

*****News Flash*****

Amboseli National Park Abolished and Given to the Maasai

Kenya's Minister of Tourism and Wildlife on Thursday afternoon, September 29, signed a decree which officially de-gazetted Amboseli National Park and turned it over to the Olkejuado County Council to be run as a National Reserve. In effect this means that all gate receipts and other revenue will now go to the County Council instead of Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) which runs the National Parks. The rules and regulations for Reserves are more flexible regarding human activities within the boundaries, whereas conservation and tourism are supposed to be the only activities within National Parks. This declaration came as a complete surprise to nearly everyone including all of us at the Elephant Trust and even to the Kenya Wildlife Service. There are mixed reports on whether or not KWS will stay on to administer the Reserve. We await developments with great interest because there are many possible repercussions for the conservation of the Amboseli elephants.

The History of Amboseli

Some history is necessary to put this change of status into perspective. The Amboseli area has had a long history of conservation. In 1906, under colonial rule, the 27,700 sq. km. Southern Game Reserve, which includes present-day Amboseli, was created in recognition of the value of the abundant wildlife and unique habitats in this area. In 1948 the reserve was reduced to 3,260 sq. km. and was given the name of Amboseli National Reserve and placed under the administration of the National Park Trustees. A further change occurred in 1961 when the same area became a County Council Game Reserve administered by the Olkejuado County Council, which runs the district that Amboseli is in.

The Amboseli Game Reserve was run by the County Council for the next 10 years and then in 1971, because of concerns for the survival of Amboseli as a conservation area, a Presidential Decree was issued declaring that an area of 390 sq. km. surrounding the main swamps in the ecosystem be used exclusively for wildlife and tourism. Amboseli National Park was officially established in October 1974 and came under the control of the National Parks Trustees.

Over the next 31 years Amboseli National Park was run by the government authority or more recently the parastatal concerned with wildlife. The current body is the Kenya Wildlife Service which was established in 1989. Throughout my time in Amboseli, which is now 34 years, there have been many ups and downs in its administration, but over the last ten years or so, under KWS, Amboseli has been run relatively well.

The Maasai

That is the Park and conservation side of the story. The other side is that of the Maasai who have lived in the Amboseli area for hundreds of years. When Amboseli was declared a national park in 1974 it was done after long negotiations with the County Council, local politicians and the people. In return for keeping away from the central swamps of what had been the Game Reserve, the Maasai were promised a pipeline so that they could water their cattle outside. In addition they were to receive grazing compensation in the form of a lump sum of cash each year. Many other benefits accruing from tourism were also promised.

The pipeline was put in, but had inadequate volume and only worked sporadically; the grazing compensation was paid for three years and then stopped; and the benefits from tourism were meagre in comparison to what was hoped for. Within a short time the Maasai were unhappy with the arrangement and have been disgruntled ever since.

The Position of the Amboseli Trust for Elephants

After the initial shock of hearing that the decree had been issued, all of us on the project have been talking, corresponding and discussing the radical changes that will occur. We have always felt that the Maasai around Amboseli were side-lined and in many ways were treated unfairly when the National Park was created. We have long argued that they should be receiving far more benefits than they do in compensation for living in such close proximity to large dangerous wild animals. Even with our limited funds we have been able to help the Maasai in several ways: 1) we started the livestock consolation scheme in 1997 which pays for cattle, sheep and goats killed by elephants; 2) we pay scholarships and living expenses for Maasai students from Amboseli to attend university; 3) we pay the bursaries for girls to go to secondary school; 4) we employ seven research scouts, a Maasai liaison officer, camp workers, and research assistants from the local community; 5) we have helped local people find jobs in tourism and wildlife; 6) our Project Manager is a vital member of several committees set up to deal with Maasai issues; and 7) we have a major project on trying to find ways to alleviate human-elephant conflict in the areas where Maasai have started to farm.

How do we feel about the loss of National Park status for Amboseli? On the positive side there are other National Reserves that have been in existence in Kenya for many years. It is not a new concept for a local community to be in charge of a conservation area and the concept is, theoretically, a very good one. There is no reason why Amboseli could not become a model of a well-run National Reserve. There are, however, many pitfalls to be aware of. We hope that the lessons learned of mistakes and successes made in other community conservation areas will help inform the people of Amboseli. This is a tremendous opportunity for the Maasai to reap the benefits of conservation.

On the other hand, we do have some concerns. One of our main ones is the lack of trained personnel to run the Reserve. Before KWS wardens and rangers leave, we would like to see adequate preparation in terms of training and education in how to run a National Reserve. Another concern is the loss of income for Kenya Wildlife Service, since revenue generated from the popular Amboseli National Park is important for all its conservation efforts throughout Kenya. The wildlife in Amboseli will still be under the jurisdiction of KWS and thus many of its activities in the area such as anti-poaching, problem animal control, veterinary care, etc. may have to be curtailed when KWS loses the considerable revenue from Amboseli.

For now we stand by to see how things will develop, we offer any help we can give, we wish the Maasai well, and we hope with all our hearts that the elephants will be safe.

Cynthia Moss
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