Nature conservation areas in Kenya - Tsavo East and West National Parks

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Introduction

This report contains a summary description of wildlife conservation in Kenya. It focuses more precisely on the two Tsavo East and Tsavo West National Parks, which form a remarkable part of the total area conserved in Kenya. Only the national parks on the African continent are discussed, although there are many marine national parks in Kenya as well.

Information about national parks and reserves has been collected from various Internet pages, some of those being old and not updated recently. There is also seldom a reference to the time when the web pages are updated. Because most of the sites are also to promote tourism, their content should be read carefully.

Nature conservation areas in general

It is possible to establish a national park or reserve (both named later as parks) on any type of land. The permission must be applied for from the appropriate district authority or the National Assembly. In the national reserves it is, in certain conditions, also allowed to use the land for other purposes than nature conservation. The parks are managed by a national organisation called Kenyan Wildlife Service (KWF). They are administered by the local authority, but staffed by national parks staff (Parks and reserves legislation 2003).

History of legislation and establishing of parks

During the colonial time, Kenya was very much a free ground to take what so ever the British Empire needed. Industry started to abuse all the reasonable deposits and stocks. Hunters were hunting wildlife and restrictions for white men were quite close to zero. Part of the well being of the British Commonwealth was due to natural resources and wealth of the colonies. The legislation of nature conservation began to develop in 1945 in Kenya with National Park Ordinance. This and the Wild Animal Protection Ordinance of 1953 were not very effective. In 1976, the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act replaced the former ordinances and started to create changes in conservation policies. The 1976 act was also unable to achieve efficient conservation measures. Reforms were made mostly in policies and legislation but there were no major impact on the real world. Credit to the act was that wildlife and natural resources were mentioned to have relevant economical potential (Kelvin 2001).

In 1989, when the weaknesses of existing legislation were finally realized, the KWS was established by a new act. KWS replaced all the former conservation-aimed organisations and it was secured to have a more independent position on its own field. In 1994, KWS imposed a five-person review group to solve public opinion on human-wildlife conflict. Report of the group and four other more technical studies led to a new wildlife policy strategy in 1996. The strategy introduced new formulations. For example, instead of the word wildlife, biodiversity was used, since the aim was to widen the field of conservation. It was also stated that more actors have to be involved in evaluation of use and managing of the conservation areas (Kelvin 2001).
The measures and objectives of the strategy seem to be proper and acceptable. Problems might arise when trying to adapt the strategy into practice. The jargon of strategy may not open to normal people and it may cause a lot of dispute when enforcing new ideas.

The first area conserved in Kenya was the Kagamega rain forest, which was realized to have unique species and a vital role in the Kenyan eco-system. It has been protected since 1933 (Kenya... 2003). It received the status of national reserve only in 1985.

Table 1 presents the opening years of Kenyan parks. The year mentioned is the one when the park got its status of national park or reserve and was opened for tourism. It does not express when conservation measures were started. The first Kenyan national parks were established in the end on 1940s. Another period of establishing parks occurred in the shift of 1960s and 1970s. 1980s increased the number of official conservation sites. Today, tourists have more than 15 parks to visit (Figure 1).

Nature conservation statistics

The number of conservation areas and information about their size varies greatly depending on the source of data. The reason might be that there are lot of differently named conservation areas and, therefore, the amount of areas depends on which types of areas are counted in. Some count in only the national parks and reserves, some in addition to those count also so-called ranches. Ranches may be privately or communally owned. In the following section there are some varying numeric data about conservation areas from two different sources. Both sources are government sources.

According to KWS there are 31 national parks or reserves in Kenya (Figure 2). Two largest are Tsavo East and Tsavo West National Parks. Together they form an area of approximately 21 000 km², which covers 48% of all conserved areas (Land use in Kenya 2002). The Land use in Kenya (2002) report, published by Kenya Land Alliance claims that there were 50 conservation areas in 1998. In addition to national parks and reserves, they have also included 25 other community-based privately owned parks. All the areas result in an area of 44 600 km², which means 7.5% of total Kenyan land area. Most of the areas are quite small in size, but they still tend to cover a complete ecosystem.

The amount of privately owned community-based parks or ranches has sprung up lately, remarkably reaching 25 areas in 1999. The importance of these areas is mostly to protect only a couple of specific different species.
Owing to diverse conservation strategies, the number of wildlife conserved has increased but populations have been diminishing (Land use in Kenya 2002).

The major threat to wildlife conservation areas is human. The intense population growth sets pressure to bring into use more and more agriculture and forestlands. Conflicts between humans and wildlife occur when wildlife invade farmlands and destroy crops. The biggest risk is human settlements close to conservation areas. Also poaching is still a big problem. For example between 1989 and 1994 poaching actually caused 40% of deaths of the elephants.

National parks of Tsavo

In addition to the aforementioned notable share of the area, the Tsavo national parks were also among the first ones opened (Table 1). Both parks were opened in April 1948.

Tsavo East National Park

Tsavo East National Park is the largest in area of Kenya’s national parks (Figure 3). It covers an area of about 12 000 km² (for comparison Uusimaa province in Finland is approximately 6 300 km² in size). In such a vast area the elevation differences are easily understandable. The park lies between 150 meters and 1 200 meters above sea level (Tsavo east… 2003).

Tsavo East is located in semi-arid plains at the eastern edge of the inland plateau. It is situated north of the Nairobi-Mombasa road and railroad about 300 km southeast from Nairobi. It belongs to the Taita Taveta district (Parks and reserves 2003).

The vegetation cover varies a lot in the large park. There are open plains alternating from grasslands and savannah bush land to semi-arid acacia scrub and woodlands. The vegetation is generally denser in the western part of the park where the annual rainfall is around 450 mm. In the east part, the annual rainfall is about 350 mm. The most vegetated areas, woodland and thickets, are found along the rivers that cross the park. The southernmost parts of the park, south of river Galana, are mostly open bushed grassland. Climate is the major contribution to vegetation. There are two rainy seasons per year, which take place from March to May and from October to December. The spring rains are more intense than the winter rains (Parks and reserves 2003; Tsavo east… 2003).

The parks most remarkable nature elements are the Yatta plateau, Mudanda Rock and the confluence of rivers Tsavo and Athi. The 290 km long Yatta plateau is one of the longest lava flows in the world. The one and half kilometres long Mudanda rock outcrop forms a natural dam at the base of the plateau. Animals use the water body formed by the dam as a waterhole. The rivers Tsavo and Athi form the Galana River when they join. Major animal attractions are the large herds of elephants and the popular legend of “man-eaters of Tsavo” lions (Parks and reserves 2003).

To the north of the park lies the South Kitui National Reserve, which was opened in 1979 (Tsavo east… 2003). The smallest reserve in the area is Ngai Ndeitya National Reserve.

Tsavo West National Park

Being 9 000 km² in size, Tsavo West National Park is slightly smaller than Tsavo East, but still the second largest in Kenya. It lies on the western side of Tsavo East (Figure 3). It forms an arc around Taita Hills in the north and west (Figure 4). In the south it extends all the way to the border of Tanzania. On the Tanzanian side the park is connected by several hundred kilometres to Mkomazi Game Reserve. The
The park lies between 150 meters and 1800 meters above sea level. The Voi-Taveta main road runs across the park. (Tsavo west… 2003).

The vegetation of Tsavo West is mostly bushland with scattered trees in the north. In the south the vegetation changes to open grass plains. Forest covers the hills reaching 1800 meters in Ngulia area. At the river Tsavo running from west to east there is also a narrow forest belt. Around Lake Jipe close to the Tanzanian border there are large permanent swamps. Due to great altitude changes the rainfall also varies within the park. Annual rainfall is between 200 and 700 mm (Parks and reserves 2003).

The major attractions of the park are lava flows and caves of the recent volcanoes, which form a great potential for geological exploration. Another tourist attraction is Lake Jipe. Mount Kilimanjaro on the Tanzanian side is also visible from the park on clear days. There is also an underwater hippo-watching place close to Mzima. In addition to hippos, there are a large amount of elephants and rhinos in the park (Parks and reserves 2003).

The Chyulu Hills National Park makes an extension of Tsavo West National Park in the north. The Chyulu Hills form a volcanic mountain range with a mixture of volcanic cones and barren lava flows. There is no ground water available in the hills and therefore it forms an important water catchment area (Tsavo west… 2003).

In addition to the parks maintained by KWS, there are also private parks conservation and reserve areas in the Taita Taveta district. Connected to the Tsavo West National Park is LUMO game reserve (Figure 5), which is based on community ownership. The Hilton hotel chain also owns a reserve south of the Taita Hills.

**Conclusions**

Before the new legislation made in 1989, the nature conservation measures in Kenya have been disorganised because of the division of different activities between different actors and the non-clarity of the upper management. Nowadays the management and maintenance of the conservation areas is concentrated into the Kenya Wildlife Service.

The KWS paints a rosy picture of its conservation measures on its web pages. The control of the parks and reserves has tightened and one active operator-system has unified the management of the parks.

Tourism is a two-bladed sword to conservation. The added volume of tourists is against the conservation targets, but brings funds for the continuation of the conservation. African nature is unique. In order to give peace for the nature, the restrictions of visitors and their movement should be planned carefully.

Human actions are the worst threat to conservation sites. Humans act consciously, like poaching, and unconsciously under duress for example when clearing forests to agricultural land for growing population. There are still lot of untouched areas in Kenya, which encourages taking advantage of some of those for conservation and tourism. However, the human pressure to the same areas is growing all the time. Hopefully the sustainable development between human population, tourism and conservation can be found in Kenya.

Tourism and nature conservation measures in Kenya have been brought to the same side, fighting against the erosion and destruction of nature. The challenge of the future is to keep these actors on same side so that the tourism will not become a destructive actor acting against conservation.
Figure 5. Elephants in the LUMO conservation area (P. Pellikka).

References


