Nairobi National Park: A Viable Conservation Area?

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Nairobi National Park (NNP) was established as Kenya’s first national park in 1946. It is unique compared to all other national parks in the world in that it is located within a half an hour’s drive from the capital city’s downtown area (Morell, 1996). This special feature of NNP, beyond making it unique, poses many difficult issues. Nairobi City is a major metropolis whose population is growing at an accelerated rate. The protected area of NNP is a mere 100 square km, while the surrounding (unprotected) dispersal area utilized by migrating wildlife is approximately 1000 square km. This dispersal area is owned by group ranches and private land owners (Western, 1997). As the metropolis of Nairobi continues to expand, these dispersal areas are progressively developed for agricultural fields, residential neighborhoods, and various business and industrial enterprises. This poses a grave threat to the wildlife of NNP.

The biggest threat to a wildlife species’ survival is habitat loss, which is most often facilitated by increased human population and encroachment (Morell, 1996). Expanding human populations insinuate a number of consequences, and these consequences are no exception in the case of Nairobi. To begin, it means increased agriculture in the area. Starting in the 1980’s, wildlife dispersal areas adjacent to NNP have been cultivated. The original landowners, the Maasai, are selling or leasing their land to farmers who wish to capitalize on the agricultural potential of this fertile land – particularly the Athi-Kapiti Plains, or Kitengala district (Morell, 1996). The Athi Plains are an essential component to the NNP ecosystem as they serve as the only open corridor for migrating wildlife, which utilize them for wet season grazing pasture. These open plains lie south of the park, while the west, north, and east sides of the park are fenced to keep wildlife out of Nairobi City and off the Mombasa Highway (Western, 1997).

Here we see further consequences of human encroachment. The Kitengala dispersal area has essentially become the lifeline for the wildlife of NNP. Migrating corridors are absolutely necessary for the success of wildlife in semi-arid lands (Harris, 1997). Due to urban development in Nairobi, including the major Mombasa roadway which supplies this city, the wildlife dispersal zones have been reduced down to the southern Athi Plains. Today, this dispersal corridor of NNP is under the threat of development, both to farms and to quarries.

Quarries are another result of urban development and human population increase. Quarries surrounding Nairobi City supply it with building materials for its ever-multiplying residential and industrial structures. The Kitengala dispersal area is littered with quarries. Workers flock to this area, dynamite explodes, pastures are removed, the ground is torn up, and trucks and machines constantly drive in and out. The Kitengala dispersal zone is becoming increasingly unsuitable for grazing wildlife. These quarries further threaten to isolate the migrating wildlife of NNP from their wet season grazing pastures (Western 1997).

The Kitengala area is a small-scale example of issues associated with urbanization within close vicinity to a national park (as seen with Nairobi City). Unfortunately, this small-scale example is becoming bigger. The town of Kitengala has grown by 800 percent in the last three years. This means greater human encroachment, bringing urban developments, factories, residential structures, fences, vehicles, water and air pollution, trash, and other serious alterations to the physical environment. These alterations further threaten to displace wildlife and destroy habitats (Harris, 1997).

The effects of urbanization and industrialization on nearby national parks such as is the case with NNP are far reaching and serious. NNP stands to protect wildlife and wildlife habitats. This is becoming increasingly difficult as Nairobi City attracts more people and more businesses. We see populations in surrounding towns growing, such as in Kitengala. This means more urban sprawl and less land left open for dispersing wildlife. Urbanization translates for wildlife as loss and degradation of wildlife habitats. This occurs through diversion and pollution of water sources, removal of grazing areas, and disruption to migratory corridors. The overall, long term effect of this urban sprawl is the fragmentation and insularization of wildlife populations, which can lead to their endemism or extinction (Harris, 1997).
Another problem associated with growing human populations near wildlife protected areas is the conflicts that arise between the humans and the animals themselves. As in the case of NNP, these conflicts increase proportionately with human encroachment. To agriculturalists and pastoralists, migrating wildlife are viewed as a real nuisance. They destroy crops, destroy structures, and carry diseases that are passed to livestock. Wild predators will kill livestock and even pose a threat to humans (Campbell, 2000). Residents living near wildlife protected areas are helpless in terms of effectively eliminating these 'nuisances' due to the KWS' hunting ban. Unfortunately, although many initiatives have been proposed, there is no compensation to these residents for damage caused by wildlife except in the case of a loss of life (KWS, 1994). Humans pose a threat to wildlife as well, beyond encroaching upon and destroying their habitats. Illegal poaching and hunting are commonplace, and NNP and its dispersal areas are no exception.

The human/wildlife conflict within NNP and its dispersal areas is a serious and prevalent issue. It is the local people who suffer the economic and personal losses associated with wildlife damage—losses which happen often. Some residents argue that the government cares for wildlife more than people due to their apparent inaction in dealing with this recurring conflict (KWS, 1994). Unfortunately, this story is not a new one. The human/wildlife conflict is an issue among many of the national parks and their surrounding residents throughout Kenya. Finding an effective solution proves to be a very difficult task, especially when considering all involved parties and their respective interests.

It is in the interests of the international community as well as the Kenyan government and their national parks to conserve and protect wildlife. Tourism is the top revenue-generating industry in Kenya, and the government receives much of this profit. However, the Kenyan government is also an advocate of agricultural expansion, for the revenue it generates and for its reputation as a modernizing force (Round-Turner, 1997). Herein lays a major conflict of interest. Agricultural development is a major cause of wildlife habitat destruction and therefore a direct threat to wildlife protection. Furthermore, agricultural farms are among the most prevalent locations for human/wildlife conflicts to occur.

It is in the interests of the local communities to sustain themselves and their families, and if possible to generate revenue. Income is often achieved through cultivation. However, agricultural fields are not in the interest of wildlife, as is exemplified with the wildlife of NNP. Wildlife interests conflict with the farmers, especially when wildlife damage these farmers' crops and cost them precious food and money. Another way the local communities surrounding NNP may generate revenue is by leasing or selling their land for agriculture, development, or quarries. All these things, while meeting the interests of the local people, do not serve the interests of NNP. While many politicians and businessmen would like to see these areas further developed, this is a direct threat to the conservation of wildlife. Clearly there are many conflicts of interests involved when it comes to preserving the wildlife of NNP and their habitats.

Various initiatives have been implemented to try to mitigate the issues associated with NNP, its dispersal areas, and its surrounding communities. KWS is working with many of the Maasai communities in an attempt to preserve the critical Kitengala dispersal area for wildlife. Some land has been purchased from the Maasai to be maintained for wildlife preservation. Live leases for this same purpose have been initiated as an alternative to the Maasai selling their land. Easements have also been implemented on some of the Maasai's land, with their cooperation. This restricts land-use activity to only those conducive with wildlife preservation and in return the land owners receive a small payment (NNP warden, personal communication).

Other possible solutions are community participation initiatives and programs that help involve communities in wildlife conservation. This can begin with educating the local communities about wildlife management and ecotourism ventures. In the case of NNP, natural resource management techniques within urban settings would also be a useful educational tool.

Involving the local communities allows for a more integrated, bottom-up approach to wildlife conservation without isolating the very people that are forced to co-exist with these animals. It further allows these communities to benefit from wildlife, as opposed to suffering with it. Initiatives such as this have already begun, as is exemplified by the Kitengala Landowners Association. This is a group of landowners in the Kitengala area that have joined together in a resolve to preserve their land for wildlife (Western, 1997).

On a final note, there are always sustainable development initiatives that can work to create a more ecologically friendly urban setting. I believe this is very important in the face of an increasingly developing country such as Kenya. There doesn't seem to be a feasible way around urbanization given the many interests involved. If these urban areas could be developed sustainably, particularly with wildlife conservation in mind, they may not pose such a threat to wildlife and their habitats. In any case, steps must be
taken immediately if the NNP ecosystem is to remain a viable protection area for wildlife. These initiatives should include benefits to the local communities, preserving the Kitenga dispersal area, and meeting the interests of developers in a sustainable way.

This assignment was a final term paper on Nairobi National Park (NNP) and the issues associated with this conservation institution. Research used in this paper, outside of what I referenced, was acquired during my visits to NNP and time spent in Nairobi City and the town of Kitengala. I also used knowledge supplemented during my studies at the Center for Wildlife Management, particularly information gained from my Wildlife Management Techniques course.

REFERENCES


