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info@arkandtent.com[Home](#)[Articles Index](#)[Travel Articles](#)[World Beat](#)[Helping Hands](#)[Pet Projects](#)[Field Notes](#)[Trips & Tours](#)[Reader's Corner](#)[Newsletter](#)[About Us](#)**MAASAI WILDERNESS CONSERVATION TRUST***Man and Beast Learn to Co-exist in the Shadow of Mt. Kilimanjaro***By Erin Caslavka**

In 1996, two Italians - Luca Belpietro and Antonella Bonomi - set about creating an eco-tourism lodge in the shadow of Mt. Kilimanjaro. A unique ecosystem exists in the shrub-covered portion of Kenya where the lodge, Campi ya Kanzi, sits; but also unique was the goal of using profits from the lodge to facilitate the protection and

preservation of the local environment, and to aid in the sustainability of the Maasai people and their way of life. Eventually, the humble endeavor grew to include 280,000 acres of Maasailand that Belpietro and Bonomi now jointly manage with the Maasai people who own it. In their combined efforts to preserve and protect the Kuku Group Ranch (as the area is otherwise known), the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust (MWCT) was formed.

Traditionally, the Maasai lived in harmony with their land, which for centuries was defended from outsiders by the majestic and fierce warriors. Thus, Maasailand has remained one of the few unspoiled African ecosystems still in existence. However, the current threats to their grassland ecosystem and to the Maasai way of life are proceeding at a stunning rate. These threats include overgrazing the grassland, diversion of water essential for wildlife, subdivision and land sales to non-Maasai, poaching for game meat, deforestation, and predator-human conflicts resulting in the killing of wildlife. The MWCT is focusing on conservation efforts to obtain protected conservation areas, recover wildlife populations and preserve the local ecosystem through a series of educational initiatives and programs.

According to the MWCT's website, "The Maasai are pastoral by tradition and do not farm. Thanks to this attitude they have always lived in great harmony with the wildlife. (However) there is pressure on the Massai to lease their land to other tribes, and thus, in the last few years, numerous small farms (that) produce little and are not sustainable in the long term, have appeared near the spring which has been the traditional source of local water and along the rivers that flow into the Kuku Group Ranch."

Traditionally, these “small farms” have not been a presence, so there’s never been a conflict-of-interest when it came to utilizing the existent water sources. But as recent additions to the ecosystem, the farmers and their water-hungry practices have created conflict with the local wildlife that also depend upon the same water sources. When these newly-introduced farming communities can’t raise their crops in drought-laden years, they turn to poaching to keep their families fed; not to mention the killing of wildlife they deem “crop-raiders.”

The MWCT’s current goal is to see these non-sustainable farms returned to the Maasai for stewardship so they can become protected wetlands. Along those same lines, their Wildlife Conservation goals are: to “create conservancy zones to preserve wilderness, protect wildlife and maintain critical migration corridors; to “protect access to springs and other natural water sources for the wildlife”; to “help limit conflicts where livestock, human beings and wildlife compete for the same sources of water”; and to “promote sustainable agriculture practices within the community.”



With education comes enlightenment. Therefore, the MWCT shows films in Maa (the language of the Maasai) and Kiswahili that help to educate them about the devastating effects of unsustainable agriculture, as well as the destructive effects of setting bush fires to clear the land for agricultural purposes as it ultimately depletes resources for both livestock and wildlife. By way of a solution, these films explain the benefits of rotational grazing and herd reduction.

But perhaps the most ambitious animal-related program the MWCT has initiated is its employment of "Simba Scouts." *Simba* means "lion" in Kiswahili, and in the past, Maasai warriors would track and spear a lion as a means of showing their bravery to the community. Instead of attempting to completely do away with the practice of interacting with the lions who live around them, instead the MWCT has enlisted Maasai warriors as guardians of the big cats. Scouts have been hired to track and monitor the resident lion populations (thereby putting their traditional skills of tracking and stalking to use), and as a result prides (or individual lions) can be followed and chased away from any areas where livestock herds are grazing.



MWCT also employs over 50 game scouts who act as protectors of the local environment. Additionally, they assist in the conservation efforts for the 280,000 acres of wilderness the Kuku Group Ranch encompasses. Under the directive of the group, these game scouts also report poaching incidents and aid in the arrest of the guilty parties.

Efforts to find ways to purchase necessary items such as solar systems for recharging radio batteries, flashlights, food, boots and uniforms are ongoing. Recently, several of the Maasai, as well as Luca Belpietro and actor Edward Norton, participated in the New York Marathon as part of a fundraising endeavor.

To learn more about the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust and its mission, or to contribute to the trust, go to: maasaitrust.org.

To plan a visit to Campi ya Kanzi, go to: www.maasai.com.

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