

Human Wildlife Conflict

The Elephant Imposed Curfew

Recently there has been an increase in reported cases of industrial farming or extensive farming in the Amboseli ecosystem. One such case was brought to the fore by WildlifeDirect which highlighted the fact that an agribusiness venture was given a license to do commercial production of avocados and had cleared 180 acres of land (in a corridor typically zoned for wildlife and pastoralism) for farming ¹. It appears that ecological and hydrological threats were not adequately considered. Such practices run the risk of exposing local communities to wildlife and issues of conflict consequently arising. What worsens the matter is that when cases of human-wildlife conflict occur, focus is often placed not on the causative factors but on firefighting mechanisms that do not address the causative issues.

Elephants are intelligent animals with strong senses. They are known to migrate during dry seasons towards more hospitable locations near rivers and water sources that are not prone to drying. They also migrate to access more nutritious food during the wet season. The degradation of their habitat exacerbates this migration, causing them to seek a 'home' elsewhere.

These issues can only be further exacerbated by the issue of climate change. Kajiado County is predominantly semi-arid; livestock rearing (nomadic pastoralism) and crop farming are the main economic activities. With the unpredictable climate change patterns (increasing droughts and altered distribution of rainfall makes droughts and floods more common), water and pasture availability are adversely affected. This causes crop losses, livestock emaciation, conflict between agro pastoralists and escalated human-wildlife conflict.

As the pastoralists continue facing the imminent drought and recurring dry spells in their locality, they have resolved to take the livestock to graze on the hills or in the forests in search of pasture. Even though they try to paddock certain sections of the land for pasture, the prolonged drought renders this task fruitless. Since this community regards their livestock highly, they often embark on long journeys to ensure that their livestock access pasture.

These harsh climatic conditions have led to the community becoming overrun by elephants. Assured of water access, a pack of elephants have made themselves comfortable in the various village water points in Oldonyio-Orok location. Things have not always been like this. The community reports that the frequency of the elephants venturing into their community has increased dramatically in the past two years. They attribute this migration to the degradation of their habitat at Amboseli Ecosystem where it is perceived that there is increased farming around the park leading to water shortage. The chairman of the Enoosampurrumpurr stated that their area is proving to be more habitable for the elephants due to water security and the presence of bushes, something which may be lacking in their natural habitat.

¹ <https://wildlifedirect.org/industrial-farming-threatens-elephants-in-wildlife-corridor-in-amboseli-ecosystem/>



Figure 1: Elephants at the Enoosampurrumpurr Water Project

Life in this area has changed. There is an elephant-imposed curfew. The community is grappling with an elephant invasion as the animals roam freely in the morning and evening, forcing residents to stay indoors during such periods. It is at the Enoosampurrumpurr water point where the local community's attention has been drawn to the presence of elephants which have come out of their hiding earlier than usual. At this water point, there are mixed emotions—excitement to see the elephants and of fear should the elephant go on a rampage. This particular evening, the curious community, in separate groups of men and women, cannot wait to behold the sight of the elephants that are hiding behind some trees 100 meters away from the water point. They often wake up to the scenes of shattered water infrastructure, felled trees or fences, big foot prints along the water storage facilities and huge lumps of elephant dung. Coming close to a herd therefore elicits some form of excitement for the curious villagers, as some scamper for their safety. On this occasion, the elephants, typically expected to visit the water point either at dusk or at dawn are spotted earlier than usual. They are parched. Clearly alert to the presence of the human beings, they maintain their position in the bushes. This impasse lasts about one hour until the community resolves to move further back to allow the animals to come out of the forest and quench their thirst. The four elephants slowly make their way and drink water that the community has decided to set aside for them in the troughs to prevent further destruction of their water facilities. Excitement creeps in as the villagers behold the sight of the elephants. But the question that lingers is for how long can they continue draining their resources to give the elephants water?



Figure 2: Curious residents of Oldonyio-Orok Location waiting for the elephants to emerge from the forest

This scene is in contrast to Embirika location where the stench of a rotting elephant carcass fills the spot. I am duly informed that the elephant was shot dead by Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) after it had killed 2 people (one in Tanzania and another in Namanga). This male elephant had been on a rampage for a period of one month and had also terrorized the farmers in Embirika farm (doing climate smart agriculture). The elephant would come every evening and sample all the ripe papayas and burrow the ground to access the sweet potatoes. When not eating the farm produce, it would fell trees (papayas and trees grown for sale) while moving through the farm. The amount of destruction left is still evident even after the passage of one month. The farm that would previously produce 2 pickups full of the fruit every two weeks can only manage to produce 2 crates. The farmers repeatedly reported the matter to KWS. They are now very happy that the rogue elephant has been eliminated and they can work towards reestablishing their farm.



Figure 3: Image of the rotting elephant carcass at Embirika area

The impacts, however, go beyond farming. Social activities are likewise affected. Freedom of movement is hampered. The community lives their lives on the edge, with nagging concerns about the safety of their children when they graze the livestock. The parents have to regularly seek their whereabouts. Education for them has also been disrupted; they are no longer able to leave the house early for school, due to fear of the roaming animals.

Should life be lost? Is one life more important than the other?

There are also question marks over who should cover the costs for the gallons of water needed by these thirsty animals.

Conservation efforts

Even though the community located in Ondonyo – Orok in Eng'aboli sub-location is grappling with the elephant invasion, they have resolved not to kill the animals. The community leaders have implored residents not to attack the animals. They have therefore resolved to ensure that water troughs are always filled with water to prevent the destruction of their water storage and piping facilities.

The village leadership has also been championing tree planting to ensure that they conserve the environment and make it better for their livestock. Practices such as charcoal production are also on the decline given the ecosystem challenges that the community has faced as a result of logging for charcoal production.

Conclusion

The community is, however, alarmed about the slow response of Kenya Wildlife Service in addressing the situation. They perceive KWS value the life of the wild animals more than that of humans and domestic animals given their reaction when wildlife is attacked. They have expressed a desire for KWS to take the issue of compensation seriously when their property is destroyed and not just engage them in unending processes of forms submission for compensation without action.

There is therefore a need to look at the big picture. As the population of communities and livestock keep increasing and settlement patterns keep changing, planning and policy enforcement needs to be put in place before the situation worsens. Conservation of the wildlife natural habitat needs to be prioritized to ensure that lives (of both wildlife and human beings) and property are safeguarded. It is therefore time to take action and continuously advocate for the need of conserving our environment to ensure that both flora and fauna flourish. Development and economic prosperity should not be allowed to override environment conservation. An integrated and a robust ecosystem management approach needs to be adopted to ensure sustainable development and reduction of human wildlife conflict.ⁱ

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