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The Biggest Obstacles for Africa's Big Cats

In [Wildlife](#) Tags [Cat Watch](#), [Michael Schwartz](#) March 14, 2016 [0 Comments](#)



[Michael Schwartz](#)

A juvenile lion. Above photo by Michael Schwartz.

Almost every obstacle surrounding big cat conservation in Africa is symptomatic of human population growth and the conversion of rangeland to reduce poverty.

On a slightly contrarian note, Africa's surge of human inhabitants is actually good news—at least insofar as the state of the human condition is concerned.

At long last, significant portions of a continent long beleaguered by death, disease, and destitution are showing promising signs of improvement, thanks largely to 21st century advancements.

And what's more, Western civilization has played a fairly substantial role in the continental baby boom by providing the means to engage in large-scale food production.

All in all, such progress is a tad ironic when considering how often some animal activists unfairly rake Africans over the coals for their role in the defoliation of wilderness and the disappearance of wildlife. But that argument is neither here nor there.

The fact remains that Africa's green revolution and expanding human population are the biggest juggernauts for feline conservation. And like it or not, bans on the sustainable use of wildlife have all but removed the incentive for landowners with properties that don't attract tourists to invest in maintaining wildlife habitats.



A LIONESS ON A HUNT. PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

More to the point—a growing demand for cultivation to bolster economic development means less room for lions, leopards, and cheetahs.

A Changing Landscape

According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), “the demographic size of Africa in the world [grew] from nine percent of the total in 1960 to 15 percent in 2010. By 2050, its share of global population will reach 23 percent and it will be considerably larger than either China or India.”

Furthermore, ISS observes that while population growth rates across the continent aren't uniform, East and West Africa are seeing the most significant upticks in annual fertility rates.

Ultimately, the entire, “African population may not approach stability until, near, or even shortly after the end of the century, by which time it could be about 3 billion people, or 32 percent of the global total.”

While such high growth rates could spell an increase in urban poverty, the most noticeable change will occur on available land that are homes for Africa's big cats.



A JUVENILE LION FEEDING ON A RECENTLY KILLED WARTHOG. PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

Mike Norton-Griffiths, a wildlife ecologist in Kenya, points out three factors that underlie these dramatic changes in land management.

“First, the growth in the human population creates an ‘internal’ market for higher production—more mouths to feed off the same area require higher productivity and, therefore, investment in land management.

"Second are the burgeoning 'external' markets—local markets in neighboring towns and, more recently, the vast urban markets of Nairobi and other large towns.

"Finally, and most important, is the evolution of property rights from the customary tenure regimes of the 1930s to private, freehold tenure, with secure property rights enshrined in and enforced by secular law (specifically the amendments to the Registration of Titles Act of 1959)."

Culture of Population Growth

On the cultural end of the spectrum, it's important to note that while polygamy is no longer as widely practiced, the measure of married—and unmarried—couples throughout Africa is still weighed in the number of children they have.

Bottom line: more offspring means greater social status for men and women.

The problem, however, is that excess children being born into impoverished communities exacerbates poverty—ergo, unsustainable harvesting of natural resources to feed a surplus population and escalating instances of human-wildlife conflict resulting from habitat encroachment shouldn't come as a surprise.

This is an especially sensitive issue that must involve conservationists, social workers, healthcare practitioners, and other experts who aren't ethnocentric when working with those who hold to different cultural values.

Land Rights

White Rhino - A Conservation Success Story (Part 2)



Human population growth and alternative land-use are the biggest variables associated with wildlife population declines. But to argue that they are mutually exclusive from the removal of wildlife's economic viability is to deny reality.

Prior to being outlawed, sustainable use in Kenya occurred on 60 percent of the total wildlife range, whilst tourism covered only five percent. Today, significantly less rangeland remains.

Norton-Griffiths states, "As Kenya demonstrates so clearly, people do what they do in response to economic incentives, but their ability to respond efficiently depends on the security of their property rights."

That wildlife belongs solely to the Kenya government is a picture-perfect illustration of disastrous land use policies, evidenced by some of the worst annual decline rates in wildlife populations on the continent.

(It's worth noting that while Kenya's elephants may be faring a bit better, lion populations have dropped significantly.)

Kenya's burgeoning tourism industry is one key example. With 95 percent of all wildlife tourism taking place in the national parks and reserves (known as service revenues), less than one percent of gross revenues goes to landowners (producer revenues) living with wildlife.

But while sustainable use may work in countries like Namibia, calls to reintroduce the practice in Kenya are out of the question since the damage was already done by banning it in the first place.

It's also fair to point out that not all methods of sustainable use fall under a true definition of conservation since they do not promote biodiversity (canned hunting.)

Payment for Ecosystem Services

One novel approach that can offset encroachment is payment for ecosystem services (PES), which means leasing land from the rural poor to keep it in its natural state.

By receiving regular payments from lessees, rural landowners receive fiscal benefits not normally seen from the influx of tourists that pay the state directly.

Calvin Cottar, a Kenyan conservationist, writes that, "Lease payments on a regular 'per hectare/year' basis can be at values equal or higher than that possible from alternative land uses such as agriculture and monoculture domestic stock.

"In return, the landowners give the PES lessee the rights to the land use, and allow the keeping of wildlife and natural habitat intact."



A LEOPARD ABOUT TO POUNCE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF GREG WILLIS.

As it stands, there are roughly eight conservancies with a combined total of 227,949 acres near the Maasai Mara National Reserve that utilize the PES system.

According to the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa, “More than 800 families benefiting earn more than U.S. \$ 3.6 million annually, now paid directly to households on a flat rate based on land holdings.”

But in spite of what is perceived as a win-win scenario, PES remains tenuous.

Not all rural communities are landowners living adjacent to protected areas, and as such, cannot reap the same rewards that those whose lands hold more wildlife do. This invariably leads to future wilderness encroachment.

Additionally, the PES model requires more investment from the international private sector in order to secure wilderness that would otherwise be converted to cash crops or cattle pastures.

Conservation Also Means Caring for People



AN EAST AFRICAN CHILD LIVING IN A RURAL VILLAGE ADJACENT TO A NATIONAL PARK.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

With progress comes the inevitable demise of the natural world. But that doesn't mean that the West should cease helping those less fortunate, nor should those protecting African wildlife ignore the fact that the poor living alongside them are only trying to survive.

Since many African people still live in poverty, they sometimes resort to less preferable methods of dealing with dangerous animals like lions and leopards—methods that aren't popular in the court of public opinion.

Unfortunately, some activists seem content stereotyping impoverished Africans as one monolithic group of poachers without addressing the root of the conservation problem.

Likewise, they fail to acknowledge that economic survival is the driving force for rural African communities, much in the same way it dictates the lives of American suburbanites.

The difference is that those fortunate enough to live in the comforts of the developed world don't have to worry about competing as heavily with dangerous wildlife on a daily basis. Many Africans, meanwhile, do not have that luxury.

All told, the loss of remaining wilderness remains a problem, as does falling wildlife populations. But again, these are symptoms, not sources. Finding balance between these two diametrically opposing forces is the greatest challenge that conservationists face in 21st century Africa.

Continued poverty reduction strategies, addressing the population growth dilemma, mitigating competition for space, and redressing policies that take away incentives for safeguarding wildlife need to be dealt with, and dealt with soon.

At the end of the day, bellicose rhetoric about saving Africa's predators and other wildlife from the big bad humans greatly oversimplifies all that is truly involved in realistically preserving nature.

Conservation requires just as much compassion for people as it does for animals. One cannot exist without the other and sometimes sacrifices must be made to achieve the greater goal. It's high time to stand up for what is right in lieu of what feels good.

When that perspective becomes the cornerstone of conservation efforts, it will break the ongoing destruction of the natural world. When we choose compassion for people, the survival of wildlife will greatly improve.



MEET THE AUTHOR

Michael Schwartz is a journalist and African wildlife conservation researcher. With field experience around the continent since 2005, his passion for Africa's wildlife is matched by his compassion for the people who live there. A significant portion of his field work is carried out in Uganda, where he studies lion and elephant conservation. You can visit his website at <http://www.michaelwschwartz.com>.

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