

Conserving Karamoja Unsung treasure trove of Uganda wilderness

A two day journey by car shouldn't feel like a terribly long time to reach a destination. But after hours of traversing the Pearl of Africa's bumpy dirt roads in the blistering heat, I couldn't wait to reach the finish line. And in the end, the destination was well worth the journey.

Most safari goers usually opt for mass market destinations like Tanzania's Serengeti National Park or Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve. It's understandable, especially considering the high population of wildlife that both parks have to offer. But experiencing this remote corner of Uganda is like unlocking the doors to a well-kept secret—an untamed sanctum sanctorum of red thorn acacias, sausage trees and borassus palms dotting a wilderness that is as beautiful as it is secluded.

Kidepo Valley National Park is a 1,442 km² jewel, located in the semiarid Karamoja region of northeast Uganda; dominated by the 2,750 metre Mount Morungole at the park's southern

A lioness in the Narus Valley.

end, and transected by the Kidepo and Narus rivers, which run north toward neighboring South Sudan, eventually conjoining at the River Nile. It is a pristine wilderness area of open savannas, granite kopjes, soaring mountains, a wide variety of wildlife, and a community of people who've largely resisted the onslaught of modernisation that has beleaguered much of present-day Africa.

The park is largely made up of two adjacent valleys. The perennial watered Narus Valley is rich with Guinea and red oat grasses. It is these grasslands that are home to the highest population of Cape buffalo in Africa. Numbering in the thousands, these massive grazers rely on the life giving tributaries that flow from the Kidepo and Narus, which also support a host of other animal species such as cheetah, leopard, lion, spotted hyaena, side-striped and black-backed jackal, bat-eared fox, aardwolf, elephant, zebra, bushbuck, defassa waterbuck, Jackson's hartebeest, eland, oribi, warthog, and the endangered Rothschild's giraffe.

Beyond the Lokayot and Natira hills is the much drier Kidepo Valley, where the ephemeral Kidepo and Sand rivers feed a landscape of whistling acacia bushes and barren escarpments. It is here that birding enthusiasts will find herds of ostrich, Yellow-necked Spurfowl, Secretary Bird, red-and-yellow Barbet, Bee-eater, African jacana, and a number of other



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avifauna that are native to the region. Near the border of South Sudan is the Kananorok hot springs. Reaching upwards of 60°C, this naturally occurring phenomenon was formed as a result of subterranean volcanic activity, evidenced by the alluvial and pediment gravel deposits found at the base of Mount Morungole.

In short, Kidepo Valley should be at the top of anyone's list that is looking for unspoiled African wilderness complete with an abundance of game.

But perhaps the most interesting feature of the Karamoja region is the Karamojong—a Nilotic ethnic tribe of agro pastoral herders whose cicatrized skin and colourful shukas (blanket wraps) are similar in nature to those of the Maasai and Samburu peoples in Kenya.

To visit with the Karamojong is bittersweet. On the one hand, many of them live a simple, if not enviable existence when compared to the overdependence on technology that defines 21st century living. But on the other hand, and within that same simplicity that can make life seem a bit more liberating, come difficulties that no one living in the comfort of the modern world would ever willingly trade in their gadgets for.

For starters, the Karamojong are primarily pastoral, raising their goats and cattle near protected areas like Kidepo. When I visited the community of Lorukul—a small cluster of makuti thatched huts near the park's Lokomoit gate—the main concern was the ongoing threat of human-wildlife conflict. They were especially fearful of elephants and lions: two species of wildlife which, unlike the region's resident humans, will unwittingly disregard a national park's borders.

Elephants in Karamoja have been known to crop raid under the cover of darkness. For the Karamojong, this can mean a loss of precious

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ



TOP: A herd of Cape buffalo in grazing in the Narus Valley.

BELOW: An elephant bull in Kidepo's Narus Valley.

INSERT: A ground hornbill in the Kidepo Valley.

resources that they depend on for survival. Meanwhile, prowling lions are especially dangerous for people and their livestock.

The predicament reminded me a great deal of the conflict that often occurs between East Africa's Maasai pastoralists and lions, especially considering the recent spate of retaliatory poisonings that took place late last year in the Mara. I was curious to know how regional wildlife administrators were working to ease that same tension in Karamoja.

As I later discovered, the Karamojong were not always peaceful. Not long ago, the region was blighted by tribal infighting, mostly in the form

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CONSERVATION



TOP: Karamojong residents from the village of Lorukul perform a cultural dance.

BELOW: Kidepo Valley National Park.

of cattle rustling. My driver Moses even told me that the Karamojong used to shoot at incoming vehicles.

“These herdsmen were all armed,” he said, referring to the AK-47 assault rifle that was once as common here as the Karamojong’s cattle. “They would shoot at each other, at the Turkana, at anyone they could. It was not a good period of time. But today, they are more accepting of visitors. They like visiting with tourists, too.”

In a slightly controversial move, the Uganda People’s Defense Forces (UPDF)—at the behest of the Ugandan government—went on a weapons confiscating mission with the goal of pacifying the region. But whether or not the move was indeed humanitarian at its core, the government eventually brokered a peace agreement with the Karamojong, which led to better communication, ultimately helping the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and UPDF establish a friendly rapport.

Over time, the relationship between UWA, UPDF and the neighboring communities culminated into an ad hoc approach for the purposes of reducing instances of human-wildlife conflict, improving economic conditions for the

Karamojong people and bolstering a local incentive to conserve Kidepo and other protected areas in and around the Karamoja region.

With the return of peace also came international investment with an emphasis on land protection and revitalisation. One such program is the Critical Landscape Project (CLP), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Led by the Uganda government’s National Environment Management Authority, the aim of the project is to, “support the integration of protected area management into the wider landscape in order to secure wildlife corridors and dispersal areas.” This includes implementing management strategies in eight protected areas, including areas known for human-wildlife conflict occurrences.

UWA Corporal Samuel Loware described how the CLP has been working hand in hand with members of the Karamojong community: “We now have village rangers who have been trained to handle problem elephants. For example, they now light fires around specific points of the community gardens, which are carefully constructed so as to not start a bush fire. The moment [the elephants]



PHOTOS BY: MICHAEL SCHWARTZ



Karamojong men from the village of Lorukul who protect their villages from wildlife.

smell smoke, they become afraid and leave the area.”

Loware went on to describe the use of capsaicin as an effective elephant deterrent. A nonlethal component found in chili peppers, UWA rangers use the capsaicin to lace over rope. Once it’s lathered on, the ropes are then fastened around crops of sorghum, maize and cassava. Elephants find the scent highly irritating, and will typically abandon the area once they’ve discovered the pungent odor.

The African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) has also provided villagers with the necessary tools to dig trenches around their harvests, which typically keeps elephants from being able to reach an otherwise enticing meal.

Regarding danger from both marauding elephants and lurking lions, UWA has employed a number of Karamojong to serve as problem animal guardians. Men living in communities adjacent to wildlife areas will often stand watch at night, armed with ranger issued guns and vuvuzelas (the noisy South African horn). In most instances, the guns are only used to scare the animals away in lieu of shooting them outright.

For now, human-wildlife conflict mitigation techniques appear to be working. But people in Lorukul are still hoping that UWA will eventually construct a fence around the border of the park.

“We hope that international communities will help create a fence, which will stop [elephants] from leaving the park,” said Gertrude Adeo, a Karamojong from the neighboring village of Karenga. “People do not want to harm the animals, but they are afraid that the animals will harm them.”

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Karamoja and its inhabitants is something of an ironic twist. That is, while Kidepo Valley National Park doesn’t have too many tourists—making it a much sought after prize for those who don’t want their safaris spoiled by droves of Land Cruisers—it often doesn’t get enough sightseers to generate much needed conservation revenue. This is especially critical when taking into account the fact that 20 percent of visitor entry fees are supposed to go to the Karamojong people.

But despite the adversity, Karamoja is still making great strides in conserving what is arguably one of Africa’s greatest wilderness areas. And none of this would be possible without the ongoing efforts of institutions like UWA, USAID and AWF, and people like the Karamojong. Thanks to their continued dedication, Kidepo Valley National Park and other wilderness areas in Karamoja are now seeing a rejuvenation of wildlife off the beaten safari track. Go marvel for yourselves. ●