

## Ecotourism in Kenya

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The increasing concern for environmental conservation leads to a greater interest in finding eco-friendly means for productivity and energy, allowing travelers to enjoy beauty in the world. Many modern tourists are turning to ecotourism, an environmentally conscious way of touring an area, to appreciate and preserve the beautiful nature they desire to see. In response to this growing interest in ecotourism, developing countries have implemented programs to protect both their land and people while also generating income. Kenya, for instance, has been developing ecotourism programs since the end of British colonial rule. However, while ecotourism's primary aim is to protect the environment and its people, preserve the native culture, and benefit the inhabitants financially, ecotourism's practices in Kenya have taken the Indigenous people's homes, interrupted their livelihood, and stolen their money. To alleviate the abuses of ecotourism in Kenya, tourists need to be more aware of tourist companies' actions, and the companies must gain a deeper understanding of the host nation's culture, people, and land.

Defining ecotourism's core principles helps reveal how far certain ecotourism programs in Kenya have drifted from their own ideals. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (2017). TIES further emphasizes ecotourism's three policies: to encourage conservation through money and other benefits, to help the surrounding communities that lack money or resources, and teach others to appreciate the land and culture they are touring. Similarly, Martha Honey (2008), the executive director of the Center for Responsible Travel, argues that ecotourism should help a host nation's people. She has researched the impact of ecotourism extensively, concluding that ecotourism gives a platform for understanding and respecting human rights issues among the less fortunate (p. 33). While ecotourism strives to protect and conserve the pristine land that still exists, its ultimate goal is humanitarian.

Given ecotourism's noble aims, developing countries such as Kenya look to it as means of economic development. Kenya first instituted ecotourism when it gained freedom from Great Britain, and the Kenyan government realized the country's potential as a tourist destination. Tourism became Kenya's main foreign exchange, surpassing both tea and coffee (Honey 2009, p. 47). The profit from tourism opened the way for many ecotourism projects, most of which did more harm than good for local communities. Jairus Koki (2017), a Ph.D. student with firsthand experience guiding community-based tourist groups, states, "When poorly implemented, ecotourism can quickly turn economic gains into social and environmental disasters" (p. 112). These disasters come in many forms and are extremely difficult and often costly to undo.

Ecotourism's biggest flaw in Kenya is the practice of "Fortress Conservation" which removes native Kenyans, such as the Maasai, from their ancestral lands (Southgate, 2006, p. 81). Fortress Conservation involves sectioning off the land for different purposes, such as separating and protecting the tourist areas from the native people and wildlife (Southgate, 2006, p. 81). One specific area where companies implement Fortress Conservation is the Kimana Group Ranch at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro. Tourism companies tend to section off the swamps because of their beauty within desert land and then give the Maasai another area in which to raise their cattle. The companies allow locals to use a few of the swamps, which constitute the few water sources due to low rainfall, but not as freely as before. This restriction of swampland provokes conflict among separate clans that once coexisted peacefully and shared the resources (Ondicho, 2012, p. 42). The separation of the Maasai from their homeland also hurts their ability to utilize the resources they need to survive. Furthermore, the hardships that Fortress Conservation forces on Maasai point to a failure of ecotourism to follow the principle of protecting communities. As tourism scholars Kennedy Magio and others (2013) explain, "The creation and management of protected areas basically ignores the participation of communities and effectively denies them benefits" (p. 483). Moreover, by removing the people from the land and interrupting their way of life, the principle of ecotourism loses its place because tourists cannot see or appreciate the culture if the Maasai are not in sight.

In addition, because the livestock that drink at the swampland provide the Maasai's only source of income, Fortress Conservation jeopardizes the Maasai's very existence as in the Maasai culture, livestock is essential. As one Maasai man explains to Tom G. Ondicho (2012), a professor at the School of Environment, People, and Planning in New Zealand: "Livestock holds significant meaning to the Maasai society, not just economically but socially. . . [; ]livestock is our livelihood" (p. 57). Domesticated animals serve as the Maasai's source of food, wealth, and everyday work. Unfortunately, ecotourism companies ignore the importance of the Maasai's traditional livestock management when they build group ranches to give the Maasai space to raise their cattle away from tourist destinations. These ranches bring all of the ranchers together but give each of them a fenced off portion for their respective herds. Giving the Maasai their own space may seem like a noble act, but the partitioned land completely disregards the way in which the Maasai care for their animals. The Maasai must learn the "Western way" of corralling their cattle within the confines of fences as opposed to the traditional open range practice (Southgate, 2006, p. 85). Also, the fencing and tight spaces make resources scarce and hard to reach. This inaccessibility is especially true when drought inevitably occurs and ranchers cannot bring their cattle to a more ample water source (Southgate, 2006, p. 85). The cattle and people must learn to survive in these new conditions (which is not easy), often leading to death for the animals and poverty for the ranchers (Ondicho, 2012, p. 43). These issues are destructive to the Maasai's livelihood physically, mentally, and economically, which once again overlooks the second tier of ecotourism: helping communities.

Even more egregious than loss of homeland and livelihood is the greed of ecotourism companies, which keeps the Maasai from gaining any profit for their sacrifices. Often the tourism companies promise many benefits to the locals, but their main concern is their own profit. The desire for profit leads to overpricing, high taxes, lack of employment, and overall theft from the native people. The abuses of the African Safari Club (ASC), a tour operator at the Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary, exemplify these problems. In 1996, the ASC promised the Maasai many economic benefits as well as protection if they agreed to surrender their land for ecotourism (Southgate, 2006, p. 92). The Maasai waited in anticipation for the promised benefits that never came. Instead, the ASC took control of the land and put up private property signs in tourism areas, limiting the Maasai's access to their own land. Despite the Maasai's anger toward these actions, little had changed at the Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary when Christopher Southgate (2006) reported: "Tourists arrive and depart in the main ignorant of the environment and culture of which they have a fleeting glance, and only a wealthy elite claim any benefit from the tourists' presence" (p. 92). Once again, the tourism companies forget the principles of community by excluding the Maasai from ecotourism projects and denying them the benefits they were promised.

Given these abuses, ecotourism companies and tourists need to change how they approach ecotourism in order to protect the Maasai and others hurt by the violations of ecotourism principles. These adjustments should start with the tourism companies. First, companies need to stop using a universal conservation plan for each community and instead consider the specific people and land in each area. They can do this by monitoring the changes in environment and the community and making specific modifications to their methods as needed (Koki, 2017, p. 111). Furthermore, the companies should involve the locals in the project through committees, employment, and overall participation in conservation so that the people have a voice in deciding what happens on their land (Koki, 2017, 123). However, in order for these changes to occur, someone needs to hold the companies accountable. This is where tourists come in. According to Costas Christ, a member of the Advisory Board of World Travel Market and a recognized Global Visionary, tourists should ask three questions of the ecotourism company they plan to use: "What are some of your tour company's environmentally friendly practices? Can you give me an example of how your trips help to protect and support wildlife and cultural heritage? Do you employ local guides on your trips?" (2017). If the company cannot give a straight answer to any of these questions, Christ says to move on to the next. This way, tourists can help the companies observe the principles of ecotourism. No matter what, the focus of ecotourism needs to be on the people. When this happens, everything else will fall into place as the people work together to protect their land and the wildlife. If ecotourism companies can recognize this, then they will be able to make a positive change in the world that will last for generations to come.

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