

The Mara Naboisho Conservancy: A step towards reaching sustainable development in Kenya

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Introduction

Mara Naboisho is a conservatory in Kenya that aims to preserve the diverse wildlife and support the local communities by providing income opportunities through tourism and management of large areas of land (Bedelian, 2012). The Mara Naboisho is a 50 000-acre wildlife corridor that connects the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya and the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. Over 40% of the world's big mammals including wildebeest, elephants, lions, rhinos, cheetahs, and giraffes are dependent on this area, partly because this is where “the great migration” takes place. The great migration is a big yearly animal migration that has been going on for thousands of years and is crucial to the animals because it provides access to vital resources, breeding grounds, and reduced risk of predation (Ojwan et al., 2017). Without the Mara Naboisho conservatory, wildlife is highly endangered, and many big mammals will be threatened with extinction (Hatfield, 2013). This is avoided by an agreement that prevents the landowners in the area from selling their land to make hotels, houses, or other traits that could close off “the great migration” and ruin the entire ecosystem (Ojwang et al. 2017).

Relation to SDG15

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) covers a broad range of environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainable development (Biermann et al., 2017), and some are more relevant than others for the Mara Naboisho Conservatory. Goal number 15 (SDG15), ‘Life on Land’, covers issues related to protection, restoration and promotion of sustainable use of terrestrial areas, where one of the 12 targets within the goal, 15.5, explicitly covers the agenda of protecting biodiversity and natural habitats.

Additionally, because the conservancy works as a corridor it allows populations across big areas to interbreed and sustain genetic diversity, which is an important part of SDG 15.

The SDGs are very much intertwined and the same goes for ecology, consequently, benefits to the biodiversity of an area has a triple down effect on other SDGs, through what is called ecosystem services (Carpenter et al., 2006). For example, the management and protection of protected areas (PA) has increased the availability of freshwater (SDG 6) and, consequently, food availability (SDG 2) for the people living in proximity to the areas (SHAH and MUKHOVI, 2019). Secondly, large, resilient populations and connected ecosystems are essential when combating climate change and meeting the variable abiotic and biotic consequences of these major global changes (SDG 13). In addition to the conservancy’s more obvious links to the environmental SDGs, there are also social and economic benefits. The conservancy has created new job opportunities (SDG 1/SDG 8), especially in tourism, and tourism has stimulated local socio-economic development through the purchase of local products and souvenirs. The new job opportunities have additionally been especially important for women (SDG 5). Lastly, there are educational benefits (SDG 4), where using the wildlife area as an example of how ecosystem services and functions interconnect has shown to be highly valuable (Chakrabarti, 2021).

It can be argued that PAs are not exclusively positive for the people living in proximity to them. First, as they often take up a substantial area, PAs seize potential agricultural areas for food production (SDG 2), potential areas for clean energy extraction (SDG 7), and potential areas for industry and infrastructure (SDG 9). It is not without reason that the biggest threat to biodiversity loss is land-use change (IPBES, 2019), given that area is a valuable resource historically managed without care. The unavoidable conflict between interests in land-

use poses a fundamental challenge when working towards achieving the SDGs.

Challenges Faced

The Mara region faces numerous challenges including population expansion, land use change, poaching, climate change, and lack of funding (MMWCA, 2019). Two major reasons for many of the challenges is due to the growing pressure on land and a lack of sufficient benefits. Portions of the ecosystem have been sold, fenced, or converted to other land uses, making them inaccessible to wildlife (MMWCA, 2019). The Mara Conservancy envisions a future where various land uses are planned and zoned to meet the needs of the community and conserve wildlife, minimizing conflict, and optimizing conservation and ecosystem integrity. However, the ecosystem's ability to provide vital services is currently under threat from various factors, such as agriculture, fencing, human population growth, increasing livestock numbers, declining rainfall, unplanned settlements, tourism and infrastructural developments, and incompatible land uses (MMWCA, 2019). These threats are leading to land use changes, human-wildlife conflict, reduction in wildlife numbers, and changes in the pastoralist way of life. Moreover, the conservancy must also balance the interests of various stakeholders, including the Maasai population, tourism, conservation organizations, and the government. Careful management and collaboration with stakeholders are necessary to ensure the long-term viability of the ecosystem and its animal populations.

Possible Solutions

To maintain the existing wildlife conservancy, one viable solution is to continue leasing the land for ecotourism and earn regular income from land leases and conservation fees (LGT Venture Philanthropy, 2022). Ecotourism can further improve the local livelihoods by creating job opportunities and raising the living standards, which ultimately helps eliminate poverty. The generated income can also support conservation efforts, community development projects, and encourage local commitment to

PAs (Terraformation, 2022). By doing this, the potential environmental impacts of ecotourism, such as increased human activity and waste generation ought to be kept attention. Since the cost of land and interest rates are high, renting the land may be the only way for biodiversity and wildlife to survive in the long run, as purchasing and owning the land is difficult (Framjee, 2012).

Transformation of wildlife conservancy into a government protected area could be a way. It would allow for better implementation measures, stricter regulations, and management guidelines to address issues that may be difficult for a community-based organization to manage. Nonetheless, this transformation could potentially lead to negative impacts on local communities like the displacement of people or a loss of control over natural resources. Therefore, continuing the conservancy as a community-based organization with a flexible approach that aligns with standard requirements may be a more effective solution for managing the conservancy (Preferred by Nature, 2023).

The success of the conservancy is dependent on the full cooperation and support of the local community and stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and private sectors. Hence, it is crucial to strengthen the partnership and engagement between them. While maintaining the livelihood of the local communities, they should be empowered with more responsibility and authority over local conservation decisions. Existing land-use policies and legislation should be vigorously applied to prevent human-wildlife conflicts and avoid the degradation and loss of wildlife habitats. By adopting a collaborative approach with effective coordination between stakeholders, wildlife conservation can be successfully achieved while improving the livelihoods of local communities (Ojwan et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The area conserved by Mara Naboisho has significant biodiversity and ecosystem value. The challenges of attaining a balance between development and conservation in Mara Naboisho include the interests of various stakeholders needing to be well-balanced,

increasing requirements of the land from humans, and land use change that is unfavorable to conserving wildlife. Solutions to address these challenges include ecotourism, transformation into a government-protected area, and collaboration between parties. Ecotourism is a feasible way to both conserve the land and provide chances for human development, while transformation into a government owned protected area can allow stricter and more effective management. Collaboration between parties can help to solve the dilemma with joint force.

Mara Naboisho is a prime example to achieve SDG 15. The ecotourism industry generates the motivation to protect and conserve the area with ecological value as it can be the resource for tourism. As the locals learn and gain more about the advantages of local tourism, such as higher income and more job opportunities, the case for conserving the environment and animals gains support. The case in Mara Naboisho shows that the key element of an effective conservancy is to solve the human-wildlife conflict. People, the environment, and the wildlife are all intrinsically related to one another.

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