

NORTHERN POWERHOUSE

Tourism is key to the transformation of Kenya's northern rangelands, with communities driving efforts to protect elephant, black rhino and other endangered species →

BY **RUPI MANGAT**



A guarded view:
Guests at Elewana Lewa Safari Camp on a walk to see white rhino on the Lewa-Borana estate. Lewa Wildlife Conservancy's success was the catalyst for the establishment of the Northern Rangelands Trust

ELEWANA COLLECTION

There are few more remarkable wildlife conservation stories than that taking place in Kenya's northern frontiers, home to the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), an initiative embraced by 39 community conservancies covering an area of some 42,000 sq km – and there's a waiting-list of many more, stretching as far as the coast.

Until the 1990s, the only protected area in this part of Kenya was the 530sq km Samburu-Shaba-Buffalo Springs National Reserve straddling the Ewaso Nyiro River. The rest was open ground. Black rhino that were common here up to the 1970s were largely exterminated by poachers within a couple of decades.

At the height of the poaching in the 1980s, an unusual request was placed at the privately-owned Lewa Downs by Anna Mertz, a guest of the Craig family. She asked if they would set aside some land as a rhino sanctuary. Kenya's black rhinos were on the verge of extinction, down from 20,000 in the 1970s to fewer than 300 by the 1980s.

Just over 2000 hectares were set aside for Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary. By 1988, it had 16 rhino, including new births that required the sanctuary to be doubled in size.

"If this can be done on Lewa," said Ian Craig, "why can't it happen elsewhere?" It was the catalyst for supporting indigenous communities to establish wildlife conservancies on their land throughout the region, in order to reap the benefits from the protection of wildlife and habitats. In 2004 these were brought together under the umbrella of the NRT. Lewa Downs became the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site – today it protects 169 rhinos (14 per cent of the country's entire rhino population) on 93,000 acres of land shared with the neighbouring privately-owned Borana Conservancy.

Set in Laikipia's most stunning and rugged scenery, with Mount Kenya as a backdrop to the south, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy houses the offices of the NRT. It's a hive of activity. From mud-plastered straw-thatched offices, elephants are monitored constantly on a large-screen Google Earth map, with signals received every hour from around 30 – mostly matriarchs and big bulls – fitted with satellite collars.

This surveillance is invaluable. The 24-hour vigilance is complimented by infra-red cameras focused on a gap between Lewa and Leparua conservancies, capturing anything that moves →



NRT IN NUMBERS (2019)

42,000 sq km

39 member conservancies

18 ethnic groups

US\$1.3 million in tourism revenues to conservancies

US\$3 million dispersed through NRT Conservancy Livelihood Fund (CLF) since 2015

68,600 people benefitted from development projects through the CLF

3000 students received bursaries through their conservancies

96% drop in the number of elephants killed for ivory in NRT member conservancies since 2012

1,309 permanent employees between the NRT and community conservancies

Keeping record:

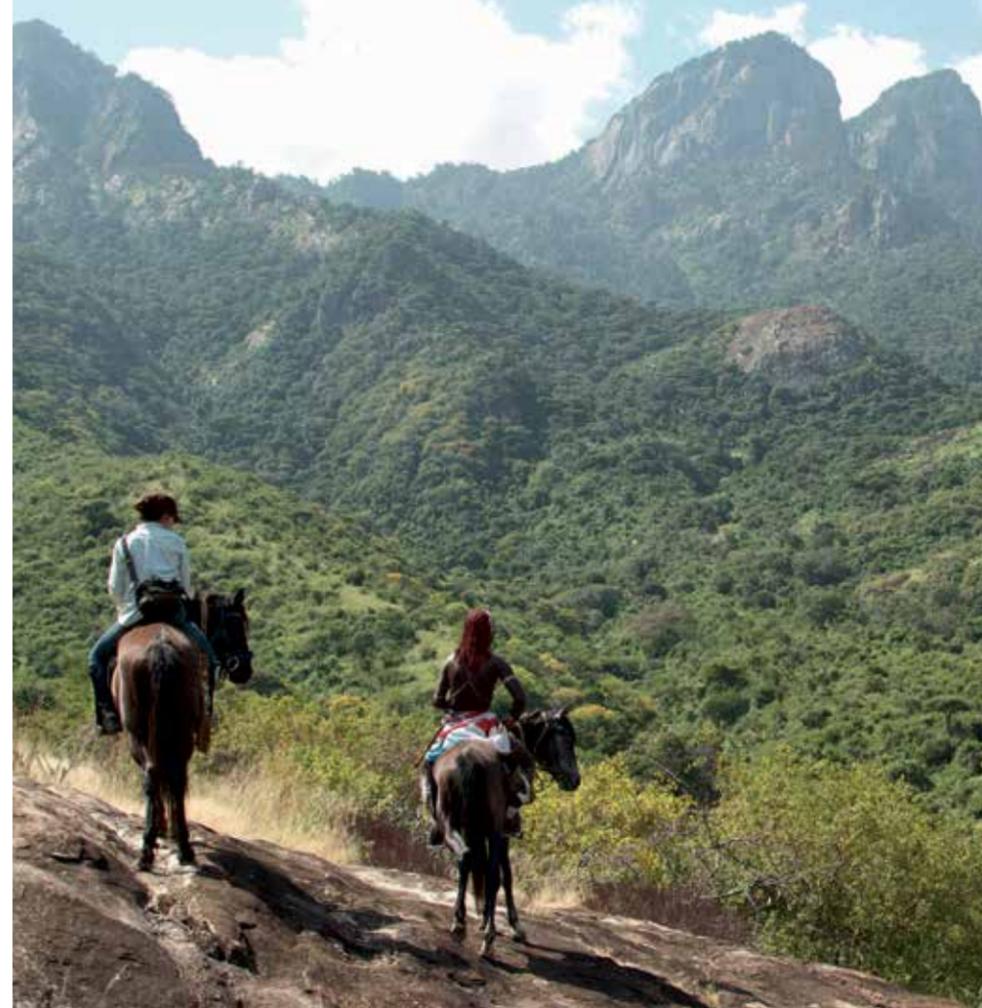
A ranger from Nakuprat-Gotu Community Conservancy fills in a wildlife data sheet while out on patrol

Opposite, top:

Tourism operators within the NRT include Sarara, in the community-owned Namunyak Wildlife Conservancy in the Mathews Range; and the Loisaba Conservancy, purchased by The Nature Conservancy in partnership with Space For Giants



MARIELLA FURBER / NORTHERN RANGELANDS TRUST



LEFT: SARARA. RIGHT: ELEWANA COLLECTION (ELEWANA LOISABA)



The Northern Rangelands protects several species characteristic of the arid north, including **reticulated giraffe**, **Beisa oryx**, **gerenuk** and **Somali ostrich**. Under the protection of the local community, the population of the critically endangered **hirola** has grown by 160 per cent since 2012. Lewa boasts the world's single largest population (450) of the endangered **Grevy's zebra** (pictured).

MARTIN BUZORA / LEWA WILDLIFE CONSERVANCY

between them. A low wall keeps the rhinos in, but allows elephants and other wildlife to migrate between the conservancies and beyond. There's also a 15-foot-wide concrete tunnel under the main road by the Isiolo/Nanyuki-Meru junction. Motorists speeding along the highway are unaware of the elephants crossing beneath to reach the forests of Mount Kenya's foothills.

The conservancies that make up the NRT are a veritable powerhouse. Revenue from tourism and community businesses is reinvested in schools, bursaries, medical health facilities and support for women selling jewellery and other NRT Trading-branded gifts.

In 2018, tourism revenue in NRT conservancies was the highest on record, with Ksh86 million (US\$775,000) earned through tourist accommodation and conservation fees – an increase of 31 per cent from the year before, and constituting about half of all commercial income. Of course, tourism revenue has been decimated in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A drop in tourism activity is not the only challenge that faces community conservancies going forward. These range from human-wildlife conflict over shared resources and the impacts of climate change, to large scale projects like LAPSSSET (Lamu Port, South Sudan, Ethiopia Transport), which includes infrastructural developments that cut through community rangelands.

For now, however, it's reassuring to see the elephants reclaiming the northern lands where they had been virtually wiped out by poachers by 1978. When communities started protecting the elephants, the world's largest land mammal returned. 🐘

NRT is supported by principal donors The United States Agency for International Development, The Nature Conservancy, The Danish International Development Agency, The European Union and others.



SARUNI LODGES

Top: Saruni Lodges offer the only on-foot rhino tracking experience in East Africa from its Saruni Rhino Lodge (pictured far left)

Middle: A hand-reared black rhino, Loijipu, takes a bath under the watch of a keeper. The calf is starting his journey back into the wild at Sera Community Conservancy

Bottom: NRT's Peace Coordinator Josphine Ekiru holds a peace meeting with women in Sera Community Conservancy

*The 300,000-hectare **Sera Community Conservancy** boasts the Sera Rhino Sanctuary, established in 2015. It is the first community conservancy in East Africa to operate a sanctuary dedicated to the conservation of black rhino, and through a partnership with Saruni Lodges had generated US\$150,000 in revenue at the end of 2019.*



MARIELLA FLURBER / NORTHERN RANGELANDS TRUST (3)

WHY CONSERVANCIES MATTER

Over the last few decades rural communities have increasingly diversified to include wildlife tourism as a means of economic upliftment. Not only has this had a marked effect on attitudes towards wildlife, but the conservancy network is now critical to the conservation of our natural resources. By **Dickson Kaelo** and **Joyce Mbataru**

Conservancies are private-or community-owned areas established to safeguard wildlife and allow the owners to derive benefit from these natural resources. In Kenya, they were officially recognised by the Wildlife Act of 2013, and they now represent over six million hectares – roughly 11 per cent of Kenya's total land area, complementing national parks and reserves by extending the area under protection.

With more than 60 per cent of Kenya's wildlife found outside state-protected areas, conservancies play a critical role in conserving and reversing wildlife declines. They host 22 per cent of Kenya's ungulate biomass and represent 18 of the 20 zones with the highest density of wildlife.

Since the emergence of the first conservancies in the 1970s, they have grown in number and their institutional complexity has broadened beyond wildlife conservation and tourism, to include peace and security,

livestock and natural resources management. More recently, they have proven impactful as platforms for securing rural livelihoods, developing social infrastructure, promoting peaceful co-existence and building resilience to environmental traumas.

Ecotourism has been key to their success, creating employment and driving rural development, thus contributing to poverty alleviation. Eighty per cent of the total number of safari-goers to Kenya have been concentrated in just seven of the country's 26 national parks and reserves, with the rest focused on conservancies. They provide further options for tourists, easing pressure on the most popular ecosystems such as the Maasai Mara or Amboseli and attracting travellers into areas previously not accessible. About 2510 beds are available in lodges within conservancies, helping to boost the country's tourist capacity.

Importantly, conservancies have helped to diversify the tourist offering, allowing

visitors to interact with local communities, learn more about the natural landscapes from those who live closest to wildlife, and enjoy a wider range of adventure experiences.

The benefits are far-reaching. More critical habitats are preserved through the conservation fees paid by tourists. Jobs are created in rural areas where there are few other economic options, and development takes place where government services do not reach. Tourism often comes with land-leasing, revenue-sharing agreements or philanthropy, notably through the provision of bursaries to support education (especially of girls), water and health-related services.

Tourism also has a multiplier effect, with other local businesses benefitting. Nature-based tourism thrives on a value chain directly dependent on local agriculture, agroindustry, transport and other specialised services. For many of the poorer and more vulnerable communities, revenue from conservancies may be their only drought-proof source of income.

Of course, tourism only occurs where security is guaranteed, so communities are aware of the improved security provided by the likes of community rangers, Kenya Wildlife Service, the presence of tourism police or through extra government security in sensitive areas.

And yet conservancies account for a meagre 1.3 per cent of total tourism earnings, suggesting there is considerable opportunity for expansion, especially in a high-value, low-volume tourism model. Many of Kenya's conservancies have yet to tap into their ecotourism potential effectively, and it is clear there is a need for a unified marketing effort now that travel is resuming, following the relaxation of social distancing rules and the emergence of Covid vaccines. Small, remote facilities are likely to be the first to attract travellers, and this will benefit conservancies. Without tourism, conservancies rely on grants from charities and conservation organisations, which is not sustainable.

Conservancies are important players in the effort to combat biodiversity loss and climate change. By adopting conservation as a land use, the diversity of flora and fauna grows, while the impacts from unsustainable land use practices – such as charcoal burning, removal of soil biomass and deforestation – reduces, making it possible for the earth to heal itself. Humans rely on a healthy environment, and we owe it to future generations to conserve it.

Dickson Kaelo and Joyce Mbataru are from the Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association (kwcakenya.com).