Abstract

This report examines the rise of nongovernmental organizations and private game reserves in Kenya’s conservation and tourist sector in the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Because these institutions are private and not required to be transparent, it can be difficult to study their histories. The archival holdings of funders, such as the Ford Foundation, or individual philanthropists, such as Laurance S. Rockefeller, can thus provide insights into the histories of these organizations. These records provide particular information on two private conservancies started in the 1980s in Laikipia, Kenya: the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and Ol Ari Nyiro (at times referred to as Laikipia Ranching). Attention to these conservancies demonstrates a shift in the practice of conservation during the late twentieth century, as the Kenyan state saw its role diminished, and private funders, NGOs, and private conservancies became more central to the project of protecting Kenya’s wildlife, while also benefitting from the tourists which followed.
In Kenya, national parks and game reserves were a colonial creation, which dislocated communities and served as a recreational outlet for white settlers.¹ The establishment of protected areas fit seamlessly into colonial policy, founded on the displacement of Africans for the advantage of Europeans, often through the appropriation of fertile lands.² At independence, white supremacy over agricultural land and protected areas was partially undone. Africans could finally purchase land in the Rift Valley highlands. Though white Kenyans and expatriates continued to occupy positions within the parks service, many jobs were Africanized. The early postcolonial government encouraged the growth of the tourist industry, establishing in 1965 the Kenya Tourist Development Corporation (KTDC), a parastatal which facilitated investment in tourism by providing financing to Kenyan businesses, while also ensuring the industry remained partially state-owned.

By the end of the 1980s, many of these initiatives had been reversed. With growing debt and unstable markets for Kenya’s primary export commodities of coffee and tea, international financial institutions (IFIs) exerted mounting pressure on government actors to restructure the economy. IFIs, bilateral donors, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also demonstrated a renewed interest in conservation, frequently through so-called environmentally sustainable wildlife tourism. Kenyan tourism grew exponentially, generating, for the first time, more revenue and foreign exchange than agricultural exports. Simultaneously, poaching threatened elephants and rhinos, as well as the fledgling tourist industry. The Kenya Wildlife Service transformed into a commercial, paramilitary unit, garnering aid to fight poachers. Transnational conservation NGOs – such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) – focused on endangered species and funded the creation of private game reserves in Kenya, thus shifting some of their donations away from Kenyan state agencies and Kenya’s national parks. Private game reserves were established in the name of conservation, often by white Kenyans who adapted struggling cattle ranches. Not only did these new game reserves dispossess communities of land and resources, but ultimately, they contributed to the privatization and commercialization of wildlife conservation, largely benefitting the white owners and the international safari-going elite.³
Global ivory prices rose substantially in the early 1970s, encouraging poaching and threatening the survival of Kenya’s parks and wildlife. With funding, support, and dedication, the government of Kenya was able to stymie poaching towards the end of the decade. By the mid-1980s, though, the problem had reappeared. Between about 1978 and 1988, there was a 95 percent decrease in the East African elephant population. By 1989, there were only 16,000 elephants remaining, and it was estimated that Kenya was losing 5,000 elephants a year. Rhinoceros suffered a similar fate. Kenya’s white rhino population had declined from about 20,000 in 1971, to 1,500 in 1980, all the way down to 500 in 1988.

Kenya’s poaching crisis drew global attention and concern. Colonial attitudes that presumed European and American entitlement to the African environment, while also envisaging Westerners as its preeminent conservators, had changed little in more than a century. These ideas were repurposed for the modern context. A 1971 African Wildlife Leadership Foundation (AWLF) advertisement sums up the thrust of much of the Western discourse. The appeal to American donors depicted the hardships of lions and then pleaded “Save their world; it’s yours too.” This donor appeal suggested that global biodiversity was threatened, it was an issue of significance to all, and Americans – and Westerners more broadly – held responsibility for its protection. Both the Kenyan government and wildlife NGOs sought to take advantage of the public outcry around poaching in order to raise money.

While aid increasingly went to equipment and supplies for anti-poaching activities – vehicles, aircraft, electric fencing, radios, and even guns – it also funded the employment of Western “experts.” The discourse on the necessity of white wardens to protect the African environment was only thinly veiled. In 1981, M.R. Crompton of the British High Commission in Nairobi, wrote, “The view put to us is that this small group of expatriates are the only effective deterrent to poaching of wildlife on a very large scale organised by persons employed in game conservation themselves.” British politicians frequently assumed that, in the absence of white wardens, the decline of Kenyan parks and conservation efforts would follow. Writing of three British contractors in Kenya, Lord Dulverton, an avowed British environmentalist and executor of the Dulverton Trust, a charity focused on the natural world, asserted, “I can honestly assure you that unless the contracts of Barrah, Woodley and Jenkins are
renewed for a further period of at least three years, the management of the National Parks and Game Reserves will deteriorate very rapidly and to a very serious extent.” Others forecast “a catastrophic drop in the high standards of tourist attraction” without the British wardens. During this period, Kenyans rarely occupied leadership or program director positions within NGOs, further evidence of the belief that Africans lacked knowledge and competence in the conservation sector.

Beginning in the 1980s, both the number of NGOs and the available funding grew, and conservationist organizations sought to intervene in wildlife preservation efforts with greater autonomy. At the same time, the Kenyan government had made subtle policy changes, which granted private landowners some ability to utilize wildlife resources. By the 1990s, as the government found itself fiscally and bureaucratically strapped, Kenya encouraged private investment in wildlife conservation and tourism enterprises.

White landowners began converting their cattle ranches into wildlife sanctuaries. While these sanctuaries started as small endeavors largely in the 1980s, within a few years, many had expanded into full scale conservancies, creating trusts and conservation NGOs to manage the land and wildlife, while attracting tourists and donor money. Only a handful of private sanctuaries opened in the 1980s, but they occupied vast tracts of land, and the majority were sited in Laikipia District (now County).

Two conservancies in particular – Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (LWC) and Ol Ari Nyiro – garnered aid from the Ford Foundation and Laurance Rockefeller, and thus, appear in the holdings at the Rockefeller Archive Center. According to an interview with Ian Craig in the *Daily Nation*, the land that now makes up Lewa has been owned by the family “since the 1920s when his grandfather came from South Africa in an ox-wagon.” Many white South African families migrated to Kenya following the South African War at the turn of the century. The Lewa Wilderness website, as well as LWC grant applications, assert that the Craig/Douglas family ran Lewa Downs as a cattle ranch beginning in 1922, and this land was inherited by David and Delia Craig, who began planning a rhino conservancy called Ngare Sergoi with Anna Merz in 1982. Since then, the conservancy has expanded, and two of their sons, Ian Craig and Will Craig, have taken over.
Ol Ari Nyiro was purchased by Paolo Gallmann in the early 1970s from white Kenyans. After Paolo Gallmann’s death in 1980, his wife, Kuki Gallmann, inherited the land. She established a project to protect rhinos and elephants in 1980 and the Gallmann Memorial Foundation in 1986, according to the foundation’s annual report in 1991. Ol Ari Nyiro began in response to a rise in poaching and focused initially on security and anti-poaching measures, but soon expanded into research, education, and tourism as well.

Private reserves, like Lewa and Ol Ari Nyiro, attracted tourists and funding early on, due in no small part to the networks of their owners and managers. Kuki Gallmann – a wealthy Italian socialite and owner of Ol Ari Nyiro – had a personal relationship with Laurance Rockefeller, who pledged $100,000 to the Gallmann Memorial Foundation in 1991, and Isabella Rossellini joined the foundation’s board in 1992. Charles Njonjo, Kenya’s attorney general from 1963 to 1979, was both a shareholder and director, of Solio Ranch, another private conservancy. Jessica Craig, the daughter of Ian Craig, longtime manager of Lewa, was rumored to be Prince William’s first girlfriend. The prince visited Lewa numerous times and even proposed to Kate Middleton there in 2010.

In addition, tourists arrived shortly after the establishment of these conservancies. American actress Brooke Shields visited Ol Pejeta in 1984, the trip later broadcast in an hourlong prime-time television episode; British singer-songwriter Roger Whittaker visited Lewa in 1986 on a tour led by Ker and Downey safaris; Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands visited Ol Ari Nyiro in 1992; and four British parliamentarians visited Sweetwaters tented camp in Ol Pejeta in 1993. These visits suggest that private reserves attracted tourists early on, and with the well-publicized visits of high-profile guests, their popularity only increased.

Tourists, state financial incentives to protect wildlife, and external funding provided private conservancies with increasing budgets. With aid, many small sanctuaries expanded and were converted into full-blown conservancies in just a few years. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, private conservancies in Laikipia were attracting large amounts of funding, while bringing in growing tourist revenues. In 1989, Prince Philip of the British royal family pledged sustained support from the World Wide Fund for
Nature (WWF), presenting 1.6 million Kenyan shillings for the Nakuru, Ol Ari Nyiro, and Ngare Sergoi sanctuaries. The latter two private conservancies received the bulk of this funding. By the 1997/98 financial year, less than fifteen years after the creation of the Ngare Sergoi rhino sanctuary and just two years after the creation of the broader wildlife conservancy, Lewa’s net tourism revenues had reached $139,550. Four years later, in the 2001/2002 financial year, revenues had more than doubled to $280,844, and by then, Lewa had a yearly operating budget of $850,000. The operating budget relied on income from tourism, but also, funding from international donors, such as the World Bank’s Global Environmental Facility (GEF), the WWF, Switzerland’s Zurcher Tierschutz, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Ford Foundation, among others.

Meanwhile, Laikipia’s African residents experienced growing insecurity and poverty, and the inequalities within their region were crystal clear. Kuki Gallmann’s Ol Ari Nyiro conservancy was 100,000 acres large, described in a Daily Nation article as “sprawling,” “the size of a small district,” and “so big...it rains in some places and doesn’t in others.” Ol Pejeta was even larger, at 110,000 acres. Each conservancy was larger than a substantial number of Kenya’s national parks, including Lake Nakuru National Park, Nairobi National Park, and Amboseli National Park.

Lewa had begun as a 5,000-acre rhino sanctuary, ensconced in a larger ranch. With the creation of the LWC in 1995, the entire ranch was set aside for conservation, increasing the area to 55,000 acres. After the passage of a new Forest Management Act in 2001, which authorized private groups to manage public forested land, LWC sought to incorporate the Ngare Ndare forest. A public forest reserve previously run by government rangers, Ngare Ndare borders Lewa for about four kilometers. LWC proposed creating a trust “to manage the forest as a commercial concern and promote its conservation.” In 2001, the Ford Foundation approved a grant of $100,000 to the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy “to establish the Ngare Ndare Forest Trust and develop an integrated approach to ecotourism in Northern Kenya,” and later, an additional $150,000 for a second phase of the project. The trust also received funding from the European Union, the Global Environment Fund, and Safaricom, Kenya’s largest telecom company. In its grant application to the Ford Foundation, LWC described a
partnership with four communities surrounding the forest, and that funding would go to providing them with technical assistance.\textsuperscript{26}

Yet, the surrounding communities described the process as an “exercise carried out by the conservancy in the name of the participatory rural appraisal that rubber-stamped the forest’s establishment.” They contested plans that appeared to extend Lewa’s boundaries to include the forest; the amount of control Lewa seemed to possess over the management, fee collection, and exploitation of the forest; the inclusion of Lewa employees as stakeholders; and the undue influence of individual trustees.\textsuperscript{27} Ultimately, the trust deed was revised and approved, but the controversy underscores how local communities mistrusted private conservancies and how white conservationists continued to monopolize funding opportunities and leadership positions even in so-called “partnerships,” as well as the ongoing privatization of public resources and the centrality of land grabs to conservation, often called green grabbing.

The history of green grabbing in Laikipia’s private conservancies differs from other parts of Africa, where states, NGOs, and other agencies advocate contemporary appropriation of land from local communities to be converted into new protected areas.\textsuperscript{28} Even so, Kenya’s private conservancies still hold much in common with other regions of Africa and other parts of the world. They were borne from neoliberal policy that privatized and commodified conservation, shifting resources away from public agencies and Africans, instead, to wealthy white landowners.\textsuperscript{29}


\textsuperscript{2} For some of the literature on protected areas and conservation in Africa: Dan Brockington, \textit{Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve Tanzania} (Oxford: James Currey, 2002); Roderick P. Neumann, \textit{Imposing Wilderness: Struggles Over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Jacob S.T. Dlamini, \textit{Safari Nation: A Social History of the Kruger National Park} (Athens:


8 TNAUK OD 112/6, MR Crompton, BHC, to W Hobman Esq, “Game Wardens,” 7 April 1981.


16 Ibid.
22 RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Central Index, Grants, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (10151487), “Grant Activities.”
26 RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Central Index, Grants, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (10151487), “Grant Activities.”
29 Indeed, the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), an organization that serves “community” conservancies, created by Ian Craig, has been accused of dispossessing pastoralists: “Stealth Game: ‘Community’ Conservancies Devastate Land & Lives in Northern Kenya,” Oakland Institute, November 16, 2021, https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/stealth-game-community-conservancies-devastate-northern-kenya.