



BOUNCING BACK BETTER: KENYA'S LUMO CONSERVANCY

by Dianne Tipping-Woods

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HIGHLIGHTED the flaws in tourism and conservation models in East Africa. Could it also have catalyzed much-needed change? Kenya's Lumo Conservancy says yes, as this community-led conservation venture uses the lessons learned from the dark days of the pandemic to reimagine its future, improve its governance, and give women and youth a seat at the table.

INTRODUCTION

Between Kenya's renowned Tsavo West National Park and the Taita Hills Wildlife Sanctuary, the 48,000-hectare Lumo Conservancy protects a vast landscape of breathtaking beauty that's home to a wide array of wildlife: lions, giraffes, elephants, buffaloes, leopards, and hundreds of bird species. It's a crucial wildlife corridor within the greater Tsavo ecosystem that enables the movements of migratory elephants and wide-roaming predators, which can disperse into new areas and spread their genes between Tsavo East and Tsavo West National Parks in Kenya and Mkomazi National Parks in Tanzania.

In the dry season, you may encounter herders on the savannah amongst the umbrella thorn acacias and the iconic baobabs or perhaps resting in the shade of fever trees, doum palms, and tamarinds. This is their land. Mostly, they have agreed to stay off it, only venturing onto it with their herds in the dry months and according to a strict grazing plan. The rest of the year? It's for the wildlife and the tourists.

Animal movements are less easy to regulate. "The people who live with wildlife bear the challenges and the dangers of that. And I think that one of the challenges is that the costs can outweigh the benefits realized from conserving wildlife," says Vincent Oluoch from [Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association \(KWCA\)](#), the



Map of Lumo Conservancy in relation to Tsavo West National Park and Taita Hills Wildlife Sanctuary in southern Kenya.

national landowner-led membership organization formed in 2013 to serve the interests and collective voice of wildlife conservancies in Kenya.

Nearly two-thirds of Kenya's wildlife rely on conservancies and rangelands. Conservation in these areas is less clear-cut than in Kenya's formally protected areas, where human activity is largely excluded. Nonetheless, the conservancy movement has been growing consistently; "We have over 160 officially registered conservancies, and the number is going up," said Oluoch.

One of these conservancies is Lumo Wildlife Sanctuary, which was formally established in 2001 when three different ranches – Lualenyi, Mramba, and Oza – agreed to build on their



history of living with wildlife to manage the landscape for conservation and channel profits from tourism activities, like game drives, bird watching, and lodge stays, into the community. It has, however, faced governance and management challenges.

The community weren't happy with the benefits they received through their agreement with a tourism operator running a lodge in the Conservancy, and when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down travel, even these dried up. In March 2020 the lodge operator put all staff on unpaid leave. Tourism-funded conservation activities were also scaled down or suspended as conservancy operations like security patrols depended entirely on park fees paid by tourists.

Conservancy staff – from rangers to lodge employees – had little else to sustain them, highlighting the vulnerabilities of Lumo's tourism-reliant model. The COVID-19-related restrictions also meant the annual general meeting of the Conservancy was put on hold, and communication with ranch members slowed to a trickle, leaving many feeling disempowered. "The uncertainty of it was even worse than the actual impact because nobody could tell you when it would end," said Oluoch.

He noted that Kenya was on the brink of mass tourism expanding in the conservancies just before the pandemic, with more tourists entering the country each year. Still, with the global travel shutdown, some communities started questioning their decision to form conservancies. "The interest, the enthusiasm, the spirit to establish and manage conservancies was impacted, and people began asking if it was worth it?" he said.

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

In response to the crisis, KWCA worked with WWF's [African Nature-Based Tourism Platform](#) to collate the impact of the pandemic on tourism-

reliant communities. The African NBT Platform, funded by the [Global Environment Facility](#), launched in 2021 to connect funders to pandemic-affected communities or enterprises involved in nature-based tourism across 11 countries in eastern and southern Africa, helping to identify the hardest-hit communities and enterprises and their most pressing needs to increase their long-term resilience. The African NBT Platform has a goal of mobilizing at least \$15 million to support communities and SMEs in COVID-19 recovery efforts and to build greater resilience into the nature-based tourism business model into the future.



Kenya is classified as a mega-biodiverse nation, consisting of over 35,000 species of plants and animals.

African NBT Platform surveys conducted by KWCA confirmed the pandemic's considerable impact on Lumo and highlighted persistent issues around human-wildlife conflict, drought impacts and resource access concerns. More than just documenting the crisis on the ground, the platform assisted with a grant application for funding through the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) biodiversity and Protected Areas Management (BIOPAMA) program to recover from the pandemic and further improve the sustainable management of natural resources in the region. The application was successful, and KWCA and Lumo began implementing the 195,000 euros project in 2023.



"This is a great example of using the pandemic as a catalyst for needed change," says Oluoch.

The grant-funded work is guided by eight governance principles and priorities for action in Lumo. These include negotiating resource use, recognizing and respecting the rights of all relevant actors within the conservancy, improving participation of women and youth in decision-making within the conservancy, strengthening the capacity of conservancy rangers, improving benefits and benefit-sharing mechanisms as well as improving management and governance of the conservancy.

RANGERS AND RESOURCE ACCESS

Ludovika Malemba, head ranger, has been one of Lumo's wildlife scouts since its establishment in 2001. Over the last two decades, she has seen droughts and illegal grazing change the landscape, which includes a critical elephant migration corridor. At the same time, communities adjacent to the Conservancy live with the risk of large mammals, such as elephants trampling crops and predators attacking livestock.



Community members assemble after an activity organized by Lumo Conservancy.

Finding a balance between the needs of wildlife and people is hard, especially as Malenda must enforce wildlife protection laws that regulate resource use in the Conservancy, which can mean telling men and women from her own community of about 5000 households where they can and can't graze their highly-valued livestock. While ranch members have the right to graze cattle in designated parts of the Conservancy, decisions about when and where grazing is permitted are made by a grazing committee according to a historically disputed grazing plan. The grant to improve Lumo's resilience and enhance its conservation and community outcomes will include human rights-focused ranger training to entrench human rights practices in rangers' operations. Through the grant, Lumo will also develop and implement a holistic grazing plan and by laws entrenching Indigenous Knowledge aligned with the conservancy management plan.

WOMEN AND YOUTH

Ongoing engagements have made clear that youth want a stronger voice, and women have been marginalized in conservancy-related decision-making despite having some strong female role models like Malemba. Most of the 20 rangers and three non-ranger staff are men. Women comprise just 1 percent of all female community scouts in Kenya. To address this, KWCA supported Lumo in establishing a youth and women forum that meets regularly to provide feedback and serve as a representative body in conservancy decision-making. "We've had enriching sessions on the overall role of women in wildlife conservation and some of the barriers slowing down their efforts to get more involved in conservation activities surrounding Lumo Conservancy," said community liaison officer, Purity Manyatta. Participants could



learn from one another, share experiences, and brainstorm how to raise their voices.

Of Lumo's three ranches, only one is open to new members, so women can't join the other two at this stage. "They want to, though, to access benefits that accrue to members, such as bursaries for children of members," says Manyatta. Open to new members, Oza Ranch has dropped its registration fee from 2800 to 300 Kenyan shillings so more people, including women, can join. "The need for women members stems from the fact that currently, women aren't taken seriously in leadership positions and find it hard to participate in governance-related matters as their perspective doesn't enjoy support from the mainly male ranch members," says Manyatta. Kenyan government policy requires more equitable gender representation, "but this is not an exercise in filling a quota - it's a real need."



Women participating in a women's forum held by Lumo Conservancy.

POACHING

"We lost a lot of wild animals as a result of people trying to survive during the pandemic, and to a degree, this has persisted even as tourism has recovered," said Oluoch. Many smaller species within the Conservancy, such as dikdik, are targeted for bush meat, highly valued in a still-tough economic climate exacerbated by drought

and climate change. To tackle this, the Conservancy is working with its new tourism investor, the privately-run Soroi Lions Bluff Lodge, which donated a patrol vehicle and supports a number of rangers with food and accommodation. The Conservancy is also revising benefits sharing guidelines to guide the distribution, management and use of the benefits, learning from other conservancies like Ol-Pejeta Conservancy and developing a conservancy business plan to provide a framework for diversifying and improving revenue generation by the Conservancy.

TOURISM

Visitors are returning to Kenya and Soroi Lions Bluff Lodge is using Lumo's capacity development process to improve how it works with the Conservancy and ranch members. "Before the pandemic, there were a lot of disagreements about the boundaries for cattle and other issues, and it was quite combative," says Soroi Lion's Bluff's Douglas Mwashii. "Now, we're on the same page for the most part. We're developing a holistic grazing plan with Lumo management, working on water provision, encouraging hay harvesting and improving grazing quality by tilling patches of land that have hardened because of the prolonged dry season to encourage pasture growth," he notes. The lodge also supports cultural tourism, creates jobs, supplies food to a local school and provides bursaries for community youth, amongst other initiatives.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

"One of Kenya's major conservation achievements pre-pandemic is the level of enthusiasm and tolerance for coexisting with wildlife that we saw," says Oluoch, who cites the growing number of conservancies as evidence of local Kenyan's commitment to conserving wildlife.



More and more people rely on them, too. After the government formalized conservancies in 2013 through a new Wildlife Act, Vincent said “we began seeing a lot of conservancies benefiting at the household level, either through community projects, bursaries, improving health facilities, improving water access, and even more importantly and more recently in areas where tourism has a good potential, we began seeing them paying out income directly to the households.”

Kenya has committed to the Global Biodiversity Framework’s 30x30 goal. According to the [IUCN Green List Kenya](#), the nation’s protected areas currently cover 10% of the country’s land mass. With little chance of expansion, community led conservation institutions such as conservancies remain the only realistic option for the nation to attain this target. But conservancies must think differently about their future and plan for more resilience, says Oluoch, sharing that some now have tourism operations but also trade in carbon credits. “I think the opportunity is really that, you know, a crisis makes you think it creates new partnerships you hadn't considered before.”

It also raised questions about the government's role in community-based conservation areas, how to provide direct investment to conservancies at the community level and support conservancies to become engines of income generation themselves “rather than the model we've used in the past, which relies on intermediaries and civil society,” says Oluoch. “We actually have to realize that we are securing our own futures by turning these conservancies into businesses that are generating their own revenue and can weather future shocks, like another pandemic or climate change impacts, which are already being felt.”



A Lumo Conservancy ranger during a tree-planting exercise.

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