

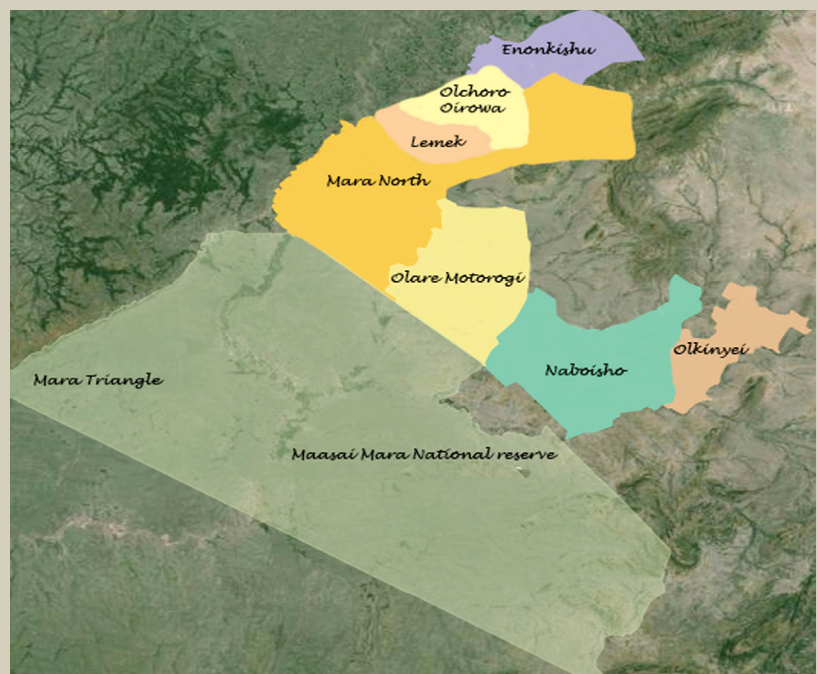
# The Success of the Conservancy Concept in the Mara

By Richard Pye

## What are the conservancies of the Mara?

People who know the Maasai Mara will tell you of a place of escarpments, hills, rivers and thickets, huge skies and open plains where wildlife of all shapes and sizes abound. The Mara is probably most known as the place where The Great Migration of wildebeest and zebra crosses the Mara River in epic displays of drama and pandemonium. What fewer people know is that the Mara ecosystem is actually a number of different entities.

The Maasai Mara national reserve lies along the Kenya–Tanzania border (the Serengeti to the south), managed by the Narok county government. To the northwest of the reserve and containing the stunning Olololo escarpment lies the Mara



triangle managed by the Mara Conservancy for the Trans-Mara county government. North of the reserve lie the community conservancies of the Maasai Mara.

## So what is the difference between these parts?

The conservancies are exclusive for their sponsoring member camps; this promotes low-impact tourism with





fewer vehicles.

Management plans exist in the conservancies with codes of conduct that control the low-impact model of conservation practiced.

The fewer vehicles (between 4-5 allowed per sighting) then allows for off-road driving which in turn ensures visitors get closer to wildlife than in the Maasai Mara reserve, where unregulated numbers of vehicles (and in many cases lack of professionalism and respect from drivers) make off-road driving unrealistic.

In the conservancies the proximity of game drive cars to the wildlife is governed by codes of conduct dependent on the animal, demographics and situation.

Fewer camps and cars means that one can also experience the Mara ecosystem on foot, seeing and learning about all the smaller parts that make up the whole that is the ecosystem.

Night drives are also permitted with rules ensuring the use of red-filtered spotlights, which do not burn the light receptors at the back of animals' eyes.

The open landscape and scenery, the multiple diurnal refuge areas for the cats (with no displacement by livestock, humans or domestic dogs) and the high density and variety of wildlife make the Mara conservancies a mecca for professional wildlife photographers and anyone looking to capture



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**Fallen Giants**

memories that remind us what it is we should seek to protect - the heritage of all Kenyans, Nature as it was created in all its perfection.

All of the above, partnered with good management practices and control of livestock ensure that the conservancies of the Mara preserve vital habitat for the iconic wildlife species we all hope will be seen in the wild for generations to come.

### **So where did it start?**

In 1992 the Maasai families who owned Ol Chorro Oiroua Ranch along the Mara River established their legal right to earn fees from tourist game viewing drives on their land. This was followed by a number

of associations formed by leaders of group ranches in the Mara ecosystem beyond the Reserve which collected fees from seasonal tourist safari camps and issued tickets for game drives on their land.

Following the sub-division of the Koiyaki and Ol Kinyei group ranches into hundreds of smaller plots, a new conservation model was established with the aim of keeping large tracts of land as protected wildlife habitat by leasing the newly sub-divided plots from the Maasai landowners to form wildlife conservancies. A number of safari companies joined together as "Tourism Partners" in partnership with the landowners who received monthly rents per acre and other benefits such as job





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part in creating the problems of the Mara. However, Kenyans need to remain positive, supportive and speak up if we as a nation are to protect this internationally renowned ecosystem. It is through these early successes of the conservancies that one can see the light at the end of the tunnel. It has been recognized that the formation of conservancies has expanded habitat for the areas' wildlife, generated an income stream for the landowners, and raised the image of the Mara safari experience, creating healthy competition which hopefully might cause management practices outside the conservancies to improve.

### What about the future?

In terms of conservation of species and habitat, it is hoped that these and other conservancies around Kenya can start finding ways to diversify the income streams so as not to depend on an unpredictable tourism market. Community-owned wildlife areas will need to generate higher benefits for the landowners to ensure conservation can compete with other high-return land uses. The implementation of Kenya's new Wildlife Act which allows Kenyan landowners to create businesses that directly benefit from wildlife on their land will hopefully highlight the advantages of managing and protecting this wildlife.

The greatest question for Kenya in the future is can this nation filled with nature and plagued by corruption find, and draw the line between, utilization and exploitation?

opportunities and outreach projects funded by bed night fees from the camps operating within the conservancies.

To ensure a low density form of tourism within the new conservancies and to minimize the number of tourist vehicles, a maximum limit of one tent per 700 acres and no more than 12 tents per camp was set. The first conservancy set up along these lines was Ol Kinyei in 2005. Olare Orok Conservancy was next to adopt this model in 2006 and was followed by Motorogi, Mara North and more recently, Naboisho. Today there are eight registered conservancies around the Mara ecosystem. Together these have added over 230,000 acres to the wildlife dispersal area of the Maasai Mara ecosystem, and all of it benefiting the Maasai landowners.

Since the creation of the conservancies there have been some concerns voiced that they are generating income for the

landowners that is being used to buy more livestock which is further compounding the overstocking and overgrazing problem the ecosystem faces. As a solution to this plans have been created to focus on the bigger picture of land use around the conservancies and projects are underway to encourage improved methods of livestock husbandry focusing on fewer numbers of better breeding with economic value.

The truth about any conservation effort is that one can only truly measure the successes of this conservation ten, twenty or thirty years into the future. The Maasai Mara ecosystem is at the forefront of 'difficult conservation', due to the overstocking of livestock, competition for resources, wildlife conflict, depredation, politics, nepotism, corruption, competitive land uses, the decline in tourism, the rise in poaching and the containment of regional migrations by unregulated fencing. These are all playing their

For more information of the wildlife conservancies of the Maasai Mara please visit <http://www.maasaimaraconservancies.co.ke>