mitigate depredation by wildlife. These methods can be divided into 2 broad categories: legal and illegal. Legal methods are those having official endorsement of the wildlife authorities. They include, fences, fires, noise-making, scarecrows, predator models, firecrackers, flares, and repellents. Illegal methods used by rural communities in Laikipia include: digging pits and trenches; setting up traps and snares; placing harmful articles, such as nails, spikes, and poison on wildlife routes, and direct attacks on individual animals. The locals also attack wildlife using spears or arrows (sometimes poisoned arrows) and, to a smaller extent, guns. These measures are usually taken out of malice, anger, or revenge for particular incidents of depredation by wildlife. While such malicious and retaliatory responses are undesirable, they are being used increasingly by the people in their response to wildlife depredation and in their war against wildlife authorities, whom they accuse of valuing animals more than people.

During my interviews, I asked people living in rural communities whether they used any illegal methods to protect their crops, livestock, and property from damage by wildlife; of the 80 households I interviewed in this study, 12% said "no," and 88% said "yes." Most (56 of 80) respondents that I interviewed either did not know that the methods they were using were illegal or they did not care. This means that only 30% of the respondents cared about the legality of the methods they used for wildlife depredation mitigation. Of those who resorted to illegal methods, 15% said these methods were effective; 20% said these methods were affordable; 45% said that they used them out of anger and frustration against the wildlife authority (i.e., the Kenya Wildlife Service) or the animals themselves; and 5% used them because the methods were traditionally used in their communities.

A significant portion of the rural people in the Laikipia region who used illegal methods to combat wildlife damage were poor (Sifuna 2005). Most locals cannot afford sophisticated equipment because their main concerns were to provide for their basic needs—food, clothing, shelter—as well as perhaps school fees for their children. They are so poor that they cannot afford

to use legal methods or purchase supplies, such as fencing wire, repellents, firecrackers, and chili pepper. As a result, they resort to cheaper methods, most of which are illegal.

Asked whether the government or wildlife authorities helped them adopt legal methods through, for instance, finance, training, or education, 95% said “no,” and only 5% said “yes.” All the latter were rich farmers with big farms and ranches. This implies that the focus of the support by government and wildlife authorities with regard to wildlife depredation has been not on the ordinary resident of the rural areas, but rather on large-scale farmers and ranch owners. Moreover, some of the wildlife that cause damage in rural communities in Laikipia come from these large, private ranches.

What is the way forward?

Undeniably, the survival of Laikipia’s wildlife depends upon the support and good will of the rural communities because they are the ones that interact with wildlife on a daily basis. They also are the ones who bear the direct brunt of depredation by wildlife. With the present widespread negative attitude of the local people in the region toward wildlife, as well as their retaliatory responses, wildlife will find it increasingly difficult to survive. Indeed, the true victims of human–wildlife conflicts are both the people and wildlife because wildlife suffers greatly when people retaliate by poisoning, attacking, or trapping them.

To ensure the survival of wildlife in the area, there is a need for wildlife authorities not only to enforce prohibition of illegal methods of control, but also to promote the use of benign mitigation methods in rural communities. One approach would be for wildlife authorities to cultivate positive public attitudes among rural communities toward wildlife, then give incentives to the rural communities to use legal methods of control.

I recommend 2 strategies that wildlife authorities need to adopt: (1) introduce community-oriented wildlife management and (2) build the capacity of rural communities to use the sanctioned methods of alleviating depredation by wildlife. I discuss below how these strategies may reduce the use of illegal methods of wildlife control.

The country’s state-centered style of wildlife management has contributed to the negative attitude by excluding rural people from the benefits of wildlife. The government of Kenya needs to adopt a community-based or community-responsive model of wildlife management in which the rural communities participate not only in the management of wildlife, but also in government programs of depredation control. Such a model has the potential to improve public attitudes toward wildlife, attitudes that are essential in securing not only the public good will and support for conservation, but also increase people’s tolerance to depredation.

It is important that a clear mechanism be established for wildlife revenue and benefit-sharing between the wildlife authorities and rural communities. Currently, there are no official mechanisms in Kenya for sharing revenue and benefits derived from wildlife between these 2 groups. The government should, therefore, through the relevant governmental agencies (e.g., KWS), formulate modalities on how the revenues and benefits accruing from wildlife and tourism can be shared among the government (including park authorities) and rural communities. I recommend sharing on a percentage basis at the ratio of 70 to 30% for government and rural communities, respectively. (However, rural residents told me that they wanted 50% of the revenue.)

A policy of sharing revenue will ensure that rural communities benefit positively and directly from wildlife revenue by boosting cottage industries in rural areas and improving communal infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals. The government should also allow some grazing of livestock within designated sections of protected areas during drought periods, permit local people to cut thatching grass for personal use on a regulated basis, give people access to water sources in the protected areas, provide people transit through protected areas without permit requirements, and offer employment opportunities to locals on a preferential basis. Conservation cannot succeed without the support of the rural communities who live near the resource. After all, these are the people most affected by wildlife in their day-to-day lives. They share their land with wildlife, and winning their support for

conservation is crucial for the future survival of wildlife. Unless the people get more from wildlife than from their cows, crops, and other forms of land-use, they will understandably continue to resent wildlife.

The adoption of a new model of wildlife management in the country will necessitate an overhaul of wildlife legislation to create a legal framework for it. The new legal framework should emphasize public participation and consultation as its new paradigms. One key attribute of community-based or community-responsive conservation is that it adopts an approach that is responsive to the needs and welfare of the rural communities. This is the same approach that lawmakers should adopt in order that the law may receive public acceptance and be effective. A good conservation law should attempt to harmonize conservation imperatives with human welfare concerns, such as safety, human rights, and livelihood.

Second, rural communities in Laikipia should receive assistance in adopting ≥ 1 forms of wildlife damage control strategy. Educational programs in wildlife damage management can be initiated by governmental and nongovernmental agencies in partnership with the rural communities. Because of widespread illiteracy in the country, information can be transmitted best through radio broadcasts, films, and advertisements.

Third, the government can provide rural communities with loans for wildlife damage control methods. Money for fences could be provided by governmental, as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have an interest in wildlife conservation, preferably by creating a fund to be called the Wildlife Support Fund. Such a fund should be established through legislation so that it can have legal backing. Money for this fund may come from revenue derived from tourism and wildlife-related activities or through taxation. The government can also reduce or waive tax on certain wildlife damage control equipment and materials, such as fencing wires, repellents, batteries, high-voltage spotlights, and firecrackers.

Even where the above resources are provided by state governmental agencies, NGOs, and donors, the programs should be managed in partnership with rural communities and employ

locals themselves to guard their property, dig trenches, and erect fences. The advantage of this arrangement is that it can provide the locals with employment and income. It can also attenuate the negative passions that rural communities usually have against wildlife, which may in turn increase local support for conservation efforts.

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