



Conservation, crime and communities:

Northern Rangelands Trust, Kenya

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At a glance

COUNTRY	Kenya
LOCATION	Northern Kenya – 19 community conservancies covering 2.5 million hectares of community land
SPECIES	African Elephant (<i>Loxodonta africana</i>)
ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE CONTEXT	High – and increasing – levels of elephant poaching for ivory
TYPE OF POACHERS	Predominantly members of the local community or neighbouring communities
TYPE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN TACKLING IWT	Community rangers/eco-guards Community intelligence gathering
CONSERVATION INCENTIVE MECHANISM	Revenue-sharing from tourism Conservation jobs Enterprise development Legally recognized community based natural resource management institutions

The story so far

Community conservancies are proving increasingly effective as partners in the fight against ivory poachers in Kenya. In the north of the country, conservancies now manage more than 2.5 million hectares of community land, much of it critical range for the African elephant.

Operating in areas which are remote, extensive and difficult for government agencies to control, the conservancies are in the front line of the battle against the illegal ivory trade.

The reason they are effective in conservation is linked to the broader benefits the conservancies bring to local communities. In essence, these well governed, community-owned and autonomous institutions are set up with the aim of improving social wellbeing, land management and wildlife conservation.

Conservancies represent constituent communities who own a defined area of community land, either legally or traditionally. Collectively, the landowners ensure the rights and responsibilities of conservation and share the benefits from conservation among the community.

First established in Northern Kenya in 1995, there has been growing demand from communities to set up conservancies since the mid-2000s. The Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) has been a key player in their development in Northern Kenya since 2005, helping to set up and support 19 conservancies in that part of the country.



Kalama Conservancy Board meeting (NRT)

Conservancies make a big difference to livelihoods

In the four counties where NRT operates, communities are mainly semi-nomadic pastoralists, with a minority of agro-pastoralists in the areas of higher rainfall. Soils are poor and recent droughts have led to high loss of livestock. Poverty, in general, is high with an average of 70 per cent of the population living below the national poverty line.

In this context, the conservancies make a big difference to livelihoods, generating financial and non-financial benefits.

During the course of 2013, NRT conservancies generated 700 full-time (including tourism operations) and 800 part-time jobs. Revenue from tourism was US\$545,000, of which 60 per cent went into funding community development projects based on priorities determined by the communities themselves. Joint conservancy–NRT programmes raised livestock sales and revenue for women through micro-enterprise.

Non-financial benefits during the same period included better security (considered more important by communities than direct financial benefits), improved rangeland health and access to grazing, the use of conservancy transport for emergencies and increased social cohesion.

A legal foundation for their role

Conservancies have also been making their presence felt in conservation. Over the past decade, a growing appreciation by government of the contribution that conservancies make has led to a legal foundation for their role.



Naibunga Conservancy Scouts examining an elephant carcass (NRT)

The new Wildlife Conservation and Management Act (2013), which came into effect in 2014, affords great legal recognition to conservancies – both in the context of tackling illegal wildlife trade and other areas of insecurity, including inter-tribal conflict, livestock raids and banditry.

The conservancies' approach to tackling elephant poaching is multi-faceted, including community rangers, mobile rapid-response teams, intelligence gathering and social pressure.

The network of around 400 community rangers monitor and survey wildlife across their conservancies during daily patrols. All are in direct radio contact with national law enforcement authorities, and just over a third are armed. Those who do carry arms operate as National Police Reservists, under the Kenya Police.

Three armed mobile rapid-response teams, made up of 25 rangers drawn from the constituent communities, cover all NRT community conservancies. These specially trained and equipped multi-ethnic groups are able to move between different tribal areas, operating where traditional law enforcement agencies would not have access.

Conservancies maintain a local informer network which complements the KWS intelligence system. Increased NRT investment is making intelligence gathering more formal and strategic.

Not least of the conservancies' roles is applying social pressure to expose and shame criminals. Customary punishments, such as cursing individuals, still carry weight in traditional communities.

In spite of the risks involved, the benefits of anti-poaching activities outweigh the dangers.

The cost of all this is significant. The NRT and the conservancies together invest around US\$1 million a year in the community policing programme. The government, so far, has given little financial support. However, new legislation, devolving power to county bodies is likely to change this.

What works and why?

Results are encouraging, although the impact of conservancies in addressing elephant poaching needs to be set in the context of changes in international trafficking and the local price of ivory, particularly since 2010.

Most conservancies in Northern Kenya were set up between 2001 and 2011, and appear to be effective in reducing poaching. Anecdotal evidence, carcass data and aerial survey data on elephants between 2002–2008 show that elephant populations increased by 27 per cent during this period, and the proportion elephants killed in NRT conservancy areas was significantly lower than outside.

Better ranger-based monitoring of elephant mortality since 2009 shows a steady increase in poaching activity from 2009–2012. During this time the percentage of carcasses found that had been killed illegally rose from 34 per cent to 81 per cent, and the overall elephant population between 2008 and 2012 declined by 14 per cent. However, in the past two years poaching has declined, from 59 per cent in 2013 to 43 per cent in 2014.

While conservancies were unable to contain the massive spike in poaching levels in 2011–12, they have upped their game in the past two years, working closely with the Kenya Wildlife Service and the Police and boosting investment.

Reports from rangers suggest that the number of elephant sightings are stable on conservancy land, in spite of overall population decline. This suggests the elephants concentrate in areas where they feel safe.

In more general terms, community conservancies have become highly effective and respected institutions bringing tangible benefits to the people they represent, as well as a significant force in countering illegal wildlife trade.

The inclusive nature of conservancies is key to their influence and success. They do not set up boundaries between people and wildlife, nor do they exclude other people from using the land.

Inherent in their structure and organisation is the capacity to resolve local issues, and ensure that the outcome is upheld.

Kenya is a highly supportive of public–private partnerships, and this is the framework for successful liaison between the conservancies and official anti-poaching efforts.



Northern Rangelands Trust Rapid Reaction Team (NRT)

Challenges

- Funding constraints and financial sustainability: it costs US\$50–70,000 a year on average to run a conservancy, and investment needs a minimum ten year timeline.
- The recent down-turn in tourism in Kenya has further reduced available funding.
- General insecurity remains an issue.
- Corruption within the Police and judiciary impedes prosecution of poachers.

Lessons learnt

- Ownership of all decision-making must be by the local communities; with government and NGO associates operating as supportive partners.
- Non-financial benefits should not be overlooked as an incentive.
- Peer process is the strongest influencing factor in changing established mindsets within communities.
- It is important for conservancies to have an identifiable headquarters in the community.
- For conservancies to survive cycles of poor governance under different leadership, maintaining strong community ownership is key: poor management will be exposed and addressed.
- A conservancy takes 12 months to set up and 2–3 years to become effective.
- It is important for a supportive partner to act as ‘honest broker’ in all technical aspects of conservancy operations.

COULD THIS WORK ELSEWHERE?

As a basic model, the community conservancy model developed in Northern Kenya can be replicated and adapted in other countries where communities are the owners of — or have strong rights over — natural resources, and where these are communally managed.