The Lion and the Cow: Conservation, Pastoralism, and Conflict

In Wildlife Tags Michael Schwartz, Voices for Wildlife April 28, 2017 6 Comments

Michael Schwartz

The lioness and the Karamojong cow are competing residents of Uganda's Kidepo Valley National Park. Above photo by Michael Schwartz.

The recurring thought of lions and cows keeps interrupting my focus on a humid evening as I sit down to dinner outside a small hotel overlooking the din of downtown Kampala.

I'm engaged in conversation with a gentleman of the Karamojong tribe from the northeastern region of Uganda—a place with little infrastructure and an abundance of wildlife.

Loupa Pius is a project officer for the Dodoth Agro-Pastoralist Development Organization (DADO), an advocacy group for rural communities living in a region aptly called Karamoja.

He doesn't bear the cicatrized marks that many of his kinsfolk adorn, nor is he donning a *shuka*, the patterned cloth worn throughout much of East Africa. Yet his fastidious nature and cordiality is trademark Karamojong.

I discover that Pius spent his early childhood protecting his father's livestock from predators living in and around Kidepo Valley National Park.

He remembers it fondly, describing how elders would light fires around village kraals to protect livestock. Some brandished semi-automatic weapons, while younger herd-boys carried bows and arrows to use against predators or cattle raiders.

Today, policy changes ranging from increased education to land tenure reform means more Karamojong children attend school in lieu of following in their parent's traditional footsteps, though a number of them continue driving cattle across northeast Uganda's dusty rangelands.

Pius may no longer tend his father's herd, but he understands why pastoralists sometimes have a contemptuous view of wildlife conservation.

Between the Lionized and the Marginalized

LIONS ARE A VERY REAL THREAT FOR PASTORALISTS LIVING NEAR PROTECTED AREAS. THEY OFTEN AREN'T SEEN OR HEARD UNTIL IT'S TOO LATE. PHOTO BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

Lions have historical significance in many different cultures, though renewed interest in Africa's largest cat in the Western world has taken on a life of its own.

Along with elephants, lions are Africa's biggest tourist draw, and what's more, a natural heritage. But for many pastoral communities, wilderness is their livestock's larder. And like a rabid dog loose in an American suburb, *Panthera leo* is seen as a threat.

It's not that pastoralists don't respect wildlife, Pius says. They've named people, places, and tribes after them. It's just that they hold cattle paramount to larcenous lions that would steal a coveted source of livelihood out from under them. That, and top-down policies and administrative kleptocracy lessens their degree of wildlife tolerance.

"Branding [rural communities] as enemies of wildlife while failing to engage or include them in [conservation] planning and decision-making marginalizes them," Pius explains.

He adds that since losing most of its wildlife to rapid industry, the West's effort to preserve Africa's wilderness and wildlife, while noteworthy, sometimes comes at a human cost, especially for those looking to achieve the same basic living standards of the developed world: healthcare, better homes, improved infrastructure, and gainful employment.

His is a thought-provoking point, and as someone who loves nature, he agrees a balance must be struck. The flipside, however, is the sobering reminder that Africa's remaining habitats have already dwindled by such a volatile degree that too dramatic a shift in land tenure could leave wildlife to an inexorable fate.

And therein lies the deadlock. How do you effectively champion a way of life that's existed for thousands of years when confronted with the unpleasant reality that lions and other wildlife currently face?

Africa's Sacred Bovine

The lion and the cow. Diametrically different beasts, both inextricably entwined.

Whereas lions are Africa's emblematic animal, cattle are its cultural currency—used for dowries, settling debts, food and milk, and as displays of wealth—part and parcel of a past and present that stands in stark contrast to Western commerce.

People like the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, for example, are deeply ancestral, their love of cattle and rejection of more contemporary living allowing them a familial solidarity that in many ways is lost elsewhere in the world, leading to a somewhat depictive inaccuracy of rural African society.

On the one hand, the West celebrates, even encourages, a more "natural" lifestyle, seemingly under the false presumption that pastoral peoples like the Maasai or Samburu are more environmentally friendly, more "one with the Earth," more wildlife-tolerant even.

The typecast stems from the 17th Century idea of "the noble savage," a notion that's spawned an almost misanthropic mentality for modern-day folk looking to swap the humdrum of 21st Century progress for the romance of nature.

The reality is that most rural communities in Africa are incredibly poor, and despite their respect for wildlife, tolerance only goes so far, in part because wildlife is not an economically viable part of their livelihood.

Conservationists certainly recognize the need to incorporate rural people into wildlife protection, for without their inclusion and support, animals like lions might possibly lose what little foothold they have left.

Similar to someone calling pest control when the house suffers an infestation of carpenter ants, so too will farmers, be they in Uganda, Namibia, Kenya, or elsewhere, take punitive action when their prized heifer is pilfered by predators.

Moreover, and unlike developed countries, rural land lust in Africa is an economically attractive gong, its reverberating echoes originating long before the coming of the West.

"Land is a scarce resource governed by a wide range of rights and responsibilities," Pius explains. "Not everyone's right to land is secure. Mounting pressure and competition means that improving land governance—the rules, processes, and organizations through which decisions are made about land—has become increasingly challenging."

The other problem is that livestock husbandry can be detrimental in its current form, both fiscally and environmentally.

First, any country relying largely or solely on pastoralism cannot successfully compete on the global market. Second, conservationists rightfully argue that much of Africa's current methodology often does more ecological harm than good—hence policies that partition livestock-free wildlife corridors.

The crux of this administrative approach is that despite what's on paper, Africa's human population boom and growing need for land to sustain it means ever-increasing encroachment on protected areas, made all the worse since, apart from South Africa, there aren't fences to ease human-wildlife conflict tensions or prevent illegal grazing.

Pastoral Reform

IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, PASTORALISM OFTEN INCLUDES A HIGH QUANTITY OF CATTLE THAT RANGES OVER GREAT DISTANCES. PHOTO BY LOUPA PIUS.

In 1956, the Fauna Preservation Society commissioned Professor W H Pearsall to conduct an ecological survey of the Serengeti. Concerning domestic livestock, he made the following observation(s):

"It is almost universally the case that herded animals do more damage than wild game of similar requirements, and in similar numbers.

"Damage from trampling and over-grazing is inevitable when stock are continually brought back to the same watering-places or stock yards.

"Also their gait is different and the mere fact of continual herding makes them habitually move in long lines and keeps them from dispersing widely over the plains. Thus the pastoral life of the [Maasai] is inevitably if locally harder on the grasslands than the presence of similar numbers of game."

Today, many pastoralists still favor large herds of livestock, moving them across swathes of wilderness, all of which researchers say escalates soil erosion, watershed degradation, deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and the indiscriminate killing of pesky wildlife. It's part cultural, part political, part coterie, all one giant conundrum.

One way to stem the tide is the conservancy method, where a mix of limited cattle ranching on large land parcels and government-approved wildlife easements offsets pressure.

Largely successful in Kenya and Namibia, conservancies are a proven boon to the economy and human-wildlife conflict mitigation, not to mention involving local communities directly in wildlife conservation.

But with the cattle barons, many of whom live on large, privately held ranches, comes a perceived social inequality that's reigned supreme in Africa for quite some time.

Africa's Age-Old Land Wars

THE OL PEJETA CONSERVANCY IN KENYA'S LAIKIPIA COUNTY IS A SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLE OF MEETING THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE. PHOTO BY MICHAEL DALTON-SMITH.

Like the farm seizures in Zimbabwe or continued bloodletting in the Democratic Republic of Congo, violence in Kenya's Laikipia county is just another example of Africa's age-old conflict over who owns its wealth of natural resources.

Much of Kenya's Pokot and Samburu people are lamenting their decision to invade a number of Laikipia's privately owned farms, many of which double as prosperous wildlife conservancies.

The drought-led and politically motivated miscalculation to run their cattle roughshod over privately owned properties recently exploded in a prosaic smattering of starving livestock, poached wildlife, the murder of a prominent conservationist and at least a dozen other extrajudicial killings, the recent shooting of a prominent author, burned out homes and lodges, and ecological devastation that in many places will take years or more to recover.

Laikipia's farming community, still under siege from invading pastoralists, contend that they are one of the country's largest economic contributors.

Though closely tied to the urging of politicians in tandem with Kenya's upcoming elections, invading herdsmen argue that private ranches are a remnant of the colonial construct, an inequitable scenario where a small percentage of patricians benefit while the majority remain poor and landless. But land rights in Africa are a lot murkier than mere postcolonial indignation.

Catherine Boone, Professor of Comparative Politics and African Political Economy at the London School of Economics, details how identity politics and the role of central governments play significant hands in Africa's land disputes in a 2014 interview with the Washington Post:

"In some sub-national regions of some [African] countries, farmers have been given land by the government, or been granted access to land by the central government. They may have been granted land on a settlement scheme, and view themselves (and be viewed as) settlers.'

"Often, their claims to this land are contested by other local people who consider themselves the rightful indigenous landowners, and do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the government's actions. This is a 'sons of the soil' type of conflict that is rooted in rural property relations, and it can fester for years.

"The settlers' hold on the land remains tenuous—they are dependent on the government's willingness to defend them and their land claims."

In this case, Kenya's elections are arguably reason enough to drum up the support of a landless rural majority.

Boone adds that many African governments have linked ethnic identity to land entitlement and allocation, adding another layer of complexity to the status of land use and ownership.

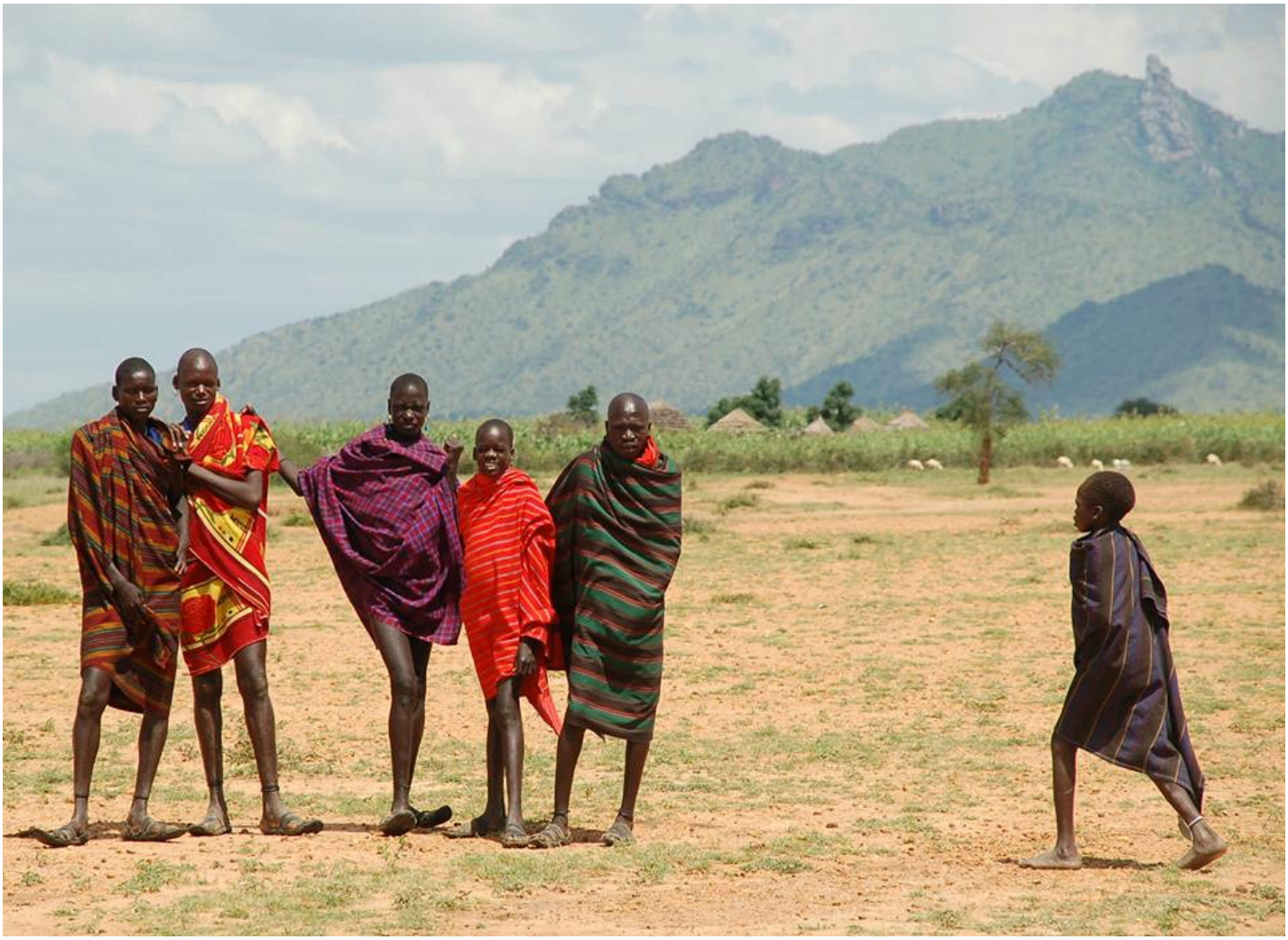
As always, wildlife suffers first, particularly outside of national parks, where contested land attracts anyone from entrepreneurs and visiting tourists to corrupt bureaucrats and a starving peasantry.

Concerning Uganda, Pius says that many rural people, including the Karamojong, are coming to the realization that pastoral reform must transcend identity politics. Many have even begun marketing surplus livestock in an attempt to cope with climate change, while a mix of smallholder cattle farming and small-scale agriculture is slowly replacing traditional livestock husbandry.

"Both pastoralists and conservationists must agree that they can both benefit from each other," he wrote in a follow-up email. "Pastoralists can benefit from the pasture and water that extends beyond protected areas. Conservationists can benefit from the willingness of pastoralists to actively engage in conservation."

Whether Kenya's land troubles will spillover or reoccur in neighboring countries like Uganda remains to be seen (northern Uganda was once the center of a heavily armed conflict between different pastoral tribes until the government pacified the region.)

Conserving Africa's Wildlife, Championing African Rights



THE KARAMOJONG OF NORTHERN UGANDA. PHOTO BY LOUPA PIUS.

Is the lion worth more than the cow? When engaging in the mental gymnastics of wildlife conservation, the answer really depends on who you're asking.

There's a Western impulse to draw lines in the sand between what is ideal and what is real. Unfortunately, the growing disconnect between them is likely borne out of overemphasizing the former and trivializing the latter.

Considering that the contrasting lifestyles of developed and emerging nations creates such different worldviews and expectations, one can certainly draw the inauspicious conclusion that the developed world's historical perception of people and wildlife peaceably cohabitating in developing countries is largely mythologized.

True, pastoral people have a long and storied respect for wildlife, but to believe that complete harmony between man and beast is possible ignores the reality on the ground.

The fact is that the bulk of Africa's people are poor, wildlife unintentionally poses a threat to human survival, corruption is rife, land disputes are ongoing, and resentment is rampant.

In short, it's a mishmash of complexity, and any solution, be it conservancy, pastoral reform, community-based conservation, park fence, or otherwise will demand trade-offs that simply will not satisfy everyone at the table.

Furthermore, marginalizing rural people while saddling them with the immense responsibility of conservation is not just inequitable; it's a lose-lose scenario, resulting in illegal bushmeat hunting, desertification from overgrazing, and the continued killing of one species of animal in defense of another.

It must be acknowledged, however, that pastoralism requires serious reform for the benefit of people and the natural world, which, when properly looked after, is a renewable resource. The conservancy model, for example, is immensely beneficial for both.

With respect to keeping tradition at the expense of the natural world and calling for more progressive changes at the expense of tradition, there's no arguing that unrestrained stock levels and a lack of selective livestock breeding is environmentally destructive.

Without succor and intranational reform, lions and their prey will suffer first, followed by people soon thereafter. The sad truth is that it's already happening all over Africa.

LIONS ARE ONE OF AFRICA'S MOST ICONIC ANIMAL SPECIES. PHOTO BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

Human-wildlife conflict in Africa will always exist, so long as people and wildlife are vying for space. It can, however, be significantly reduced by first recognizing that, unlike the developed world, people there live in extreme poverty, working under severe restrictions.

While there must be a limit on the amount of cattle being allowed to graze if wildlife is to survive, conservation requires balancing the needs of culture and identity with the demand for progressive environmental changes; the need for food, water, healthcare, and employment with the desire to protect vestiges of wilderness and wildlife populations.

Once improvements are made to people's quality of life, and when corruption is curtailed, the rest should theoretically follow suit, though both are easier said than done given the current political climate.

It's key to remember that too much sentimentality—be it over-romanticizing wild Africa or the love of cattle—can be a dangerous thing, no matter which side of conservation's fence one happens to be on.

Is the lion more important than the cow? Better still, is the hungry lion worth more than the starving human? When trying to understand the quandary and quagmire that is Africa, all are vital. Basic human needs, however, must be met soon, lest none survive.

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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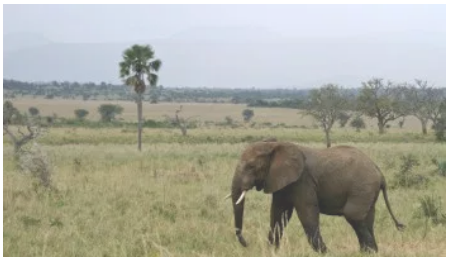

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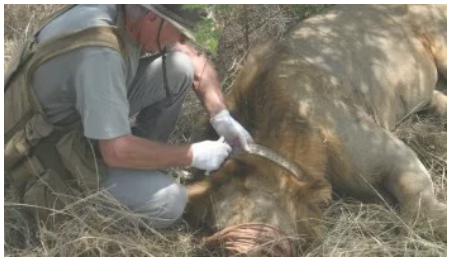

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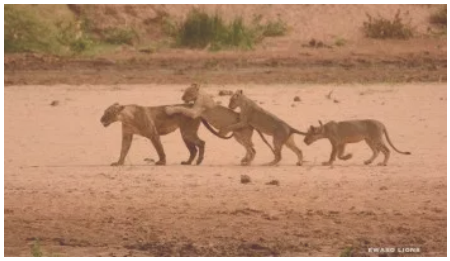

Lion Conservation: Does it Come Down to Cows?

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Loupa Pius • a year ago

Thanks Erwin, Moses, Maimuna, and Rigava.
You all have encouraging comments in which I encouraged Michael and myself to build on in order to write a future piece once again. However, I do request if Erwin and Rigava could share similar models for Tanzania and Ethiopia; generally, the interaction between governments, pastoralists, and wildlife, including conservationists perspective towards indigenous communities.

If Mozambique has some models, too, then Maimuna can well share the experience as well.

Thanks once again for the beautiful comments.

Regards

Reply • Share ›

Maimuna Ibraimo • a year ago

Thank you Loupa and Michael for your effort!!! I put it in terms of population and development in the sense that population growth brings challenges for ecological balance/wildlife survival. A population policy that tackles environmental issues could have positive returns in a long run. Muita for,ca e energia Loupa and Michael

Reply • Share ›

Mackay Rigava • a year ago

Good article and to the point. Several countries have attempted to address the issue of human wildlife conflict with some limited success. The bottom line is, both should have space within the governance of natural resources. Harmony between wildlife and humans will depend to a larger scale on the level of attention States give to addressing human needs, especially the needs of marginalised communities such as pastoralists and the rest of the rural folk whose livelihoods depend on protecting their livestock.

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Erwin Kinsey • a year ago

Good article, and great pictures, Pius! There is a similar but different, promising model east of Tarangire NP in Tanzania with easements created by Maasai communities for grazing of both wildlife and livestock. Growing human populations and their capacity to act in unity for conservation's sake seem to be the greatest risks to the future of the wildlife and livestock alike.

Reply • Share ›

Loupa Pius • a year ago

Thanks Michael,
You have really shared a nice article. The idea is very simple, and should also indicate tourists and development challenges, like the continuous payment of taxes to those governments in the world whose communities have persistently lived in poverty despite of a lot funds paid by tourist into government coffers. However, conservationists should equally pay a prize to some pastoral communities for embracing conservation as well.

Thanks

Reply • Share ›

Moses Konde • a year ago

Wow, thanks Michael for this conservation write up and it is really an educative forum. The balance between wildlife and domestic animals should be practiced, for without nature Africa is nothing, and still without domestic animals human beings may fail to make a living. Thanks to Pius for the source of information from the North-Eastern Uganda (Karamoja) where one of the best African National Parks, Kidepo Valley National Park, is found and much loved for the African wildlife and undulating landscapes. We shall work hard to promote wildlife conservation in Uganda and Africa in

general..... Keep it up Michael,,,,

• Reply • Share ›

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