News from the Amboseli Trust for Elephants

July - September 2018

Greetings!

Most of the flooded roads in Amboseli have finally dried up after the exceptional rainfall in the first half of the year. There are, however, still large lakes and pans of water, and most wonderfully, thousands of flamingoes. The great swaths of pink brighten every day. As one safari guide stated: "This is the year of Amboseli." The Park and surrounding areas are looking gorgeous and the animals are in excellent condition. For us who have lived through droughts, it is a joy.

At the same time, there are pressures on the wildlife from loss of habitat and land being sold and fenced. We work closely with the Amboseli Ecosystem Trust, a grassroots Maasai organization that is trying to save the ecosystem. We have hope for Amboseli.

A new and very unwelcome pressure came up recently. The Cabinet Secretary in charge of wildlife appointed a task force to look into the consumptive use of wildlife in the form of cropping (killing) species such as zebras, wildebeests and gazelles for their meat and skins. For this newsletter, I have asked the co-founder of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project, Dr. Harvey Croze to write a piece about cropping. He had experience in the '70s with one of the schemes tried before in Kenya. Here also is a link to an excellent opinion piece by a hunter turned conservationist. Luca Belpietro runs a very successful conservation project in the Amboseli ecosystem. I recommend reading both these articles.

We at ATE are totally against any kind of consumptive use of Kenya's wildlife.

Cynthia Moss
Director
Amboseli Trust for Elephants

Consumptive Wildlife Utilization in Kenya: Been There, Didn't Work

by Harvey Croze

Consumptive utilization of wildlife, or, in plain words, killing wild animals for profit, has been proposed, tried and rejected at least three times in Kenya. Biology, economics and society just didn't conspire to make it work.

Over a half century ago, in 1961, cropping of zebras and wildebeests was tried in Narok District, political domain of the famous Maasai Mara. A UN Food and Agricultural (FAO) study concluded in 1967 that past and present cropping schemes failed due to insurmountable problems of harvesting, processing and marketing.
Eventually, Soila was highly respected in the community, putting her in the position of being a strong advocate for elephants. In taking on the role of community liaison, Soila also became a role model for young women and girls in Amboseli. They saw that she could drive a Land Rover, rise in her job, and gain the respect of the elders. Later, when she was no longer with the project, she devoted her time to helping the young women in her community.

We are certain that Soila’s name will echo for many years to come through the Amboseli Ilkisongo ecosystem, and that the people she inspired will achieve great things.

Thanking our Generous Donors

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Nonetheless, in 1966 the Kenyan government, assisted by the UN Development Program (UNDP) and FAO had already embarked on a Range Management in Kenya (RMK) project with dual objectives: increasing meat production from rangeland resources (meaning wildlife) while at the same time ensuring the continued aesthetic and economic attributes afforded by Kenya’s wildlife on which the tourist industry was (and still is) dependent. In other words, let’s try to have the cake and eat it too.

The second project produced a series of reports on the mechanics of wildlife cropping, essentially manuals on how to put wildebeest into tins, but nothing to demonstrate sustainability. A joint UNDP/FAO review mission in 1974 concluded that the project put an undue emphasis on game cropping, a misguided attempt to export North American hunting ethos to the complexities of Kenya’s semi-arid ecosystems and rapidly changing social ethos.

In order to salvage some of the previous project work and infrastructure, UNDP and FAO with the Kenyan Wildlife Management and Conservation Department re-jigged the RMK into a third effort, the Kenya Wildlife Management Project. The KWMP ran from 1975 to 1977 in the 20,000 km² Kajiado District, in which, far to the south along the Kenya-Tanzania border, lies Amboseli National Park.

The new project fielded fresh international and national staff, with new economic and ecological objectives based on integrated land-use planning and sound ecological science that considered a host of controlling and modifying factors driving semi-arid ecosystems - soils, water, primary production, herbivore population dynamics, livestock disease, human conflict, Maasai culture, as well as other consumptive activities (game ranching and hunting).

The KWMP conclusions on consumptive utilization were wide-reaching and mostly negative. The 1980 Final Report cautiously observed that cropping of medium-sized herbivores (wildebeest and hartebeest) could be successful in theory. But there were too many negative, unknown or uncontrollable factors to make it workable, profitable and sustainable in practice, given socio-economic and biological realities. For example...

Marketing of a trial crop of 675 wildebeest, Coke’s hartebeest, Thomson’s gazelle and impala from the previous RMK project was bedevilled with problems, including infrastructure failures, Maasai disinterest in consuming protein other than from domestic stock, a scanty high-end demand within the capital city, and, crucially, the naturally fluctuating herbivore numbers that made it impossible to establish a stable market supply.

Economic analysis of the experimental cropping showed only small profit margins. A cost-benefit model predicted that income from meat and skins would not provide Maasai ranchers more livelihood than from cattle. In particular, given Kajiado’s popular Amboseli and Nairobi National Parks, wildlife-based viewing tourism would produce much higher revenues than cropping.

Inequitable distribution of revenues to landowners from wildlife-generated, or indeed most any enterprises, remained a perennial problem. The KWMP proposed a system of fairly distributing benefits from a Wildlife Utilization Fund fed by wildlife-viewing revenues. The scheme was never implemented.

Natural population fluctuations of wildlife arising from the year-to-year unpredictability of rainfall and forage, led KWMP to conclude “...it has not yet been proved that wild herbivore populations can tolerate the additional long-term mortality required to make a cropping scheme economic on a sustainable basis.”

The KWMP highlighted a number of ancillary negative impacts of wildlife cropping, among them: damage to Kenya’s conservation image to a growing wave of international tourists; traumatized animals who run away instead of posing for those tourists; Maasai landowners wondering why wildlife - their traditional protein hedge against extreme drought - should be sold short by...
In the past few years a number of our families have been spending more and more time outside the Park. They return from time to time spending a few weeks with us or sometimes just a day or two. Whenever this happens we are excited to catch up with them to see who has had calves or if anyone has died. This year when the BBs, VAs and UAs returned Norah and Kaito recorded 17 calves, some of which were born in 2016! That’s how long the families had been away.

Although we miss these family we also love that elephants in Amboseli still have the space to change their strategies. Flexibility and space are essential for their survival. We at ATE are doing everything we can to keep this ecosystem open to the elephants and other wildlife.

The History of the SB Family

Sona was a big, handsome female. That first day we could not figure out who was in her family nor how many. She and others were associated with another matriarch who we already knew--the JA of her associates. She was in her family nor how many. She and others were associated with another matriarch who we already knew--the JA of her associates. She was deeply moved by it. In 1958, he moved to Canada and continued his love affair with music, performing as a folk and blues singer throughout North America before joining the rock band The Sparrow. He met his future wife, Jutta—a devotee of rock and blues, as well as a human rights activist—in 1965 and the two became part of the fascinating musical scene from Haight Ashbury to LA’s Sunset Strip. In 1967, they formed the band Steppenwolf, which quickly became one of the world’s foremost rock’n’roll bands, releasing such standards as “Magic Carpet Ride” and “Born to Be Wild.”

In 2004, John and Jutta translated their “born to be wild” theme into action to protect animals, the environment, and human rights around the world. Through the Maue Kay Foundation, they travel the planet to investigate problems and aid people trying to solve them. Their projects are many and varied, ranging from saving elephants and orangutans, to funding schools in Tanzania and Cambodia.

To learn more about their projects, you can contact The Maue Kay Foundation at info@mauekay.org or at The Maue Kay Foundation, 1187 Coast Village Road, Suite 324, Montecito, CA 93108.

Thanks, John and Jutta, for all you do and for reminding us to always “stay wild”.

The History of the SB Family

Sona was a big, handsome female. That first day we could not figure out who was in her family nor how many. She and others were associated with another matriarch who we already knew--Jezebel of the JBs. The next time we saw Sona we were able to get a better idea of her associates. She was with a female who belonged to the JA family, Juliet. The other females that were close to Sona were also...
Sona (rt) with radio collar in 1974; on the left is Sadie at 10 years old

We saw Sona several times during 1974 both from the air when radio-tracking and from the ground. On August 18, 1974, we found Sona in a small group of five elephants. We were able to get good photos and work out who was who in the family.

In those early days of the study as we found new families, each was assigned a letter of the alphabet and then everyone in that family was given names starting with that letter. Later when we had reached 27 families we had to start going through the alphabet for the second time. There was already an ‘S’ family that became the SAs and Sona’s family was called the SBs. The second adult female in her family was named Sara.

To read the full history of the SB family Click Here.

In terms of the elephants and the ecosystem we’ve had a time of peace and plenty. We just wish it could always be like this—buckets of rain and relative safety. We know that hard times will come again and at ATE we are always keeping that in mind. We are working closely with the local community, the Kenya Wildlife Service, and our NGO partners to secure the Amboseli ecosystem. We want Barbara and the other “prodigal daughters” to be able to roam throughout their present range. We need your help. Any donation would be appreciated.

Cynthia Moss
Director

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