

## The future of conservation in Kenya

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The bejewelled and feather-dressed Samburu tribesmen must have laughed all the way home when Italian journalist Riccardo Orizio gathered them together a decade ago and told them of his plans to turn a couple of lumpy granite outcrops in the heart of Samburu country into a luxury game lodge overlooking the searing, acacia-speckled plains of northern Kenya.



The conservation effort at Kenya's Lewa Wildlife Conservancy uses the latest technology, such as this ranger tracking lions. (Stuart Butler)

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Several years and one luxury lodge later, nobody is laughing. The Saruni Samburu Lodge is so perfectly designed that its permanent tents virtually meld into the rocky bluff on which it is located. And these tents have stone bath tubs, open-air showers, terraces, designer furnishings, heavenly beds and views overlooking a little-visited corner of the northern savannah lands that are quite simply out of this world.

For many years conservation -- and safaris -- in Kenya meant visiting one of the nation's famous government-run national parks or reserves, such as Amboseli National Park and the Masai Mara National Reserve. Saruni Samburu, though, sits in the middle of the 384sqkm community-owned and -managed Kalama Community Wildlife Conservancy, one of a growing number of privately-owned wildlife reserves in Kenya.

According to the Kenya Wildlife Service, up to 70% of Kenya's wildlife lives outside of the protection of the national parks and reserves. So many people believe that the future of conservation in Kenya lies in this new breed of private reserves -- there are at least 15 such conservancies in north Kenya alone. Some of these, such as Kalama, are owned by the local community and are located on former communal cattle grazing land. Others are owned by private individuals and are often located on former cattle ranches. Together they are changing the face of conservation and tourism in Kenya.

Such protected land is not just good news for wildlife though; they are also bringing about huge benefits to local people. The land on which these reserves lie was often used for livestock grazing. In the past, wildlife was seen mainly as a nuisance and a danger, but over time people realised that wildlife could attract foreign tourists, which in turn translated into dollars for the community. Investors such as Orizo, who were willing to construct luxury tourist lodges, were needed to build the essential infrastructure. Much of the money generated through tourism is pumped straight back into the community, which means that the locals have a vested interest in the survival of wildlife on their lands -- a fact that is not always true in the state-run national parks and reserves. The final icing on the cake is that tourist numbers are generally limited to the capacity of one or two lodges -- meaning wildlife watching is undisturbed by streams of other safari vehicles.

One of the first, and certainly one of the finest examples of this kind of community-based conservation is found just a short way to the south of Kalama, at the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (LWC). Although Lewa has luxury lodges, stunning scenery, astounding wildlife and has hosted Prince William, they would rather focus on their community and conservation projects. Founded in 1995, LWC is a non-profit organisation that relies on tourism-generated money and donations. Today it has an annual operating budget of around \$2.5 million, about 70% of which is ploughed directly back into healthcare, education and various community projects for the surrounding villages, while the rest funds further conservation and security projects.

The conservation effort at Lewa -- which is a mixture of classic habitat preservation, stringent security measures (the rhinos have their own security guards at all times) and the use of the latest technology to enhance the knowledge of a species and its breeding patterns -- has been astounding. And 20% of the world's Grevy's zebras, 12% of Kenya's black rhinos, a rare population of aquatic sitatunga antelope and sizeable populations of white rhinos, elephants and buffalos thrive here. Of the predators, there are small but growing populations of leopards and lions. Lewa has been so successful that it is being used as a model for private conservation throughout East Africa. For a visitor this means not just the near-guaranteed opportunity to see all the "big five" (lion, buffalo, elephant, rhino and leopard), but that joy also comes with the knowledge that your money is helping the local community.

Lewa might be one of Kenya's finest wildlife viewing areas and Kalama might offer one of the most luxurious and chic safaris, but for a true East African wilderness experience look no further than Kitich Camp in the Matthews Mountain range. These dramatic mountain slopes, which rise up out of the semi-desert to the north of Kalama and Lewa, are carpeted in misty forests and support a wealth of wildlife,

including elephants, lions, buffalos and what might be Kenya's largest wild dog population. The mountains fall under the protection of the Namunyak Wildlife Conservation Trust, another community-run conservation area that was established in 1995 by the mountains' Samburu people. Today, it is one of Kenya's most successful community conservation programs and this accomplishment has seen animal populations rise dramatically. It acts as a vital corridor for elephants migrating across barren northern Kenya and it is one of the few places in the country where wild dog populations and Grevy's zebra are increasing.. And the Kitich Camp itself is arguably the most remote camp in Kenya; staying here is a true wild Africa experience. Elephants pass through almost daily -- coming so close to your tent at night that you can hear them breathing -- and passing lions are not unheard of either.

With private conservancies starting to pop up all across Kenya, the Samburu, Maasai and other pastoralist communities are laughing again. This time though, it is due to the joy that they have finally found a way of combining their traditional lifestyle, conservation and the demands of the modern world into one happy, wildlife-filled bundle.