

# Local Communities and Ecotourism Development in Kimana, Kenya

**Tom G. Ondicho**

*Massey University*

*School of Environment, People and Planning*

*New Zealand*

**Abstract:** *This article presents a case study of a wildlife-based ecotourism project in which the people of Kimana have sought to exploit the commercial advantage of their communal land which lies near Amboseli National Park (ANP) in southern Kenya. The Kimana Community Wildlife Sanctuary represents one of the best examples of a community-based ecotourism project that promotes the ideals of local participation in wildlife management and creates opportunities for the local Maasai pastoralists to benefit from wildlife tourism. Whilst local participation has a positive resonance, the case study suggests that a great deal of the ecotourism potential for the Kimana area has not materialised. The chapter concludes that internal political rifts within the community which have both hampered meaningful Maasai participation in tourism benefits and facilitated the exploitation of Kimana's tourism potential by external commercial operators.*

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Kimana, Kenya, Maasai, conservation, development, communities.

## Introduction

“Time had come for a new approach, an approach resting on fairness and local involvement rather than on alienation and enforcement. Why should local communities, not become the principal beneficiaries and ultimate custodians of wildlife, as they had always been, without sacrificing the larger interests of society” (Western, 1997 cited in Watkin, 2003: 5).

Ecotourism has aroused a considerable amount of interest in the last two decades, not only as a substitute to mass tourism, but also as an important convergence point for economic development and environmental conservation (Southgate, 2006; Watkin, 2003; West and Brenchin, 1991). Pundits maintain that ecotourism can potentially offer opportunities for local communities to benefit from tourism and environment while at the same time minimizing undesirable effects. However, some commentators have contended that ecotourism has so far not been proven to be either sustainable or economically viable. A growing number of scholars and researchers have suggested that local participation and control are essential and necessary in circumventing the difficulties that derive from mass tourism (Southgate, 2006; Western and Wright, 1994; Wells and Brandon, 1992). By keeping it small scale and benefits local, ecotourism may minimize economic leakages and undesirable impacts, and stimulate rural

development in destination areas. However, the global nature of tourism can engender many problems for communities yearning to retain control over the tourism industry at the local level. More often, local people neither have the business skills and connections nor the political and economic power to compete with transnational tour companies. Nonetheless, the growing economic significance of ecotourism has caught the interest of many people and communities especially in the developing countries. The Maasai of Kimana are one of such communities.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper is based on an ethnographic research I conducted for my dissertation amongst Maasai communities residing in two group ranches that lie adjacent to Amboseli National Park in Kenya. (See Fig. 1 and 2 showing the location of Amboseli and Kimana). Data was collected for a period of slightly over twelve months, with intermittent breaks, between November 2003 and 2005. The research incorporated a multi-sited ethnographic methodology. The resulting data were largely qualitative stemming from participant observation, in-depth informant interviews, text analysis of documents and focus group discussions.

### **The Context of Kimana Group Ranch**

The Kimana Tikondo Group Ranch (25, 120 ha) is situated at the base of the northern foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro and adjacent to Amboseli National Park in the newly created Loitokitok District in the Rift Valley of Kenya. Formerly owned jointly by some 845 extended families of the indigenous Ilkisonko Maasai pastoralists, the ranch has recently been subdivided into small and individually owned plots and ranches. Although large sections of the ranch are arid, there are also a number of wetlands including the Kimana swamp fed by the Kimana and Tikondo streams (Mburu, 2004; Rutten, 2004). These swamps are the main sources of permanent water in a region that receives low and unpredictable rainfall (ranging between 300 mm and 500 mm annually). These swamps and the vegetation around them were traditionally, according to the local Maasai pastoralists, one of their most important dry-season livestock grazing and watering refuges, and useful sources of food, fire wood, building materials, craft materials and medicine.

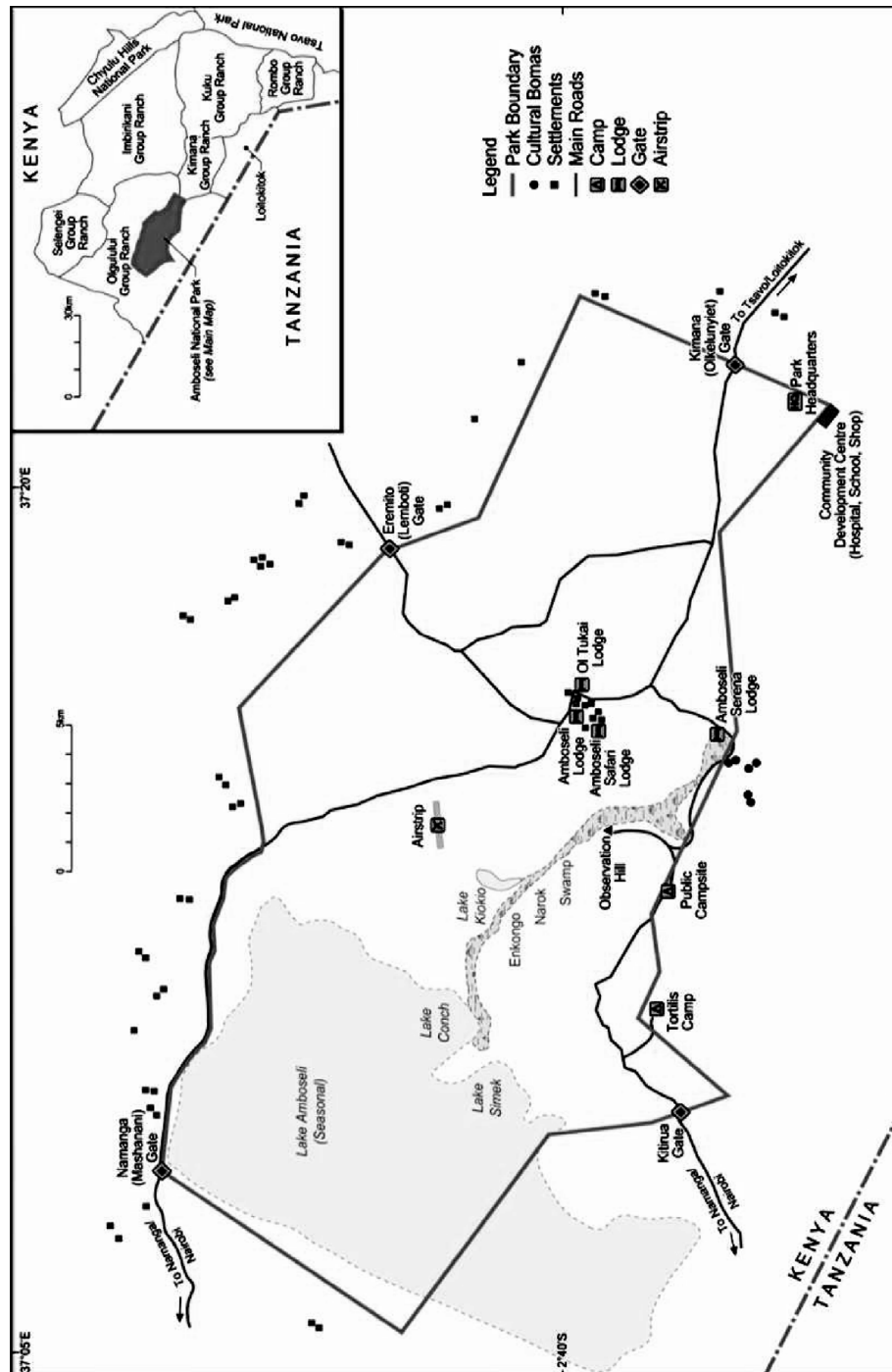
Kimana Group Ranch is also a very important dispersal area and seasonal migration corridor for wildlife between Amboseli and Tsavo National Parks. Because of the availability of permanent sources of water, Kimana Group Ranch offers opportunities for livestock herders, agriculturalists (majority of them recent migrants) and wild animals. However, as a result of competition for scarce range resources including water and pasture, serious conflicts often erupt between these user groups threatening their welfare and wellbeing as well as the areas biodiversity

(Rutten, 2004; Reid et al., 1999). The individualisation of land tenure has exacerbated these conflicts as the title holders fragment their land and either sell or lease a portion or the entire piece to Maasai elites and non-Maasai people (Monbiot, 1994). The new owners immediately fence and convert these lands into commercial beef or arable land, and sometimes tourist areas or other uses (Homewood, 1995). This hasty sale of land and the resultant loss of access and user rights over critical livelihood resources have driven many Maasai into landlessness and poverty (Hillman, 1994).

Whilst the Maasai are denied the opportunity to access the natural resources in the park, wildlife from park often forage on their lands spreading diseases to livestock and causing damages crops, livestock and human lives (Ecosystem, 1982). As a result, Maasai resentment towards wildlife conservation and tourism development has been on the increase. The negative attitudes are accentuated by the fact that the local Maasai pastoralists receive very few direct benefits from the revenues generated from conservation and tourism in their territory yet they are the ones who bear most of the costs from wildlife and the foregone opportunity of not using land for traditional activities accrue entirely to them (Ondicho, 2006). Exclusion from critical natural resources in the park essential for livestock production has had profound negative effects on the Maasai including growing poverty and breakdown in the social systems of livestock sharing and exchange. As a consequence the Maasai became overwhelming hostile to park and unsympathetic to wildlife. Talbot and Olindo (1990) lay the claim that in protest and frustration the Maasai started to spear wild animals. As a result wildlife, Kenyas been increasingly suffering major depletion.

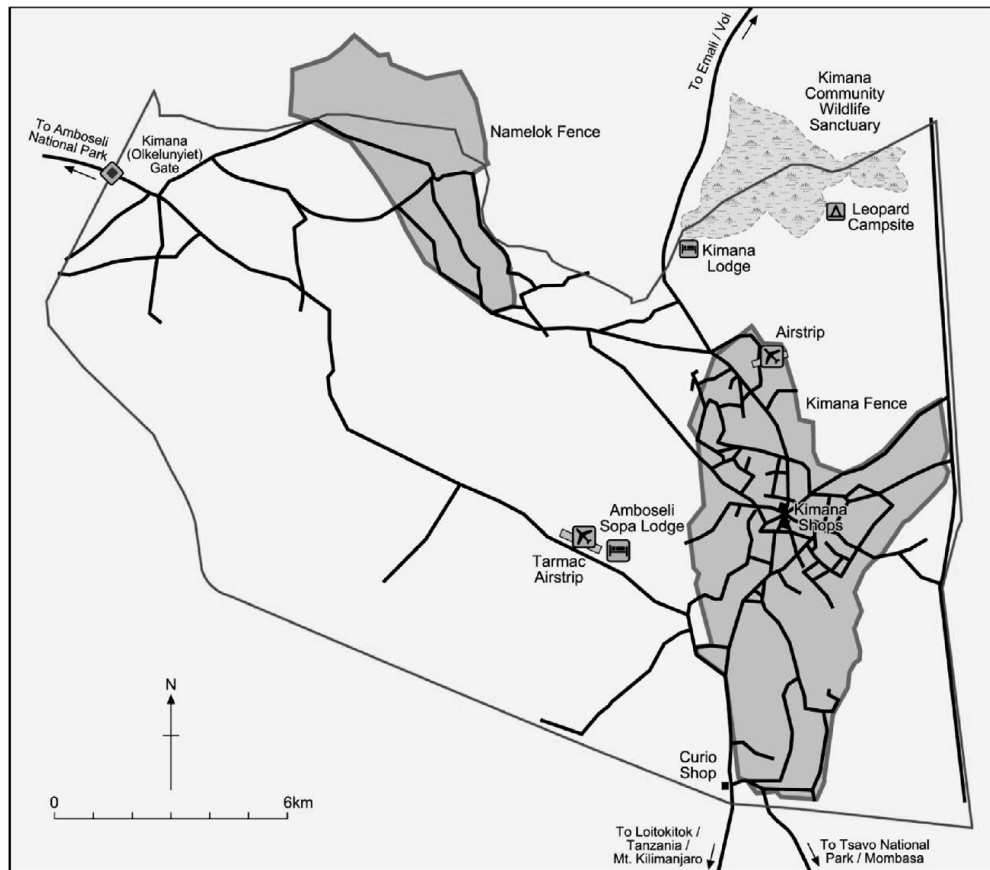
As a result of increased human-wildlife conflicts, poaching, and complications brought about by the sub-division of the group ranches in around Amboseli National Park, the government came into realisation that the future survival of the more than 75% of Kenyas wild animals that live seasonally or permanently outside the park dependent on the goodwill of the local Maasai pastoralists (Norton-Griffiths, 2000). The subdivision, fencing and conversion of Maasai groups ranches into privately owned farmlands was not only a threat to wildlife but also to the tourism industry which depended on it. Subsequently, in 1990 a major policy shift occurred when the newly formed Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) started to encourage and aid the Maasai to participate in conservation through the establishment of locally owned small-scale wildlife-based ecotourism projects as a form of commercial enterprise (KWS, 1990). Ecotourism was viewed as a viable tool not only to curb further wildlife losses but also to reconcile the otherwise intractable conflicts between conservation and development (Southgate, 2006). The assumption was that active local involvement in wildlife management and tourism benefits would provide economic alternatives which would, ultimately, relieve the day-to-day

pressures subsistence livelihoods placed on conservation. Subsequently, a growing number of the local pastoralists struggling for survival amidst declining livestock production are increasing turning to wildlife-based ecotourism to supplement their livelihoods and to spur development in their homelands. One of the best-known and pioneering examples of wildlife-based ecotourism initiatives in Kenya is the Kimana Community Wildlife Sanctuary (KCWS).



Source: Researcher (2008)

Fig. 2. Map of Kimana GR and location of the community Sanctuary



Source: Researcher (2008)

### The Development of Ecotourism in Kimana

KCWS was set up in 1996 after a preliminary Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the Kimana wetland to determine whether the proposed Sanctuary was the best land use option and the potential effects. The EIA report did not provide a conclusive verdict other than suggesting that “if the proposed Sanctuary proved to offer more rewards as opposed to those from cultivation the Maasai would no doubt discourage cultivation” Further the report envisaged that unless upstream irrigation was stopped the swamp would dry up, human-wildlife conflicts would increase and building of more campsites than the existing ones would bring adverse ecological impacts (Irigia 1995 cited in Rutten, 2004: 12). It was however acknowledged that the place was very suitable for wildlife viewing and sightseeing and would therefore be an ideal place for ecotourism development. Ease air (there are two airstrips: one in Kimana and the other within ANP) and road accessibility both directly from Nairobi and Mombasa together with proximity to Nairobi, (Kenya's capital city situated 240 km away) and Amboseli National Park which is only 15 kilometres away were added advantages for the establishment of an ecotourism project in Kimana Group Ranch.

Although the origin of the ecotourism project is not very clear, anecdotal accounts suggest that the idea of establishing a community



wildlife sanctuary in Kimana was initiated by KWS in an effort to win back some space for wildlife and further the parks conservation goals. The proposal to set up an ecotourism project at the Kimana swamp was first presented at a GR meeting in 1992, by a former GR chairman, a well-respected community elder, assisted by the parks Community Warden. As ANPs Community Warden stated,

*The Kimana swamp is generally a very beautiful place with lots of wildlife. The people wanted to subdivide and cultivate the swamp but KWS advised the locals that this would lead to the swamp drying up and vegetation withering. So we advised them to set-up a mini-Amboseli to attract fee paying tourists. We told them that the Sanctuary would belong to them and benefit them economically (Ruto, personal communication, 2004).*

As the idea of establishing a locally owned community-based wildlife Sanctuary began to spread, community opinion was divided over the wisdom of having such a project on their land. The proposal not only generated a lot of confusion but also social divisions within the community between proponents and critics. Generally, many people and particularly the older members of the community, who remembered how the government had in the 1970s failed to keep its promise of providing livestock watering points outside the Amboseli National Park strongly opposed the proposal (Rutten, 2004). As a local primary school teacher told me,

*Initially, there was a lot of resistance within the community because we had negative attitudes towards wildlife and tourism. We thought that KWS was going to take away our land and then we lose access to the water and pasture resources within the Kimana swamp. We also thought we were not going to benefit from the proposed Sanctuary because tourism was a white mans business and just for a few rich individuals. Then another challenge was, we only thought of tourism as the national park. So the general feeling was that if we accepted the Sanctuary project then ANP would be extended into Kimana group ranch. Many of us already knew the dangers of having a national park in our midst. ... However after a lot of persuasion the project gained a lot of support locally and it eventually succeeded (Sitonik, personal communication, 2003).*

Community wide consultations were carried out through a series of participatory village meetings where all community members were courted either as individuals or groups to support the project. These community wide sessions elicited mixed feelings ranging from downright confusion to fear of the potential negative socio-cultural changes that tourism could engender. However, a group of local elites who wanted to see the ecotourism development go ahead spoke to every community member explaining the potential benefits that could accrue to them from such a project. This core group of about 5 villagers was instrumental in influencing public opinion and the overall direction on the project. As one leading local womens leader

stated, “It was not until I heard more about the importance of wildlife conservation and the potential benefits that could accrue to us from tourism in the proposed Sanctuary that I realised it was worthwhile supporting” (Eunice, personal communication, 2004).

The KWS subsequently arranged and sponsored a small number of influential community leaders and elders to a study tour of successful community wildlife conservation projects in other parts of the country. The findings of the study tours were reported and deliberated upon in a GR meeting. In the meeting, it emerged that the community's biggest fear was that the “government will one day come and take the Sanctuary away from the land owners as it did with Amboseli claiming wildlife is a national resource so the government must control them” (Ntiati personal communication cited in Smith, 2001:1). However, the project was slowly accepted after the community was assured that the government had no designs on their land and that they would own the project. The major motivation for the members to accept and support a wildlife Sanctuary in their midst, however, was the desire to receive economic benefits. Each of the member families was promised an annual dividend paid from the entrance fees, lease fees from the three campsites and one game lodge in the Sanctuary, and a certain percentage of tourist bed nights. Some money could also be retained for joint community development projects such as a school and dispensary and a revolving loan scheme (Rutten, 2004). So whilst the concept of local participation in community-based wildlife conservation and tourism development was both novel and strange the possibility of making money was enthusiastically welcomed. In fact, without the promise of money a community wildlife sanctuary would not have made sense to the people of Kimana whose main source of livelihood, livestock production heavily depended on the swamp.

With the promise of money on the horizon the KCWS was born. This marked the first time that the Maasai were drawn into conservation-oriented tourism development. As one resident recalled, “to be honesty it was a very rough beginning. We never had any experience with either tourism or conservation ... we even didnt know our role in the whole process and how tourism worked, so we just waited to see the outcome. People never believed it could come to pass” (Onetu, personal communication, 2003). Trusting that the community was going to benefit the project got underway. The funds for the project were provided by several international donors including USAID, WB and Kenyan government. In addition to these donors, a large number of other stakeholders including conservation-oriented NGOs, researchers and volunteers provided infrastructural, material and technical support. For instance, The European Union donated money for a 61km game-proof fence which was put up around the western edge of ANP in 1997. The Friends of Conservation (FoC) and The Amboseli Community Wildlife Project (ACWP) helped in planning, designing and organising the

construction of the required infrastructure including the gates, the purchase of uniforms and the acquisition of entrance-ticket books (Gicharu, 1999 cited in Rutten, 2004: 13). In addition to employing a manager and paying salaries for the Sanctuaries staff, KWS also contributed a road network, a toilet block, staff housing and in training 17 community game rangers and 7 community wildlife scouts.

With the basic infrastructure in place the final step was to attract tourists. Towards this end, the Sanctuary negotiated a deal with a private tour operator to build a luxury lodge in the Sanctuary and channel tourists to the area. The neighbouring lodges, Kilimanjaro Buffalo (now Amboseli Sopa Lodge), and Kimana Lodge both owned by Kilimanjaro Safari Club together with the three leased tented camps within the Sanctuary were to assist in marketing the resort internationally. Additional overseas exposure and marketing was provided by a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary recorded in the Sanctuary. For the local market, marketing was done by Abercrombie and Kent (A&K) under a commission arrangement with the Sanctuary (Gicharu, 1999 cited in Rutten, 2004: 14). In marketing the Sanctuary had a tremendous advantage due to its close proximity to the ANP. The entry fee into the Sanctuary was fixed at US\$ 10 per person, which was considerably lower than the US\$ 27 per person charged by ANP at that time. It was anticipated that lower entrance fees would attract visitors from ANP.

When the Sanctuary opened its doors for business in February 1996 it attracted an overwhelming amount of media coverage both locally and internationally as the first genuinely community owned and run wildlife Sanctuary in East Africa. In recognition of its significance to the countrys conservation efforts, the Kenyan government and international organisations hired a Royal Ballet to perform a specially choreographed production in the middle of the Sanctuary during the opening ceremony. For its pioneering and exemplary work in community-based wildlife conservation the Sanctuary was granted the prestigious „Silver Otter award by the British Guild of Travel Writers in 1996 (Southgate, 2006). This was the first time Kenya had ever received such an award. The Sanctuaries success stories were told around the globe and the future looked even more promising especially for the people of Kimana. In fact, the Sanctuary was locally perceived as one of the biggest and most significant developments in the history of Kimana, so much so that it formed a dividing line between the past and the present. Even today, 1996 is remembered as the landmark year for the Maasai communitys involvement in wildlife tourism.

Shortly after its official opening, the Sanctuary began attracting tourists and by the end of the first year it had hosted 800 visitors (KWS, 1997 cited in Rutten, 2004: 14). The people of Kimana were amazed to see tourists flock to the Sanctuary. Many villagers could not believe that this same old wetland they had grown up with and took for granted had brought the inevitable. This was surprising, considering that tourism was



something they had watched since ANP was created, but they had not been directly involved with in any way. People could have never guessed that tourists would pay money to visit Kimana. I asked residents, "Did you believe that tourists would ever come and pay to see animals in your ranch?" The common reply was simply, "the truth is that we honestly didn't know that could happen". Within a short period, Kimana put itself on the international tourist map and tourists quickly became acquainted with the Sanctuary, apparently unaware of the latent controversies that surrounded its establishment or the larger political and ecological context in which tourism and conservation in Amboseli are situated.

In spite of the initial opposition, the people of Kimana overwhelmingly and enthusiastically threw their support behind the Sanctuary and many villagers started to exhibit positive attitudes towards wildlife and tourism. Instead of spearing wild animals, they protected them as a valuable economic asset that needed everybody's care. As one local resident stated, "It is now our collective responsibility to ensure that wildlife is protected so that we can all draw benefits from it" (Lekolol, personal communication, 2005). Another resident, a female teacher said,

*Many people have changed their attitude towards wildlife because of tourism. Now wild animals are earning them a living ... When tourists come to see the animals in the Sanctuary they pay us money and they also purchase our souvenirs ... now people have the attitude that if you kill wildlife there will be no tourism within this area and the community will no longer get money (Florence, personal communication 2005).*

Everything looked promising for the inhabitants of Kimana GR particularly as tourists continued to flock into the Sanctuary - for it had an appeal of its own. Walking around the Sanctuary was not only a natural experience but also a cultural one since a cultural boma at the edge of the Sanctuary satisfied the needs of tourists interested in Maasai lifestyles. Instead of competing with the national park the Sanctuary complimented it perfectly well. Generally, the motivation behind the establishment of the community Sanctuary was government quest to protect and conserve the fragile wildlife resources of ANP. Community participation in income-generating opportunities in tourism was just a bait to achieve conservation goals. In spite of the project being conceived by KWS many local Maasai strongly believed that it was they who initiated the project. In any case, they were the recognised owners of the Sanctuary.

## **Analysis**

Soon after the Sanctuary's inception a situation arose where the Kimana people became doubtful of the GR committee and KWS's style of management and also fading project support. KWS had from the beginning sought to control the operations of the Sanctuary. Towards this end it (KWS) worked with the GR treasurer and secretary excluding the illiterate

chairman and other members (Knegt, 1998 cited in Rutten 2004: 14). “Over the intervening years, GR members were consulted only twice: during one Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) meeting and the annual general meeting when the decision to establish the Sanctuary had been made” (Rutten, 2004:14). The twin issues of representation and responsibility were not seriously addressed by KWS, yet they affect operational issues such as openness in financial management and decision making (Muthiani, 2001 cited in Rutten, 2004:14). As one local resident stated,

*The trouble was that KWS had a different agenda from that of the community. KWS was only interested in securing more land for wildlife and preserving natural habitats for wildlife use. When they found out that most wildlife exists in our land outside the park, they thought they'd better do something to keep us busy and happy so that we support their conservation efforts in the park (Lekanaiya, personal communication, 2004).*

A local management board was appointed by the GR committee in 1998 to take over the Sanctuary's management responsibility which had been relinquished by KWS. The board was theoretically supposed to handle all administrative and financial affairs. However, in practice the board had only a ceremonial role because of the GR committee's refusal to transfer the management responsibilities to it as originally agreed. This unwillingness to cede management powers to the board, which became a contentious issue locally, is a clear manifestation of the significance of political control over the Sanctuary's revenues. Some board and community members began to voice serious complaints and suspicions about lack of transparency and accountability in the handling of the Sanctuary's finances. The GR committee was criticised for failure to pay dividends and spending group money without consulting the board and GR members and collusion with outsiders to defraud the landowners. The management board later on resigned over major disagreements with the GR leadership on the Sanctuary's management (Muthiani 2001 cited in Rutten, 2004). One former civic leader expressed his opinion in this way,

*For a long time we were not aware of the level of corruption that was going on in the Sanctuary. However, at some stage we saw the dishonesty and greediness of the GRC members come out in the open. We have seen some of our own brothers collude with outsiders to steal from us. There are some educated Maasai amongst us who have started to ask questions. They are also talking to their relatives and slowly the people are awakening. People are right now talking about the amount of corruption going on there. To some extent people have started to vet seriously people seeking management positions in the GRC (Kipaa, personal communication, 2004).*

Poor marketing of the Sanctuary by the three campsite concession holders and neighbouring game lodges may have to a large extent contributed

to its pathetic performance. In practice, each of the three concession holders had attempted to play each against the other in an effort to keep control over the Sanctuary (Kanene, 2002 cited in Rutten, 2004: 15). As a result, a poor relationship developed between the concession holders and the community. Unfortunately, with no proper mechanism for co-management of the Sanctuary and conflict resolution, differences over cattle-grazing areas and resource harvesting further contributed to the deterioration of the relationship between the community and the concession holders. Lease fees were always either in arrears or not paid at all, and in spite of demands by the GR committee for payment (ibid). Nobody in the community knew how much they earned since they never declared their occupancy rates and income. Although GR members demanded a review of the statements of account both for the Sanctuary and the concession holders this was never undertaken or given and no adequate solution was immediately found.

In an attempt to revive the erstwhile success story, the GR committee in 1999 made a move to find a private investor to manage the Sanctuary. This decision was hastened by the failure of the Sanctuary to attract tourists and a huge debt in unpaid salaries. Towards this end, the GR committee informally approached various tour companies operating in the area including Abercrombie and Kent (A&K), African Safari Club (ASC) and the Kilimanjaro Safari Club with a view to leasing the Sanctuary to them (Buysrogge, 2001 cited in Rutten, 2004:16). However, only A&K and ASC showed interest. Most GR members preferred A&K which offered flexible terms about grazing and the collecting of resources inside the Sanctuary but the GR committee opted to lease the Sanctuary to ASC. During negotiations with ASC the landowners were told that only the original 2,720ha (6, 793 acres) would be leased out. However, after the signing of the lease agreement it emerged that the land involved was 14,000 acres. The size of the lease land had certainly been extended deceitfully without the knowledge of all GR members (Rutten, 2004). As one local teacher stated,

*The level of illiteracy in our community is very high. Once you have a group of men and women who cannot read or write it is quite easy to manipulate them because they do not understand how the modern system works, and how contracts are negotiated or enterprises are run ... it is very easy for them to be conned, abused and taken advantage of. Illiteracy and ignorance really puts our people in a vulnerable and disadvantaged position (Kilelu, personal communication, 2003).*

There was a lot of suspicion within the community that the GR committee was bribed to accept the ASC's offer and terms. The fact that the GR committee signed the lease contract, without informing and consulting with the members, gave credence to these claims. ASC was criticised for conniving with the GR committee to steal from the people of Kimana. The Kimana people perceived ASC as acting to deny the community control and

access to the Sanctuary and tourism activity. The community believed that foreigners had abrogated the role of the GR committee in the management of the Sanctuary. The failure to advertise the partnership and later to pay dividends led to the conclusion that an underhand deal to swindle the members existed. Some respondents suggested that local elites were to blame for the problems that emerged. When asked if people of Kimana had benefited from the leasehold with ASC, a retired civil servant retorted,

*In Kenya today it is impossible for poor to benefit from tourism and wildlife in their lands. As long as political elites and government bureaucrats have an interest in the tourism you cannot stand on their way. They have greater monetary and political power, so whether or not all the Maasai are involved in tourism it will not make a difference. To be very specific, some of our own people have seen the potential and in the process have tried to get to the mainstream of the tourism industry. And in the process of that they have compromised quite a lot. They have compromised the interests of their own people, compromised the interest of the environment, and the entire Amboseli region. Some of our own people are to blame for what's happening today (Mmoi, personal communication, 2004).*

After ASC signing the lease agreement KWS's involvement was maintained at a lower level and only a few GR members were directly involved in collecting the lease money and solving grazing disputes (Mburu, 2002). The leasing of the Sanctuary demonstrated a conflict of interest over the management responsibility between the various stakeholders. Each of these stakeholders had their own interests they wanted to further. These competing and often differing interests of the Sanctuary's main stakeholders were the cause of many local social conflicts, power struggles and political controversies over benefit sharing. The external tour operators and investors sought to make profits whilst the government through KWS and other conservation organisations sought to conserve biodiversity as a source of earning foreign exchange. These objectives differed from the subsistence needs of the Maasai people.

### **Staff - Management Relations**

The main motivation for supporting the Sanctuary was the promise that it could create employment and training opportunities for the people of Kimana. While this did not engender any problems but when ASC started running the Sanctuary it did. Despite the agreement with ASC that most of its staff would come from Kimana only a few low-waged seasonal unskilled and manual jobs such as those of security guards, rangers, porters, casual construction workers and cleaners were made available to the local people. Most of the skilled positions such as those of managers, drivers, were filled with employees transferred or rather sourced from its (ASC) Mombasa premises (Buysrogge, 2001 cited in Rutten, 2004: 18). As one civic leader

observed, “Our people have limited access to well-paying skilled jobs in the Sanctuary. Well paying jobs are certainly out of the reach of our people” (Saire, personal communication, 2005). A local manager at the community campsite further confirmed this assertion when he stated,

*Sadly we have very high rates of unemployment amongst our people because of their generally low levels of education. The growth in tourism has created employment opportunities for the Maasai but these jobs tend to be short term and insecure. The tourist industry provides our people with only part-time and seasonal unskilled employment, and not full time secure employment. What our people really need are more skilled and secure full-time jobs (Nkadayo, personal communication, 2005).*

Most of my informants told me that they were unhappy with the employment situation in the Sanctuary. The general feeling was that employment opportunities including those that did not require any special skills or formal education were given to outsiders who just dressed like the Maasai. The most cited examples involved the positions of cleaners and watchmen. Many interviewees claimed that non-local managers often deny the Maasai employment opportunities by hiring people from other parts of the country. As a local primary school teacher stated,

*The Maasai have been denied job training and employment by the tourism lodges here ... many locals have not been employed in the tourism facilities here because managers often judge the Maasai to be incapable of advanced training. I feel this is a form of discrimination against the Maasai in their own soil ... The Maasai people are fully capable of job training and employment; they just need to be given a chance” (Raphael, personal communication, 2005).*

In the view of some of the Maasai staff I interviewed, the so-called skilled jobs were tasks that many ordinary villagers could perform. Many villagers also lamented that it was difficult to get employment in the Sanctuary because of the requirement for one to obtain a letter of recommendation from the GR officials. However, such recommendations were selectively given to clansmen and friends (Rutten, 2004). This means that not only do people from some clans dominate employment in the Sanctuary but also jobs are available to only a minority of the residents and not necessarily the poor. I asked one Lodge manager why the Maasai were not employed in the game lodges in Amboseli and she responded,

*The Maasai lack the required skills because many of them drop out of school early ... they are incapable of advanced training ... they are only suitable for menial jobs such as security guards because they are accustomed to guarding their livestock ... the Maasai are unreliable people because they come and go as they must attend to their livestock herds and many wives (June, personal communication, 2005).*



The other important issue that came up during interview sessions with local employees was the lack of security of tenure. Several interviewees stated that locally based tourism enterprise managers held problematic views about Maasai staff such as they were lazy and unreliable. These views rendered their relationship with Maasai staff difficult. As a result, the relationship between the Maasai employees and the expatriate managers was one characterised by hostility and mistrust. Some Maasai staff had resigned or lost work as a consequence. As one Maasai who had lost employment as generator operator for the electric fence stated, “In most cases the Maasai are hired and fired by word of mouth as they were never given any chance to enter into a formal employment contract like other employees from outside the region” (Matiko, personal communication, 2003). This means that the employment agreement with Maasai was very loose, thus giving the employers the advantage of dealing with the local employees in a way which suited them not employees. Generally, working conditions were tough especially for the Maasai who were tasked with the responsibility of keeping away wildlife from the camps. I was told that those local employees who raised or attempted to raise any complaints were either fired instantly or suspended without justification. Without any support from a trade union or employment organisation many are left to serve at the mercy of the managers.

Most Maasais working in the resort on a casual basis lamented that they were not only paid low salaries compared to employees from outside the community and never received any payment or benefit from their employers during the off-season but also were denied permission to attend customary activities and events such as funerals and ceremonies. In cases where such permission was granted a deduction was made from their meagre salaries for the days when they were absent. In such an environment small problems became magnified and tension was heightened with the Maasai, who felt that they were being treated unfairly in their own territory.

### **Finances, Benefits and Leadership**

The initial investment for setting up the Sanctuary and its infrastructural was vast and could not be met fully through donations. A business plan drawn up by KWS for the Sanctuary projected that Ksh. 9 million would be needed for further infrastructure development and capacity building. KWS pledged Ksh 6 million and the remainder of the money were to come from the Sanctuary’s profits (Muthiani, 2001 cited in Rutten, 2004: 13). Although the KWS financed infrastructural developments in the Sanctuary to the tune of Ksh. 4.2 million this was far much below what it had pledged. Relative to the initially projected annual earnings based on estimated financial investment costs the capital spent and the time needed to begin profitable operations were considerably underestimated. This gap and the other financial and accounting confusions resulted in negative

repercussions upon the villagers and also their relationship with the GRC and foreign investors.

The Sanctuary's budgetary deficits were attributed to lack of transparency and accountability in the GR leadership. While the money collected from entrance fees by the Community Game Scouts was handed over to the GR treasurer nobody within the community knew how these funds were spent. This money which amounted to Ksh. 1 million in the first year was supposed to be put in a bank account and then distributed to members at the end of every year minus management costs. Over and above this the GR was to be paid a certain share of the bed nightly bed lodging rate received from tourists. This fee per visitor per a night was supposed to be invested in the construction of a school and clinic and to support other special community projects and the running of a small „soft loans scheme for members (Knegt, 1998 cited in Rutten, 2004: 15).

The GRC was censured for being not only secretive and dishonest but also running the Sanctuary as their personal property (Mburu, 2004). As one resident aptly put it, "the GRC members are doing business for themselves that is why they are building new houses and buying cars" (Onetu, personal communication, 2005). Whatever actual income was generated from the Sanctuary it was difficult for the villagers to comprehend because of the high operating costs. The people of Kimana could see foreign tourists visit and/or stay at the campsites and lodge in their Sanctuary but no profits in terms of direct dividends were forthcoming as had been expected and promised. As one Kimana ranger lamented: "we are now really very tired of waiting for the economic benefits we were promised from the Sanctuary to come ... we have grown impatient ... if we are to realise any benefits we need change at the top" (Sakuda, Personal Communication, 2005). The only local people who have so far claimed any profits from the Sanctuary, are a few elites many of who were wealthy and politically powerful members of the community. Otherwise, a huge junk of the Sanctuary's tourism revenue was garnered by the foreign investors, tour operators, middlemen and the government. This confirms Crick's assertion that tourism industry is notorious for the „uphill' flow of benefits: profits normally flow to those who are already wealthy, and thus the overall effect of tourism is often to reinforce existing patterns of inequality (1994: 94).

By the time of this study many local people had become not only restless and desperate but also lamented the positive decision they had made a few years ago to set up a wildlife Sanctuary in their most important remaining dry season livestock refuge. The enthusiasm that greeted the Sanctuary at its inception was no more and by the time of this study community members had lost their goodwill towards the Sanctuary as it was no closer to the ideal of community participation which they had been told. Some villagers claimed that they had lost faith in their leaders and that they felt cheated

or even misled to support the Sanctuary project. They even hinted that loss of access to water and pasture in the Sanctuary had contributed to poverty in the community. They accused their own leaders of being responsible for the mess. As one local member of the Kimana Game Scouts Association explained "... a general low opinion of the community is to a certain extent justifiable as the GRC responsible for running the Sanctuary did a shoddy work" (Ole Saina, personal communication, 2005).

However, some interviewees reported that the community had received some indirect benefits from the Sanctuary such as the construction of an electric fence, school and health clinic, together with education bursaries and some revenue from the park under the sharing scheme. These benefits were not necessarily a direct result of the Sanctuary but are part of other initiatives that all group ranches in the area have received regardless of whether or not they created a wildlife Sanctuary on their land. In many ways the Sanctuary and tourism had created a mind-set of anticipation. The failure to deliver economic benefits thus became a major source of increased social conflicts and power struggles for political control over the Sanctuary's revenues at the community level. In the next section I will shed light on how political and power relations, induced by external interest groups, within the community affected the smooth operation of the Sanctuary.

### **Political relations**

Political relations within the community affected the effective management of the Sanctuary and, subsequently, the realisation of the anticipated benefits for the members. The management of the Sanctuary was often mired in controversy and political power struggles revolving around the issue of equitable resource and benefits distribution. The resultant competition, for control over the Sanctuary's decision-making process and income, generated various conflicts and tensions that consequently impeded the smooth operation of the Sanctuary. A basic factor that heightened internal political pressures within the community was loss of access to traditional natural resources within the Sanctuary, mainly water and pasture. Shortly after taking over the management responsibility signs were erected around the Sanctuary by the ASC management warning local Maasai that the land had been designated 'private' property and that they were to stay clear. Evidence of local feelings can be seen by the large number of spear holes and scratches concealing the word private on the signs (Southgate, 2006). The conflict over water and pasture was evident in 1999, a year of serious drought, when Kimana members allowed their livestock to return to the Sanctuary. This angered the foreign partners who demanded that Maasai livestock be kept out of the Sanctuary, to the consternation of the already distressed land owners. As one older resident stated,

*Livestock holds significant meaning to the Maasai society, not just economically but also socially ... livestock is both the cultural and economic life of the Maasai and must be recognised as such. ... We are more interested in pasture and water for our livestock. Livestock is our livelihood (Saire, personal communication, 2005).*

It is worth noting here that the concept of group ranches, managed by an executive committee elected periodically by all group ranch members to discuss and make joint decisions on behalf of their communities, is a recent development amongst the Maasai (Southgate, 2006). However, the concept of Western democracy is something with which the Maasai had not been familiar. For instance, during the 1970s only one election was held in Kimana as one village elder recalled, “people did not know the importance of group ranch elections at the time”. As a result, it is not surprising that group ranch elections rarely took place, and when they did occur they were not the annual democratic events they were supposed to be. The Annual General Meetings would often fail to achieve the necessary 60% quorum required for elections to be legally binding, and thus the legitimacy of the elections held in 1980, 1986, 1993 and 2003 has been increasingly challenged over the years. Often politicians and bureaucrats rigged the elections in favour of young educated and easy to manipulate individuals (Rutten, 2004). By vesting the power to control the group ranches in the hands of young elite group leaders, prominent figures were able to gain access to some of Kenya’s prized land and key natural resources, in return for promises of political promotion and a share of the benefits.

It is important to point out here, that when I began the active phase of my research in Kimana political campaigns for a parliamentary by-election were beginning to take shape. Ten political parties were taking part in the by-election, which was held on Wednesday 19 November 2003. Although each party supplied a candidate, the main contest was between candidates from two main political parties, that is, the ruling NARC and the official opposition KANU. Before the day of the election, for close to three weeks, campaign rallies were held in the vast Kajiado South Constituency in order to canvas for votes. Whilst during the campaigning, politicians used tourism as a symbolic weapon for political contest and although they expressed different viewpoints, they did not oppose it. The by-election was eventually won the NARC candidate, who was a second year Computer Science student at the University of Nairobi and the youngest of all the contestants. This result was a clear indication of how a young and well-educated man can take up the role of traditional elders in the management of community affairs.

In an attempt to follow the intricacies of Maasai politics, I was alerted to the „workings’ of clan politics at the grassroots level, and how politics affected community relations and perspectives on several issues including tourism. Clan affiliation was a major determinant in deciding the eventual

winner of the by-election. The winner hailed from one of the largest sub-clans in the constituency. It became evident that whilst traditionally age-grade and set affiliations provided the very basis of collaboration and co-operation, the clan has become the medium through which political support can be harnessed and client-patron networks established. Maasai clans have become vehicles through which key politicians elicit political support, in the same way as they exploited the age-group system. Suffice to say that the clan plays a central role in political relations. Clan monopoly over political and social power, amongst the Maasai, has had deleterious impact on development in the Amboseli region.

This political and clan divide was also well rehearsed in group ranch and tourism enterprise leadership contests. For many Maasai villagers, democracy has become increasingly associated with increased conflicts and power struggles for political control over resources (natural and financial) at the community level. The popular perception of political leaders and parties is that they have taken the democratic system as an opportunity to enrich themselves, at the expense of the public. Serious conflict between political parties and interest groups has become extreme in Kimana. Many local people bemoaned how clan and party politics had polarised the community and they felt that this was unfortunate but nevertheless an important part of life. Many associate this development with democracy itself, and consequently they have an entirely negative image of what it means.

When the national political regime and group ranch leadership changed, the Sanctuary became a focus of internal clan-based leadership struggles for control over the Sanctuary and its revenues. The evidence of tourism, as a new arena of age-old inter-clan rivalries, crystallised in struggle over the rights to serve at the group ranch cultural boma. It was felt that it was only members of one clan that were benefiting from the group ranch boma (through direct sales of handicrafts to tourists). Many of the villagers I talked with expressed their annoyance that the majority of those who served at the boma were from the same clan as the former officials. The general perception was that these people were benefiting enormously. Consequently, this provoked other clans to demand equal representation, and indeed a decision was taken to have each clan appoint representatives to serve at the boma. However, similar representation has not yet been achieved in the GRC. Generally, the contest for Kimana's commercially valuable resources is now vehemently being fought between clans. There is no quick solution to the problem and it will also be a setback to other forms of economic development.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted that although local participation in ecotourism has the potential to merge the interests of conservation and development, the



reality is different. The case study has shown that rather than empowering the Maasai to take control over the management of natural resources in their area, ecotourism has served to reproduce and strengthen the predominant values, beliefs, and institutional procedures which benefit the state, foreign tour operators and investors as well as a few local elites. Inequitable participation in benefit sharing and decision-making processes has engendered power struggles and social conflicts which threaten not only to tear the community apart but also to compromise the chances of the Maasai prospering from the resources in their area and their involvement in ecotourism.

In conclusion, ecotourism, if cautiously designed and managed, can provide a sustainable return, much of which can be retained within the local community and thus contribute to development. However, for local participation in wildlife-based ecotourism development in Kimana to succeed issues that relate to local ownership, equitable benefit sharing, good governance and political control over access and user rights of land resources need to be more carefully addressed. There is also urgent need to develop local capacity particularly in the fields of management and business skills. Training especially in leadership and micro-enterprises management skills will in the long run equip the Maasai with sufficient business expertise that will enable them not only to negotiate equitable and sustainable relationships with other actors and agencies in ecotourism development but also to undertake collective action in natural resource management.

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### About the Author

Tom G. Ondicho, PhD is a Research Fellow and Lecturer at the Institute of Anthropology, Gender and African Studies (IAGAS), University of Nairobi. He received his PhD from Massey university in Palmerston North, New Zealand, and his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the then Institute of African studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya. He specialises in the Anthropology of tourism. His research interests are in the broad areas of indigenous tourism, community based tourism development and gender and tourism. E-mail: [tondicho@hotmail.com](mailto:tondicho@hotmail.com)