

Maasai Mara: Government Should Recognize Narok County Council's Efforts and Potential

The rolling savannah of Maasai Mara National Reserve (MMNR) is an ecological paradise unmatched anywhere else on the planet. Expanses of grasslands and winding rivers make the Mara a precious oasis, not only for extraordinary wildlife, but also for Kenya's tourism industry in general. Considering the fragile environment and significant economic resource, it is no surprise that management of the Mara is an issue under constant scrutiny. Currently MMNR is supervised by the Narok County Council (NCC), a local public body that has recently pioneered initiatives to reform administrative and ecological mismanagement. The seat of management, however, is destined for criticism. While some of the concerns raised against the NCC may be accurate, the value of having a locally managed park is worth further investigation by critics. As the National Government, in conjunction with KWS, has threatened to annex NCC management over the Reserve, now is the time to assess the larger picture of Masai Mara's future.

Tourism is Kenya's second largest industry, due largely to the Masai Mara's 1,510 square kilometers of breathtaking scenery and home of the 'Big 5.' The management of MMNR has the complex task of preserving this heavily impacted environment and regulating the use of countless tourists. Accusations of poor tourism control and weak environmental policy have put NCC under the microscope. While corruption within a governing body is certainly a worthy anxiety, and has been a real issue within NCC, it cannot be used as a blanket critique of the Council's practices or the problems in Masai Mara.

Blame should not be placed solely on the shoulders of the NCC. Issues facing the management result from complex dynamics between all the stakeholders and all Kenyans share an interest in a solution. Kenya's Central Government should also be held accountable for its neglectful policies on national tourism practices. Without country-wide standards protecting Kenya's treasured parks or reserves, local managers are left with deficient authority. One example, obvious to all tourists who have traveled to the Mara from Nairobi, is the poor condition of the national highway. Perhaps the Minister of Tourism himself should brave the Nairobi-Narok-Mara highway and be jostled by potholes and ditches and flooding from inadequate drainage. What kind of reputation is being perpetuated when the government turns a blind eye to the driveway of its most prized national treasure?

We must also consider the consequences of the tourism industry on the integrity of the entire MMNR. Through the irresponsible behavior of tour operators and lodges, the visitors themselves are led to degrade the environmental landscape and the local culture. Tour vans are often seen barreling off-road, onto open grassland, sometimes narrowly averting collision with the very wildlife that they came to see. Drivers, under pressure to deliver to their clients sightings of cheetahs and lions, openly break the park rules and destroy fragile nests, breeding grounds and habitats. What's more, the custodians of this

land, Maasai communities, have been reduced to tourist commodities. Maasai have been forced to survive by selling their most precious assets—their lifestyles and traditions—which they have somehow preserved against all odds. The humanity of the Maasai is bypassed through millions of camera lenses that seek to capture the “exotic”; Maasai are known to tourists as objects rather than potential teachers or experts of the land and wildlife.

While the Kenyan media has reported fairly on problems with corruption and mismanagement of MMNR as they have surfaced, it has failed to accurately portray the complexity of the situation as well as positive efforts made by the NCC. The NCC has taken some big steps recently to reform its management of the MMNR, and these warrant attention. For example, within the past six months, the Council has conducted an assessment of overly stressed regions in the park and designated them protected from tourist traffic. A visitor to the Mara today encounters tastefully designed, and strongly worded, warning signs blocking game tracks that lead to protected areas; as these areas recover, tracks will be opened and others protected on a rotating basis. A recovery plan such as this requires an intimate knowledge of the Mara ecosystems, one that is ideally better designed by those who have lived in and know the region. Also, in a full Council meeting held recently, the NCC passed a resolution to stop the ongoing invasion and destruction of the Mau Forest complex. Subsequently, operations are underway to remove illegal squatters to save the forest, the source of all the rivers supplying water to millions of wildlife and communities in the Mara Serengeti ecosystem.

The council’s local origins also contribute to its ability to effectively manage the reserve. The NCC is predominantly comprised of Maasai people, and therefore has a long-standing relationship with the communities that surround the Mara. As an extension of the communities, the NCC has unique leverage in continuing to collaboratively conserve the land, which the wildlife needs to thrive, including that which rings the reserve and is owned by Maasai group ranches. While the park is under 1,510 square kilometers, the surrounding habitat in the group ranches is 4,566 square kilometers; land which all Kenyans need to remain open if tourism is to continue to rely on wildlife. It is the value of these relationships that must be recognized as Kenya considers how best to manage its parks and reserves. Solutions will not be found in finger pointing at any one stakeholder, but will arise from shared accountability and support from all who benefit from the protection of MMNR. The Kenyan government needs to prioritize this spirit of collaboration and give the NCC every chance of succeeding if the legacy of Maasai Mara is to survive.