

Protecting wildlife in Kenya's parks in the face of high commercial hunting pressure

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Background to wildlife management in Kenya

Kenya has 66 protected areas, including 23 National Parks, four Marine Parks, 24 National Reserves, six Marine Reserves, three Sanctuaries and six Wetlands. Between them, they cover 7.8% of Kenya's land area.

The Kenyan Government gives high priority to wildlife conservation. The Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) was established as a parastatal, and is managed by a board of trustees. KWS retains all revenues for management, and the Director and Chairman are presidential appointments. KWS is a modern, mainly paramilitary, institution.

Wildlife Protection Units aim to provide security for wildlife countrywide through aerial and ground patrols. In addition, investigations are done into poaching; they lead to arrests and recovery of illegally held trophies, and prosecutions on wildlife crimes.

The Intelligence Unit collects information through informants, conducts covert investigations on illegal trade of trophies, disseminates information, and conducts surveillance and monitoring of banditry around protected areas.

Preventing ivory poaching and poaching other species for meat

Success of the Ivory Wars was assured because the public was on the side of the enforcers, the damage to elephants could be seen, and the data illustrated obvious population trends.

By contrast, halting poaching of wildlife for meat has often failed. This is because the opponent is difficult to hate, the tools are usually snares so are impossible to control, the local populace provides the markets for the meat, and data are inadequate to demonstrate the impact of hunting.

De-snaring – saving wildlife and providing data

De-snaring teams are employed to remove snares from protected areas. These operations reduce threats to wildlife, and also provide data on snaring intensity in different areas, habitats and seasons. In some parts of Tsavo East, more than 300 snares per month are removed.

Wildlife and livestock trends in the Tana River district

In spite of all of the efforts to reduce hunting, wildlife numbers in some areas continue to decline. For example, in the Tana River district, wildlife populations have crashed between 1977 and 2002, while the number of cattle and shoats (sheep and goats) has increased somewhat in the past ten years.

Hard lessons learned

Halting the slaughter will be difficult. It requires strong leadership, courage and principles. If we fail, the cost of re-establishing various species in protected areas might be prohibitive.

Communities have not benefited successfully from game cropping programmes. This was because:

- profits were below expectations;
- benefits accrue only to land title holders;
- regulatory structures were not universally accepted;
- monitoring has been weak.

Challenges to solving the problem of unsustainable hunting in Kenya's protected areas include:

- poverty;
- conflict between wildlife and humans;
- high levels of unemployment;
- cheap tools for hunting;
- the presence of wild meat markets;
- the lack of disincentives for potentially illegal hunters.

Before the problem can be solved, the following are required:

- a coherent wildlife policy;
- systematic data collection on wildlife status, and on potentially sustainable rates of offtake;
- accurate information on the dynamics of hunting and wildlife trade;
- a policy on land use;
- incentives that improve tolerance of wildlife;
- awareness programmes and ways to involve local communities, to generate public support for wildlife conservation;
- improved enforcement;
- improved legislation;
- increased funds.