Coexisting in Kenya The Human-Elephant Conflict

By Meitamei Ole Dapash

The Amboseli Maasai-elephant Dialogue is convened under a tree by the roadside to tap the inputs of passersby, who may not be residents of that location. The forum has no chairperson, master of ceremonies, or any form of authority figurehead. (MERC)

“We, the Maasai have never failed in our moral duty as guardians of wildlife. However, those with myopic understanding of our way of life and its interconnectedness with nature have consistently failed both the people and wildlife of Amboseli.”

– Lengete Ole Manti, Amboseli resident

The Maasai people name their clans after animals such as lions, elephants, or rhinos to demonstrate the importance of wildlife prosperity in Kenya and Tanzania to the Maasai culture. Each clan advocates for the protection of its particular species, which becomes the clan’s totem and symbol of prestige. Wildlife conservation in Maasailand owes its success to the Maasai traditions that prohibit the killing of wildlife or destruction of forests or any part of the natural ecosystem for commercial or any other form of consumptive use. This is why, even today, wildlife thrives in Maasailand, unlike many other areas where animals have been eliminated either for food or to create land for commercial agriculture.

Kenya’s prolonged droughts in 1999 and 2000, the worst in 25 years, led to widespread competition for water throughout East Africa. Many rivers, swamps, and dams dried up, and the few water sources that survived the droughts immediately became hot spots for human-wildlife conflict. This natural catastrophe caused starvation among wildlife, livestock, and even people in some parts of Kenya. Amboseli National Park was the most affected protected area in the country.

“Empusel” (Amboseli) is a Maasai word for "dry land" and is located on the northern foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro, the world’s tallest freestanding mountain. Amboseli was established mainly to protect Kenya’s elephants and preserve their migratory routes. Amboseli is dotted with oases (created by the melting snow of Mt. Kilimanjaro) and perennial swamp grass species. These permanent sources of water and green vegetation attracted more wildlife and Maasai livestock into the park during the recent drought period than any other time in the history of Amboseli. Consequently, human-elephant conflicts erupted leading to the spearing of eight elephants-six of whom died from their wounds, while an orphaned baby was reported to have died of starvation. Reports from Maasai indicate that within the
same timeframe, two Maasai (including a mother of a three week old infant) and at least 42 livestock had been attacked and killed by elephants.

The Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition (MERC), with support from the Animal Welfare Institute, set out to create a dialogue to discuss human-elephant conflict and related conservation issues in Amboseli and find long-term solutions to the conflicts. On June 30, 2001 the first meeting took place under a huge acacia tree at Meshenani area in the Olgului/Ololarrashie group ranch, the largest, most important communal land that almost engulfs the Amboseli National Park. More than 60 people, representing twelve villages within the vicinity of Amboseli National Park, attended the meeting.

Moving testimonies were heard about the peaceful coexistence of Maasai and wildlife in the delicate balance of the ecosystems within which they live. Participants expressed serious concerns over growing threats to the survival of Maasai people, elephants, and their shared habitat in Amboseli and across Maasailand. "These threats," they said, "come from commercial agricultural expansion; sidelining of the Maasai from mainstream nature conservation; insensitive tourism practices; and continued loss of Maasai traditional lands to other modern economic enterprises. The ongoing destruction of forests, commercial hunting, and loss of wildlife migratory routes and breeding grounds must be stopped now if the future of wildlife in Kenya and Tanzania is to be guaranteed. Moreover, as we lose land and culture, elephants and other wildlife lose habitat."

Intensifying competition for limited water resources was the single most important factor responsible for human-wildlife conflicts in Amboseli. According to the participants, approximately 80% of the permanent sources of water are located in the center of the park. Additionally, women and children have to endure a 10-15 kilometer daily trudge across the dry, open Amboseli basin into the middle of the park to fetch water for domestic use. This increased human presence in the park, coupled with human-elephant-livestock convergence at the watering points, creates tremendous tension resulting in occasional deadly conflicts.

Maasai communities often are forced to take the law into their own hands by killing rogue elephants when they believe that no help is coming from the park's office. An act of this nature often escalates friction between wildlife authorities and the communities. According to one elder, "elephants hardly ever attacked people unless provoked, thirsty or instinctively reacting to an experience of past attack." Although men would sometimes successfully scare away elephants from watering points, elephants in most cases prevail by maintaining their ground and forcing people and livestock to go thirsty. Many participants pointed out that water scarcity outside the park for communities and continued habitat loss to encroaching agricultural communities were some of the serious problems undermining Maasai's centuries' old peaceful coexistence with elephants.
Conflict is also exacerbated by the Maasai’s dissatisfaction about the current level of wildlife-derived benefits being extended to the local communities. Currently, Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) distributes approximately US$10,000 among the seven group ranches adjoining Amboseli National Park. The forum heard that the amount was not only meager; it was erratically given, in spite of the fact that Amboseli generates more tourists’ dollars for KWS than any other park in the country. Moreover, lodges in Amboseli employ more than 1,500 people of which Amboseli residents constitute fewer than 100 people, put in the most undignified, poorly paid positions. Amboseli residents feel cheated and are increasingly becoming resentful of tourism and conservation programs alike.

The dialogue revealed that there is also pressure from wildlife consumptive use proponents to persuade and manipulate Maasai into urging the government to allow commercial hunting for trophies, particularly in communal lands, as a way of enhancing wildlife-derived benefits. Because of the problems mentioned earlier on, and the feeling that the colonial government stole Amboseli to create a wildlife preserve without consultations, the Maasai are very vulnerable to these ideas.

KWS already has expressed unequivocal interest in working with MERC and Amboseli communities to address human-elephant conflicts and a number of specific actions resulted from this valuable dialog. MERC will encourage KWS to include local communities’ participation in the development and implementation of conservation programs in their localities. KWS will review the existing revenue-sharing policy with the view of increasing the community’s share, while job training and placement opportunities in the tourism industry will be extended to the local communities. The Maasai have proposed the establishment of a code of conduct and ethics for the tourism industry to safeguard environmental integrity and the culture the Maasai people. Finally, MERC is proposing the establishment of a problem animal control unit in Amboseli to respond to reports of animal attacks. This unit will be responsible for rapid response in situations where people or livestock have been attacked by elephants, lions, or buffaloes. It will also discourage people from taking action on their own to address the problem.

MERC continues to promote and sustain the peaceful coexistence necessary for the safety of both human and elephant populations in Amboseli. We need to keep focused on: handling local communities’ complaints and liaising with the wildlife authorities for quick resolution; initiating water projects outside the park to minimize human-elephant contacts inside the park; and initiating community-based ecotourism programs in the Amboseli area. With the active involvement of MERC and the Maasai people, wildlife in Maasailand will be protected for generations to come.

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