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The Masai Mara: 'It will not be long before it's gone'

As lodges and shanty towns proliferate in Kenya's Masai Mara, drastic and urgent steps are needed to save this beautiful game reserve from becoming an environmental disaster

Jessica Hatcher
The Guardian, Friday 23 August 2013 22.00 BST
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Giraffes in Kenya's Masai Mara game reserve. Photograph: Guillaume Bonn

Our vehicle comes to an abrupt stop. "There, now watch," says Josphat, my exacting young Masai guide. We cut the engine and the silence is acute. Josphat points out a cheetah's head in an ocean of golden grass. One minibus has already pulled up on another sandy track a few hundred metres away and four heads are craning out of the roof. We sit and watch for the cheetah. All of a sudden white minibuses crest the horizon in droves. We are in a stampede. Eight of them surround us. Within five minutes we have counted 30, the drivers communicating via radio to make sure their clients tick off "the big five". A cheetah will never kill like this; its prey will have been alerted. And if it has killed, the vehicles will make it blind to a subsequent hyena attack. But this cheetah is now nowhere to be seen. Undeterred, the minibus drivers start ploughing into the long grass. Eventually they give up. I ask if this happens often. Every day, Josphat says.

Josphat is a member of the Kenya Professional Safari Guides Association, which means he knows the Latin names and mating rituals of every animal in his domain. He is 27, small, intelligent and deeply serious about his work. He is accustomed to tracking animals and avoiding humans, but he is also proving adept at the inverse, showing me the "real" Masai Mara. One of the greatest natural spectacles on earth is under way. More than a million hungry wildebeest are on their way from Tanzania to Kenya's Mara National Reserve to graze tons of sweet red-oat grass. Primordial gnus are the stars of the show, but in supporting roles are a few

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Masai Mara - audio slideshow

Jackson Looseiya, a guide in the Masai Mara for 26 years and presenter on the BBC's Big Cat Diaries, discusses the impact of tourism on the national reserve. Photographs by Guillaume Bonn

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hundred thousand zebras and half a million Thomson's gazelles; then there are the resident crocodiles, lions, hyenas, leopards and cheetahs.

video



A tourist plane lands in the Masai Mara. Photograph: Guillaume Bonn

Their show is in danger of being upstaged. Every year, thousands upon thousands of tourists descend on the Masai Mara to witness the migration. The resident human population is increasing; lodges are proliferating. Rampant corruption means money is not filtering down to the Masai population, who are increasingly turning to charcoal and arable farming to make ends meet. In short, mankind is in danger of squandering one of the most important habitats left in the world.

"It will not be long before it is gone, unless some drastic and urgent steps are taken now," says Joseph Ogutu, a scientist who has studied changes in the area's fauna for 24 years. The Masai Mara represents the northern quarter of the Serengeti ecosystem that stretches down into Tanzania. The wild animals that remain here require vast and various dispersal areas to survive drought, predators and human pressure. These safe havens are disappearing. Lodges surrounding the park have erected kilometres of electric fencing; lions have been known to use them to trap their prey. Shanty towns are developing fast, and some may soon be on the national grid. There are too many cows for not enough land, and wheat fields are advancing (wheat has become a swearword among conservationists). Human waste is being buried or dumped. The environment is displaying symptoms of its mismanagement. Algae are emerging in rivers upstream, a consequence of fertiliser use. The Mara river, where wildebeest cross from Tanzania, dried up completely in 2009, says Dickson Kaelo, a respected Masai guide. He recalls seeing scores of minibuses queuing to watch wildebeest splash through the water. But there was "just dust". Inside the treasured reserve, monkeys play with crisps packets. Even the predators' behaviour is changing. Malaika is a cheetah who will sit on the roof of your car; Josphat is disgusted by the guides who encourage her, to secure a good tip.

Kenya's economy is heavily reliant on tourism and the core area, the Mara National Reserve, generates an estimated £13m each year. The place projects a timelessness that speaks to notions of man's origins and the beginnings of time. But it also epitomises a modern conflict over land and resources playing out across Africa today.

Landowner Kaitet Ole Naingisa sips hot chocolate in a central Nairobi cafe. He has travelled to the capital to present his case to the commissioner of lands. He pulls his title deed from a brown A4 envelope. Naingisa's family had a plot close to the National Reserve in Siana where they had lived for more than 20 years, and where his 10 children are being schooled. Siana was one of many "group ranches", areas of communal land around the reserve, which have been subdivided among members in recent decades. It was this subdivision, locals say, that opened the door for the land-grabbing that is now epic in scale. When the land registry finally issued Naingisa with his title deeds last year, he got "this", he says, brandishing the embossed title deed to plot 366, far

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from his home, on unproductive land. The deed states his name as the land's original owner, but another name is semi-legible beneath it. There is a hole in the paper where someone has tried to rub it out. This is not his original land; the authorities have fiddled it, he says.

In battling for their rights, the Masai are seen as greedy by many conservationists, but most are not, an exasperated Josphat says: they just want their rightful share. The Masai occupied most of western Kenya at the turn of the 20th century, but disease, massive evictions by British colonialists and civil war reduced them to only 0.5% of the population. Centuries of survival in harsh lands gave them a strong sense of mutualism, but a culture of cronyism now pits the Masai against one another. The uneducated minority are represented, and exploited, by an educated few. There are countless lawsuits languishing in the courts and a number of unsolved, politically motivated murders. Paramilitary police have carried out forced evictions by night. People are bitter, and trust has eroded. Somali *émigrés* run thriving businesses in the Mara, because the Masai trust them more than Kenyan tribes.



A lion rests in a manmade quarry within the Masai Mara reserve. Photograph: Guillaume Bonn

Until last year, the Mara National Reserve, 371,000 acres of government-owned land, was administered by two different county councils. Now it is united under a new governor. "We call him the Big Fish," a young herdsman says.

One half of the administration had outsourced its management to a conservation group, one that received praise for its environmental work but faced allegations of corruption. Samuel Tunai, the "Big Fish", was on its board of directors. He holds a stake in more than 2,000 acres of prime land that were once part of the reserve but then given to the community to use. The land now boasts three luxury camps. There had also been allegations of corruption on the other side of the administration, and management was said to be worse. But now, under Kenya's new constitution, Tunai, as governor, is in charge of both administrations. He has rejected claims that his involvement in the Mara represents a conflict of interest. The Guardian's attempts to contact him proved unsuccessful.



A herd of tourist buses park in the Masai Mara to watch a river crossing.

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Photograph: Guillaume Bonn

Three decades ago, the Masai community gave president Daniel Arap Moi a parcel of land on the northern escarpment, a gesture that belonged to a more honourable era when "grabber" didn't feature in the local vernacular. Moi built a spectacular lodge with the only tarmac landing strip in the Mara. Today his presidential pied-à-terre, Ol Kurruk, has fallen into ruin. The buildings have either collapsed or been gutted by fire. Huge herds of giraffe and zebra have moved in. As we pick through the demolished rooms, small antelope, lizards and monkeys skitter away. Communities living on the escarpment fear Tunai plans to turn it into yet another luxury lodge.

"Today it's lodges, lodges, lodges. Everybody wants a lodge," Josphat says in despair. Some of those inside the reserve secure leases by greasing palms; others pay wardens for illegal permits, or start up as temporary camps and never leave. Outside the reserve it's easier. The first Chinese lodge is under construction on the south-eastern edge of the reserve. Its flat-pack cabins travelled 5,000 miles from China to be constructed on cleared forest. The minister for tourism said recently that of 108 tourist operations in the Mara area, only 29% were legal. Jake Grieves-Cook, a former chairman of the Kenya Tourist Board who owns a number of camps, estimates there are 7,000 tourist beds in the Mara ecosystem. If this is true, then in the past 10 years, despite a four-year moratorium on development, the number has almost trebled.

Fifty years after the process of dividing community lands began, it became evident that these traditional pastoral lands would turn into housing estates and farms if something didn't hold them together. A number of "conservancies" sprang up. These are privately managed reserves, funded directly by tourism, that lease land from communities to be set aside for wildlife. They increase the size of the protected area by 50%. Supporters argue that they will be enough to save the Mara; others say they are a sticking plaster and can support it for only so long.

Josphat and I venture out to [Richard Branson's much-discussed new camp](#), which lies on its own conservancy away from the politics of the National Reserve. We eye the "tents" agog. They could feature in Star Wars, with four-metre pegs supporting futuristic domes. But their aspect is all natural. As we stand next to the infinity pool, a hyena obligingly comes to drink at the stream below. When almost 300 landowners of the surrounding Motorogi community were offered 3,500 shillings (£27) per hectare per year, they were delighted; the land was so overgrazed it looked worthless. Fast-forward five years and "you wouldn't recognise it", says Tam Breedveld, Branson's handsome young manager. The story is the same across the conservancies: overgrazed land has recovered with only a few years of good management, and animals have come back in great numbers. For tourists, the conservancies give a flavour of what the Masai Mara was.

We drive between two conservancies with Grieves-Cook, an early pioneer of the community-owned model. Night falls and we become hopelessly lost. We drive through herds of buffalo and stop for hippopotamuses to cross the road. When we eventually arrive in camp we are greeted with a hero's welcome. The tented camps Grieves-Cook operates don't have menus or cash-bars. Seven hundred acres is budgeted per tent, and a game drive isn't a treasure hunt. Driving through Olare Orok conservancy, we sit in silence with a pride of lions for an hour as the sun goes down. Cubs tumble around like Andrex puppies and bloated females finish off a wildebeest as the lone male has a lie-down.

Go on safari, meaning "journey" in Swahili, with someone like Grieves-Cook and such mishaps and surprises will be the moments you remember best. In the early days, trailblazers took guests on a journey in every sense of the word. In the 1950s, the late [Sydney Downey](#) once burst every one of his tyres. His glamorous guests were made to stuff them with grass and bump along. Another time, Downey forgot all the food apart from a

wheel of cheese. His guests gave him a silver plaque to commemorate "the great cheese safari". When Downey discovered someone was going to build a permanent structure in his beloved Mara he was "horrified", his daughter Margaret recalls. Keekorok Lodge opened in 1962 on Downey's favourite camping site. It is a 200-bed behemoth with tarmac roads and a swimming pool. At 4pm sharp, white minibuses charge out, taking guests on prosaic "game drives".



A dog roams through an illegal settlement in the Masai Mara. Photograph: Guillaume Bonn

Animal habitat is disappearing. On the banks of the Talek river, overlooking the National Reserve, you can get a room for only 300 shillings (£2.30) per night. Talek is an urban island in an expanse of protected land and the largest trading centre in the Mara. Filling stations open early, televisions blare out from restaurants and bars, and the sex workers open their doors at night. The abattoir does a roaring trade but its owner is nervous – he's waiting for the first lion to steal a carcass. There is no public waste management system in Talek and the roads in the town aren't really roads but rising layers of human detritus where there's a tacit agreement not to build.

North of Talek on the Narok road, an enterprising woman has set up an impromptu charcoal stall beneath the Mara North Conservancy sign. A 150-year-old acacia tree lies slain on its side, prey to the charcoal trade. Once you take out these trees, the land can go over to wheat. Wildlife pays around 3,000 shillings per hectare per year, but wheat farming pays 8,000-10,000. Masai society is increasingly monetised, steered by electronic communications, motorised transport and imported food. These people and many more are trying to make a living, and although the National Reserve makes millions, they're getting little from it. Without incentive to protect it, they are destroying it. A Japanese businessman has offered the council 42bn shillings (£235m) to relocate people on the edge of the reserve to 20km away, a consultant for the council says, which would mean more forced evictions and an uncomfortable new chapter in the battle for the Mara's billions.

Jackson Looseyia, a veteran guide of 26 years and presenter of the BBC's Big Cat Diaries, is between safaris. I have come to meet him in a private house owned by a wealthy Briton. Looseyia wears rubber sandals made from old tyres, a red-checked shuka, red dress and beaded belt. "I don't normally eat like this," he says, feigning embarrassment at the elegant meal laid on. I believe him. However much time he has spent around westerners, Looseyia is Masai to the core. What concerns him most about the future of the Mara is the rocketing value of land. Africa is rising, the media proclaim, but it is doing so unequally. Wealthy investors in the former Masai rangelands 30km south of Nairobi have driven land up to 12m shillings (£93,000) per acre. Both the Masai, who "suffered big time", Looseyia says, and the wildlife are gone. "It's a threat to conservation, it's a threat to the community. We are bordering the famous Masai Mara National Reserve. That in itself is gold. It could easily go," he says.

As well as the Serengeti wildebeest that convene every year in the National Reserve, around 300,000 wildebeest from Kenya's

Loita plains used to arrive concurrently and mingle with their Tanzanian counterparts – the "northern migration". Calvin Cottar, whose family have been in the Mara for almost 100 years, has seen the Loita migration reduce by 90% to 30,000 animals in the past three decades. Wildlife populations crashed by up to 70% in that time, according to a [Journal of Zoology](#) study, while cows grazing illegally inside the reserve were up by 1,100%.

The Masai don't want to see their pastures become sweeping wheat fields. But wildlife on land comes with a risk to personal safety, loss of grazing, disease and death of livestock – and this should be compensated. Money from wildlife should go directly to the people affected, Looseyia says. Otherwise it will be lost, like America's 65 million wild bison: not one walks freely today. While the focus is on the spike in elephant and rhino poaching, Looseyia says lions and hyenas are disappearing at an alarming rate. "This is a home to these species. We have come to invade and as invaders we need to understand when to back off." People say lions sleep for many, many hours, Looseyia muses. "What I know is that when lions do not want to see you around, the easiest thing is to close their eyes. Yes, they sleep. But not as we think they sleep."

Looseyia likens expats in the Mara to the key that will turn on the engine, with their experience and funding. But the agent of change, the engine, can only be Kenyan. Looseyia's 20-year-old daughter is at university. "In an ideal Masai world she'd have three children by now." Women like her, he says, are the leaders of tomorrow.

That night, Josphat maintains a soft but lyrical commentary as we drive through the National Reserve for the last time, away from the setting sun. "That's a topi on a termite mound – see its dark legs?" he says. "That's a fish eagle." Then something catches my eye, a multitudinous and multicoloured herd. "What are those?" I ask. "Those," Josphat pauses, "are cows." Next to a ranger's post, 200 cows are inside the protected reserve at peak tourist time. If the council cannot enforce their rules, what hope is there for preserving half a million acres of ecosystem for generations to come?

• Watch an audio slideshow of Guillaume Bonn's photographs, narrated by Jackson Looseyia, at theguardian.com/weekend



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42 comments. Showing 50 conversations, threads collapsed, sorted

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3 PEOPLE, 3 COMMENTS



ayeleshamlad

23 August 2013 11:08pm

3

That's twice I've seen the word 'Gnu' in the G recently. Is it just another word for Wildebeest? If so why did fall out of use? This is a tragic story of course. I'm off to look at the slideshow.



chacohucuq ▶ ayeleshamlad

24 August 2013 8:06pm

Kiswahili for wildebeest



MonkeyDubious ▶ chacohucuq

25 August 2013 11:28am

1

"Nyumbu" is Kiswahili for wilderbeest... I'd say "Gnu" is English and "Wilderbeest" is Afrikaans?



Bowiebros

23 August 2013 11:45pm

David Bowie was the first person to bring this area to my attention after he visited in 1977. There are some good pics of him with the Masai tribesmen, and him in his green clogs!

4 PEOPLE, 6 COMMENTS



hazh

24 August 2013 12:17am

25

The problem with article like this is that it seems to concentrate on what appears to me to be the relatively minor issue which is the number of tourists (7000 beds is hardly a huge number), but doesn't give any sense of the number of local people actually living in there which is presumably what's causing the problem, and presumably the main issue, but after reading it I have no idea how many people there are there. It says for example "cows grazing illegally inside the reserve were up by 1,100%", but as far as I know, tourists don't bring cows here to graze, so illegal cow would mean illegal settlements, so are there 1,100% more people? I have no idea. It wrings its hands over "forced evictions" and mumbles something about being "uncomfortable". So does it wants wildlife or farm animals on

this land, it's the kind of guilt-ridden western liberal article that tries to empathize with those trying to make living from this land, but tiptoes round the obvious problem of population increase or give suggestions as to what to do with the people.

Articles like this end up being confusing and confused. It goes on about missing cheetahs because of the tourists' cars, but then mention a cheetah that likes to sit on the roof of their cars (I would presume it found it useful for spotting prey). There is nothing wrong with predators adapting to presence of tourists, but the problem for the predators is surely the decreasing number of preys due to overgrazing of land? I don't know, this article won't tell me.



kentalucy ▸ hazh

24 August 2013 1:06pm

4

The Maasai are semi-nomadic, so they need to be able to relocate without too much trouble. For this reason, the Maasai Mara hasn't experienced the same level of population explosion that has been seen in many areas. The tourists, I believe, are a large part of the problem because they draw in more and more local people looking to make a living off tourism-related trade. But they're not actually getting that money. Uncontrolled tourism is what's eventually going to drive up the land prices as it becomes a "desirable" area to have a house. And every house means a new fence, a new road, and less habitat. And the predators are decreasing due to all sorts of reasons but again it mostly comes back to human pressure, from what I've heard - they're coming into conflict with Maasai who are concentrated around the reserve (due to the tourism - and the "free" grazing in the park), and because there are so many vehicles around during their hunting time, it distracts them and prevents them from making kills, so they're not breeding as well as they could. At least that's how I understand it.



hazh ▸ kentalucy

24 August 2013 3:02pm

1

The tourists, I believe, are a large part of the problem because they draw in more and more local people looking to make a living off tourism-related trade.

That doesn't make much sense. The locals are looking to serve the tourists, they are not coming to farm or graze their animals. The problems I have read is with overgrazing, poaching, and growing of crops (this has been reported in a number of articles) and these people are not farmers or herders. Driving up land prices doesn't appear to have much relevance to the wildlife (it should in fact stop poorer people coming into the area). This article is confusing.



Muikari Gaturwa Wa Tiiri ▸ hazh

24 August 2013 3:08pm

3

Show 3 more replies

Last reply: 26 August 2013 6:08pm



jobi258

24 August 2013 1:57am

7

I went on a safari in the Masai mara back in 1988. It was an adventure in those days, just as described in the article. First, the minivan that our guides took kept breaking down. We had barely got out of Nairobi before the first break-down. The second came an hour or so later. Finally we limped into the reserve. We stayed at the campsite by the Tanzanian border. A few months later, Julie Ward was murdered there.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Julie_Ward

We got to see the animals. Hippos in the river, wildebeest, zebra, lions, antelopes, ostriches, etc. There was a place where you could actually stay in physical buildings as opposed to tents, but being poor students, this was beyond our budget. Each morning we saw the balloons go up. Now that must be a good way to see the landscape.

We slept to the sound of growling lions and hyenas. In the morning there was a kill a few hundred yards from the campsite. Our guides cooked us full English breakfasts.

On the way back, the van broke down again. The driver was afraid of being murdered because we were in a remote area inhabited by a different tribe

from his own. Somehow we got the van started again and made it back to Nairobi.

An adventure I will never forget.

3 PEOPLE, 3 COMMENTS



iainallan

24 August 2013 4:33am

8

Kenyan greed will result in the loss of the Maasai Mara within the next fifteen years. The Maasai are symptomatic of this greed. They want the tourist dollars, which they then spend on buying more cattle, which in turn will eat away the fragile ecosystem. The lodges are parasites bent on making the quick buck, and Branson is showing the way. The ignorance of the Mara park authorities will ensure this bleak future, where corruption reigns. These lodges will have their comeuppance when one day, in the not too distant future, they will have joined the encroaching shanties surrounded by wasteland.



Lime83 ▶ iainallan

24 August 2013 2:38pm

2

Kenyan greed? Watch out, that white man burden of yours looks heavy.



inconsolable ▶ iainallan

24 August 2013 7:48pm

1

"The Maasai are symptomatic of this greed. They want the tourist dollars, which they then spend on buying more cattle, which in turn will eat away the fragile ecosystem."

Yeah, these greedy nomads, wanting a better future for their children...the capitalist bastards. Just as well we have you to alert us to the danger they pose to all our futures.

Iain, were you drunk when you wrote your post? I hope so.

4 PEOPLE, 5 COMMENTS



Stieve

24 August 2013 4:51am

11

There is only one solution. Put a fence around the entire Serengeti, get everyone out of it and leave it alone for twenty years, albeit with a well-funded staff of conservationist/wardens to make sure there is no poaching etc.

Isn't it clear? Human beings and other animals don't mix!



DeltaW ▶ Stieve

24 August 2013 3:05pm

4

Another solution which should have been undertaken decades ago is birth control. Worldwide the exploding human population is playing havoc with nature to the extent that the earth's global carbon budget is wacky and even our vast oceans are feeling the heat. So grateful I got to see the Mara through the eyes of Alan Root and Jonathan Scott at the old Root/Leakey camp in 1977 and again in 1979 with Alan and Joan camping on the Mara River. There were too many lodges and too many mini-vans back in 2001 when I wrote the last Fodor's Guide to Kenya and advised travelers to go to other parks or off season. Not sure what regional solutions are best but don't slam Branson; he's a decent man and might back the best idea.



inconsolable ▶ Stieve

24 August 2013 8:11pm

2

"Put a fence around the entire Serengeti, get everyone out of it and leave it alone for twenty years "

Excellent idea. Now, how much are you prepared to have that happen?

Or do you think that the poor local people should pay all the price? Isn't it great that you can afford ideals, and have other people pay for them?

@Deltaw

I am unclear if you are advocating birth control to decrease the number of minivans, or to control the number of local people being born.

Rich westerners should be extremely careful about dictating how many children poor people need to achieve family security.



inconsolable ▶ inconsolable

24 August 2013 8:18pm

1

Show 2 more replies

Last reply: 26 August 2013 9:33am

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



bunter666

24 August 2013 5:33am

1

An adventure in 1988 ? I first went two years prior and I would hardly call it an adventure - we had tents with showers.



Trilobyte ▶ bunter666

24 August 2013 10:46am

12

Well, I went in 1375.

It was a real adventure then.

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



thriftnot

24 August 2013 7:05am

3

If any of these tourists gave a damn they would not go on safari. Half of them are just ticking another box of their comfortable travel log. Farmlands across the globe are being built on when forests and wild areas are turned over to farmland. Until people wake up and stop reproducing, don't expect wildlife anywhere to survive. It's only when the west can't import its favourite foods because somebody else has paid more for it will anyone notice there is a problem.....!



ks009746 ▶ thriftnot

24 August 2013 4:01pm

2

I can see where you're coming from, but if responsible ecotourism is encouraged then it will bring great benefits (Kenya would not survive without tourist revenue) to both locals and the environment. The problem with places like the Masai Mara is that they are relatively small when compared to the number of tourists visiting.

However, without tourists this beautiful landscape would've been lost to poachers and developers decades ago. There's plenty of incentive to protect it, as well as employment opportunities for local people as guide and education to dissuade them from poaching.



MacNara

24 August 2013 7:15am

11

I'm really disappointed that this excellent article is online in the 'Weekend' section, which consists almost entirely of trivia, rather than on the front page. Weirdly, at the time I am reading this (6 am UK time, but I'm in Japan) it is next to an article on '[Leopard-skin Prints for All Ages](#)'. Am I alone in thinking that, despite Greenwald, the Guardian has lost moral focus somewhat?

A few observations on what Jessica Hatcher writes.

My wife and I have been on safaris in the last few years, as the death of our parents and reduction of obligations allowed us to indulge ourselves before we are too old ourselves to enjoy such trips. Both of us come from poor families (in different countries), and never imagined in our childhood that we would visit any foreign country or that we would be able to visit Africa and see the animals and people we watched then wide-eyed on

We, of course, wonder if our trips make it more likely that the wildlife will survive (money to the local economy through preservation) or less likely (over-exploitation; the short-term winning out over the long-term).

After our first trip to Kenya, I was moved to make a website (no ads; just for fun) about the country. (I meant to add other trips, but haven't. Also some bits of the site may not work on your browser or OS. Sorry: it was fine five years ago.) And in making the site, I studied the background of what we had seen.

1. A lot of the exploitation of the Maasai is being done by other Maasai. Contrary to western images of traditional Africa, the concept of private property is strong among the Maasai, and they are extremely individualist. They know exactly which cows and goats belong to which person, and which family. And they will kill if necessary to enforce this. One thing I remember reading is about the local council of Narok, a town on the edge of the Mara, and mentioned in the article. An area of the Mara near Narok was handed over to the local Maasai council, as part of a programme to involve the 'indigenous' people in the management of their own lands. And the councillors (local elders) privatised this portion and sold it at knock-down prices to each other (as individuals). And this is one of the sources of the increased number of lodges (the councillors own the land where they approve building permits as local representatives). (No different from the current corruption in Spain, for example, so it's not a racist thing; on the contrary, the Maasai are 'just like us'.)

2. Catch-22. If you are young in the wildlife-rich areas of Africa, educated more than your parents, still looking after goats, but you'd like a little more, what do you do? Well, there are lots of conservation charities run by guilty white people from the US or Europe. Once upon a time, they would just come in and order local Africans around. But enlightenment has come! Now, involving the local people is necessary before the big foundations will release the grant money. Young western 'volunteers' who know nothing of Africa arrive. They don't speak local languages, and the locals are mostly illiterate. And often the potential grant money has a deadline - if it's not spent in six months, say, it will be taken off the table. They need an interlocutor. So our educated goatherd sets up an NGO representing local people, and Bob's his uncle. The goatherd gets a 4x4, a nice home with shower and electricity, an office with computers and, if he's lucky, a secretary or two. Maybe, even, if he plays his cards right, a flat in Nairobi, because it's cheaper than paying for hotels for the necessary meetings with busy government employees. And when, after a year or so, the 'volunteer' realises that this is where all the money has gone, is she going to spoil her CV and future employment at the UN or WWF or EU by reporting this? After all, she'll be gone at the end of a year or two, and it could have happened to anyone. Read Jim IGOE: Conservation and Globalisation - you'll learn more about African conservation from this book than from any other.

3. On the cheetahs. We went on a one-day trip in the Mara - usually safaris are 6am-10am and 3pm-6pm (cooler and less bright). On this trip, we saw a cheetah teaching her cubs to eat with an impala (cheetahs are strange in that the cubs don't recognise meat as food unless they are taught, unlike other cats). We were told that cheetahs have started hunting in the middle of the day whereas they would normally hunt in the early morning or late evening because the early/late tourist buses give them away, but in the middle of the day, there are usually no buses. Most cheetah cubs are killed by lions, who can of course find them more easily in the middle of the day, and this is why cheetah numbers are declining.



Aneroid

24 August 2013 7:37am

9

Let's not forget numbers. I lived in Kenya during most of the '90's, arriving during a census year when it was estimated that the country had a population of just under 21 millions, confirmed when the results were published in 1992.

Today the population has more than doubled since then and more than seven fold since independence in December of 1963.

The north and north-east is out of bounds due to poor terrain and Somali bandits.

So today most Kenyans occupy the south-west and the coastal strip from Lamu to Mombasa. With this comes the effects of massive overgrazing turning the land to dust. I used to observe Maasai herding their livestock through the suburb of Makadara where I lived. This was just 4 miles from downtown Nairobi.

When you put the dividing off of ever smaller pieces of land to the male offspring of various tribes with the land-grabbing by politicians and their cronies

into the mix, then you have a recipe for disaster.

One way or another, the Maasai Mara WILL go.



1voteukip2

24 August 2013 7:55am

7

As the human population continues to exploded the natural world will be destroyed. Glad I managed to see quite a lot of it before it goes.

Then the humans will kill themselves off



erroberts

24 August 2013 8:15am

3

This all rather sounds like driving a JCB through the Garden of Eden to uproot the Tree of Knowledge.

3 PEOPLE, 3 COMMENTS



yonsok

24 August 2013 9:06am

6

I visited the Masai Mara a few years ago.

Kenya is a basket case.

The whole trip made me vow never to return to Africa.

We didn't feel safe as when we arrived several attacks on tourists had recently taken place. One had people right in your face 24/7 trying to sell you stuff. Bribes were the order of the day for everything.

The road from Nairobi to Mombassa(or the Aids highway as it is known) just stops in places and becomes a dirt track. Corruption is endemic.

There were huge areas fenced off on the road where illegal dumping had taken place in the 70's and 80's.

Two sights made me sad. The first was a man in the middle of nowhere outside an appalling shebeen with no shoes, a mobile phone and a Man UTD T shirt on.

A young man trying to swap a carved Gnu which must have taken him many hours for my sweaty old Nike baseball cap.

The world is fucking mad.



Muikari Gaturwa Wa Tiiri ▶ yonsok

24 August 2013 3:13pm

7

The whole trip made me vow never to return to Africa.

And Africa thanks your fortuitous decision not to return



Mukirra ▶ yonsok

26 August 2013 12:48am

4

And I went to Kenya and stayed with a family for ten weeks and it was one of the best experiences of my life. I saw and heard horrific things but I met some amazing people and it made me fall in love with Africa and I can't wait to explore further.

Mukirra is actually the name my Kenyan mother gave me.



peterpuffin

24 August 2013 9:16am

7

I first went to the Mara in the late 60's as a kid so I am lucky perhaps; but even then the quickest easiest way to find lion was search for huddles of tourist buses. Nothing new there.

Population is the problem 50% under the age of 20 !



ilovecheesetoo

24 August 2013 10:21am

3

Until humanity recognises that it is the problem, and that the Earth doesnt exist simply for it to expand into and exploit, we will never actually respect

we will be much poorer for it.

Sadly there are always bleeding heart liberals trying to protect people's rights to expand and expand and expand.



timeandtruth

24 August 2013 11:22am

3

The UK and Europe has expanded housing and business in to areas which once were scenic. Milton Keynes being the biggest example in the UK. Many cities and towns across the UK and Europe were not planned. So why do we expect other developing countries to plan.

We in Europe and the UK keep saying this environment issue and that environmental issue must not happen, were in fact we need to sacrifice much of our open land to forest. Lets not forget Europe including the UK was at one time mainly covered in forest. This would reduce agricultural and building land which off course farmers, builders, government and the landowners do not want.

We all know our major landowners obtained the land by forcing the common people from common land using parliament as their tool. May be its time the land is returned to common land and reforested so other countries can also develop.



johannesguttenberg

24 August 2013 12:33pm

2

So the local people can go hungry so tourists can watch a lion take down a gazelle. How bizarre.



DontPanic

24 August 2013 2:25pm

4

The Chinese will eat the lot, the rest they will dig up and refine, mostly shipped out of their Tanzanian port they are building.



ks009746

24 August 2013 3:54pm

3

Very sad indeed.

I went to the Mara in 08 (which, despite tourists being put off by the recent riots, was still considerably busy), and it ranks among my favourite places in the world. Endless herds of wildebeest, zebra and topi, along with all the big five, cheetahs, leopards, crocodiles, baboons, monitor lizards and various antelope species. Never in my life have I seen a landscape so devoid of negative human influence. It would be an absolute tragedy if that is lost.

The masai, though, seem to have a lot of respect for their ecosystem, which is more than can be said for some tourists (notably those that feed the wildlife or allow cheetahs to sit on their cars).



angelsoup

24 August 2013 10:01pm

If tourists are the cause of cheetah decline, as MacNara shows, it would be preferable, for the sake of the wildlife, to leave them be. But there is too much money at stake, the whole system, like all of our systems, has become dependent on it. It is reminiscent of the building going on here, destroying the countryside, the wildlife habitat etc. Can we find a way to meet our needs and respect/conservate nature. Where there is a will there is a way.



lemek

25 August 2013 3:04pm

2

This is a muddled and confusing article, which bears the hallmarks of bad editing. Lets start with the standfirst in the online version (yes I know, as an ex-journalist, this isnt written by the reporter but by subs): 'As lodges and shanty towns proliferate in Kenya's Masai Mara' - STOP there, there

are the human settlements situated in any of many so protected areas [PAs], national parks or, in this case, a game reserve, apart from the lodges and facilities for locals who service the lodges/tourists. So this is factually incorrect regarding 'shanty towns'. The author hasn't distinguished very clearly between the actual PAs, and the buffer zones or 'dispersal areas' around PAs in which wild animals can roam free (something like 80 per cent of all Kenya's wildlife lives OUTSIDE PAs, as they are not fenced, which leads to severe wildlife-human conflict in which locals like the Maasai suffer a great deal, e.g. elephants killing children on their way to school). Of course informal settlements will spring up in these localities, because the tourist industry attracts poor Kenyans seeking work, not just directly from the tourists but e.g. from the relatively affluent drivers/guides [usually non-Maasai, a bone of contention in Mara] who bring tourists here. These work-seekers include prostitutes. I didn't like the way they are implicitly stigmatised here, including the pic of 2 girls in a bar - they are just trying to earn a living, give them a break! THEY are not the problem!

I could go on. I know Mara well cos I did academic fieldwork nearby (outside the actual reserve) and have many friends in the area, including one of those quoted in the article. But let's just end with a word about cows, referred to disparagingly in the final par. Cows and Maasai cannot be separated, since those Maasai who are still practising pastoralism (not all are, livelihoods have diversified) rely totally on cattle and other small stock economically and for other reasons such as bridewealth; cows are the bedrock of the community and culture. Instead of blaming poor herders for grazing cows in a reserve created on land that was Maasai in the first place, something I believe they ARE allowed to do during severe drought, why not - as some lodges do, I think, in Laikipia - educate tourists about the importance and cultural significance of cows and Maasai husbandry? If tourists and visiting hacks/photographers want to gawp at Maasai, they should gawp at cows too, and not be surprised to see them there - where they belonged, and happily co-existed with wildlife, long before the tourists came along.



rohinirevati

26 August 2013 8:15am

1

I completely understand what the author is talking about - I have just returned from the Mara. It is wonderfully exhilarating but also tragic to see how tourism is destroying the Mara's habitat. Some of the tour guides behave abominably. At times, I thought the gnu were actually there to watch a herd of four wheeled things stampeding across the bush, not the other way around.

Many tourists also behave idiotically. I heard people making loud noises to get a cheetah and her cub to look into their cameras! My daughter and I picked up wads of napkins in the middle of nowhere in the Mara just because we couldn't bear to do nothing about the trash in the beautiful place.

Please, I appeal to tourists to do their little bit (whatever is in their control) to keep this paradise safe, clean and beautiful. This includes staying silent in the presence of wildlife, asking your guide to maintain the prescribed safe distance from wildlife if he is not doing so, and definitely NOT leaving your trash in the bush - carry it back with you! And do NOT obsess with the so called BIG 5 - Be happy with every experience you have in the bush and enjoy it. The BIG 5 is nothing but a marketing gimmick. There is really no fun in "spotting" a leopard or any other BIG 5 animal in the wild if you have 20 other mini vans around you.

But, it is one of the most beautiful experiences in the world. and I will be going back to experience it all over again next year.

2 PEOPLE, 3 COMMENTS



rohinirevati

26 August 2013 8:35am

Keekorok Lodge opened in 1962 on Downey's favourite camping site. It is a 200-bed behemoth with tarmac roads and a swimming pool.

I would like to add much more to this description of Keekorok Lodge. I stayed at Keekorok lodge 20 days ago. It charges USD 530 approx per night for a couple and child in a standard room. It boasts of several awards - Preferred Boutique Hotel, Merit certificates, Luxury Hotel Award etc. which are displayed prominently on its website and its reception. The photos on the internet are excellent and it seems comparable to any 5 star hotel in the world, which is what made us take the decision of choosing this one over several others.

Unfortunately, reality is very different. On two counts - the hotel overbooks and bumps guests off into accommodation that is cheaper than what the guests paid 100% for weeks in advance without informing the guests. This happened to us and we did not get a resolution during the 3 days we were

there. On raising the issue, we were offered a bottle of wine or a deck dinner (as if we travelled 1000s of km to the maasai mara to eat and drink).

Second, the rooms are disgustingly filthy. Major issues are yellow and black toilet bowls (yuck), filthy corners in the toilets with dirt visibly pooled there, filthy floors that turn black when a wet towel is rubbed on them (the brown colour of the tiles camouflages the dirt. We only happened to discover this when we split some water on the floor and used the bath mat to wipe it off) and filthy furniture surfaces - my finger turned black when I ran it across a bed rail.

These issues were raised with the GM and he was given a tour of his own property by us. Nothing was done to resolve these issues to our satisfaction and we left with the the feeling of having been cheated by their misrepresentation on the internet.

My advice - Stay away from Keekorok.



LBScotland ▶ rohinirevati

26 August 2013 9:37am

This isn't Trip Advisor.



rohinirevati ▶ LBScotland

26 August 2013 10:42am

This isn't Trip Advisor.

And you are not my keeper or the editor of this space. But, since you've added so much value to the discussion, thank you.

Comments for this discussion are now closed.

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