

kenya's wildlife woes



'Bring back trophy hunting and problem solved!' That's what the hunting fraternity says in response to Kenya's declining animal populations. Not so, replies **Ian Michler**, not only refuting the argument, but propounding far more plausible reasons for the country's shocking loss of wildlife.



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It is widely accepted that Kenya has lost a sizeable percentage of its wildlife, particularly the large mammal species, over the past few decades. Numerous reports substantiate this view, including one commissioned by the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) in 2008; most indicate that the declines are as prevalent within national parks and reserves as they are in the group ranches and community lands outside the protected areas. All the surveys state that, depending on the species, the losses are between 40 and 60 per cent of the country's animal populations.

Few deny the veracity of these appalling statistics; many have put forward opposing explanations for them. One opinion, being peddled by the trophy-hunting fraternity, is that the primary cause is the national moratorium placed on hunting in 1977. It's based on the same old justification: a financial value – or trophy fee – on the head or horns of a species is crucial to securing its conservation status. Moreover, say the hunters, their presence in the field is the perfect anti-poaching measure. They argue their case as if it is common knowledge that bringing back hunting would result in the return of the animals.

This line of thinking needs to be challenged. Even the slightest investigation shows it to be spurious: there is little or no correlation between the loss of wildlife and the moratorium on hunting. Look at Tanzania, where the trophy-hunting industry controls more than 90 per cent of the concessions in the Selous Game Reserve. It is widely reported – by the respected Environmental Investigation Agency, among others – that at least 50 elephants are killed every day for their ivory. In Zambia, the national conservation authority, ZAWA, considers

poaching to be a serious threat to the future of ecotourism – and it goes on while trophy hunters operate along the borders of most national parks. So much for the presence of the hunting industry preventing poaching in these countries.

Kenya's wildlife is in trouble as a result of the same economic and socio-political factors that hold sway across most of the continent. It is no coincidence that the serious declines began at about the same time that Daniel arap Moi came to power in 1978. Until forced out in 2002, he stood at the helm of what many believe was one of Africa's most corrupt and inefficient governments. Hundreds of millions of dollars in tax and aid funds were siphoned off, while a bloated bureaucracy was created and the country's infrastructure crumbled.

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The rot had severe repercussions for the wildlife and environmental services and, although Moi has gone, the present government continues to under-perform.

During Moi's rule, Kenya slumped from being a middle-income to a low-income economy, in which between 42 and 50 per cent of the population now lives below the national poverty line. To make matters worse, UNICEF statistics show that the country's population has grown from about 15 million in 1978 to 38.7 million in 2008, which means that an additional 23.7 million people are scrapping for resources in an economy that in real

Long famed as a wildlife destination, Kenya is in fact losing the animal populations on which its reputation is based.

terms has stagnated. Three-quarters of these people live in rural areas, most of which are classified as arid or semi-arid. It is hardly surprising, then, that the competition for space between humans and wildlife has become intense.

But this obvious pressure on wildlife tells only half the story; neglecting to adapt land-use models to fast-changing demographics has also played a damaging role. The creation of mostly small protected areas that are surrounded by rural communities and their livestock has put a stop to most of the seasonal wildlife migrations – and in doing so has all but strangled the parks and reserves. Poaching has become easy, habitat management is fragmented and droughts cause havoc. Amboseli National Park, for example, lost approximately 70 per cent of its biomass during the most recent prolonged dry spell.

Throw in a host of other issues – the poor record of the KWS, turf wars between conservationists, the inequitable allocation of tourism benefits to communities, and the lack of environmental awareness among mass-market tourism operators – and it becomes clear why Kenya is losing its wildlife.

Reintroducing trophy hunting would merely exacerbate the decline. ■

Read about efforts to protect Kenya's wildlife in 'Growing plains' on page 54. You can also keep up with the environmental issues of the day by following Ian's blog at www.africageographic.com/blogs/?cat=5