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THE EFFECT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE CONSERVATION OF MAASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The conservation of National Reserves across the globe is a tourist policy priority, aimed at ensuring the sustainability of biodiversity. In Kenya, the areas have been gazetted as protected; however, despite the recent legal frameworks, little is known about the utilization of the social and cultural knowledge and leadership of the local communities in conservation of the reserves, the Maasai Mara being one of them. This study, therefore, sought to examine the role of socio-cultural practices in the conservation of Maasai Mara National Reserve, in Narok County, Kenya. The study was guided by the descriptive research design, and data were collected using questionnaires. A sample size of 200 was used. A pilot study was carried out in the Mara Siana Conservancy. The collected data was supported by secondary data. Research authorization was sought from Kenyatta University, and a research permit from NACOSTI. Anonymity and confidentiality were adhered to. Results indicated that there is a positive correlation between socio-cultural practices and conservation of the Maasai Mara National Reserve. These practices included the incorporation of the Maasai cultural traditions in conservation, the utilization of traditional leadership, and the practice of cultural tourism.

Keywords: *Social; Cultural; Conservation; Maasai Mara National Reserve*

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Conservation of national reserves across the globe is an important gesture that serves to preserve tourism, ensure the sustainability of wildlife, and secure employment opportunities for locals who depend on them for their livelihoods. Additionally, effective conservation and management of protected areas such as national parks and reserves are key essentials in the contribution of human wellbeing, biodiversity, and environmental health, and this depends on the presence of adequate capacity among relevant institutions, civic education among communities and all stakeholders involved, and ensuring popular participation (Huber, 2023).

In the United States of America, the dominant factor in conservation efforts, according to Joppa and Pfaff (2010) is the protected areas, a tool used to conserve not only the land cover, but the entire ecosystem ecology. While determining the impact of protected areas, the study focused on national parks across all states as a strategy followed globally in conservation. The results showed that the conservation efforts implemented through the setting aside of protected areas have reduced habitat loss and led to a decrease in deforestation. Additionally, results determined that the effectiveness of the implemented conservation policies was highly dependent on the level of enforcement, social and economic pressures, and the locations of the reserves.

In Thailand, reports indicate a rapid loss of forest cover in national parks due to the conversion of the habitats into agricultural lands through encroachment. This has been achieved through demarcation and declaration of protected areas to curb deforestation, but enforcement is challenged by differences in the governance quality and commitment to conservation policies, and strict protection has so far not guaranteed effective conservation results.

In Brazil, UNEP-WCMC & IUCN (2024), while reporting on protected areas in the Amazon region, a host to the world's largest tropical forests and an extensive network of protected areas, noted that the country holds a global coverage of terrestrial protection at 17.6%, making the country a significant contributor to forest conservation. The policy on conservation efforts has been on the rise since 2020, with More than 629,000 km^2 of land being under protection. The report further alluded that, despite the gains, conservation policy outcomes depended on how the policies are implemented, as well as the adoption and utilization of indigenous ways of governing the land.

In South Africa, the GIZ (2021), while exploring Africa's protected natural resources, noted that the country is leading in the wildlife economy and the number of areas protected for conservation. These protected areas have led to sustainable tourism and ecosystems, thus creating an enormous economic value for the country. Additionally, conservation is implemented through mixed governance models such as public-private partnerships and the inclusion of the local communities. However, despite the policies in place and implementation efforts, South Africa's conservation of protected areas faces several threats, including climate change effects and rapid land use changes.

In South Sudan, IUCN ESARO (2024) investigated the areas under conservation during an era of political instability. The results indicated that conservation efforts are greatly affected by rampant insecurity brought on by conflicts and the governance structures that have been weakened over time. This has therefore led to limited conservation efforts coupled with limited and, in most cases, a lack of enforcement, and poor conservation monitoring systems. A key issue noted was the existence of protected areas on paper, but not in real-life practice.

In the East African community, IUCN Eastern and Southern Africa (ESARO, 2024), while investigating the conservation efforts status of the protected areas, reported many issues touching on Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda. In the over 55000 protected areas in the region, there are common conservation challenges; the rapid decline of biodiversity, expansion of agricultural activities, and ever-rising growth of the population. Additionally, there is a visible disparity in the conservation of protected lands across the three countries, but they all face similar challenges, such as inadequate financial resources, weak enforcement of conservation

policies, and a lack of adequate connectivity within the ecology. Moreover, it was noted that there exists a shift of conservation efforts towards the adoption of community-based models. However, the efforts are inadequate in curbing degradation along the edge of protected areas and encroachment.

In Kenya, national parks, community and private conservancies and reserves are heavily relied on for the conservation of biodiversity. These areas are protected, and the policies in the areas that form refuge for critical species, but it was noted that across the parks, many species are not well presented, leading to a decline in certain species over others. Additionally, effective conservation of protected areas in the country is tied to the engagement of local community members and creation of a working connection that links their norms with conservation (Onditi, Li, and Song, 2021).

In the Maasai Mara National Reserve, Tubey, Kyalo, and Mulwa (2019) investigated the strategies tied to social and economic conservation efforts and how they affected the sustainability of local conservation efforts in the community-based tourism subsector. The results showed that the Maasai cultural practices had a direct and positive relationship with the sustainability of conservation. These cultural norms were reported to include the Maasai cultural heritage that entails the utilization of traditional knowledge, skills, and practices, and how the knowledge is transferred, aspects considered key conservation efforts. However, it was noted that the change of land use and the erosion of the traditional Maasai values and practices are now a threat to conservation.

Based on this background, the study therefore sought to investigate the effects of socio-cultural practices on the conservation of the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

Statement of the Problem

Maasai Mara National Reserve is one of the largest ecosystems in the Savanah across the world, and is known as a combination of both the Serengeti and Maasai Mara. Since 2010, the national reserve has been a premier UNESCO heritage site thanks to its outstanding universal value on biodiversity, a large number of predators, and the annual migration of wildebeests, composed of a migration of over 1.5 million livestock across the Serengeti-Maasai Mara ecosystem (UNESCO, 2023).

The Maasai Mara National Reserve plays a critical conservation role for both wildlife and the stability of the ecosystem (Waithaka, 2004). It is also a major source of finances, both local and foreign, through tourism, a source of employment in the entire tourism sector, from transportation, tour guiding, lodges, and conservation opportunities, thus a critical driver for both the Narok county government and the Kenya National Government's economic growth. The local community also plays a role in its conservation and is the local beneficiary (Shar and Mukhovi, 2019).

Despite its recognition, the Maasai Mara National Reserve has been reported to face different challenges, especially in conservation efforts. Ogutu *et al.,* (2011) reported that the reserve has been witnessing a decline in some of the animal species due to human pressure and the encroachment of the protected areas. Holdo, Holt, and Fryxell (2009), while analyzing ecological processes, found that the national reserve is facing conservation challenges that end up disrupting migration cycles, and it is in danger of its ecosystem collapsing. For its economic sustainability, the World Bank (2020) reports that the reserve's sustainability is therefore dependent on conservation efforts.

To ensure its sustainability, Homewood *et al.,* (2009), in a study on conservation of rangelands in East Africa and livelihoods, noted that the local community's cultural norms and practices are critical, tied to the Maasai livestock grazing traditions, and the indigenous ecological knowledge. Moreover, they attributed the decline in the park's conservation effort to the alteration of the Maasai cultural identity, a central aspect of the Maasai Mara landscape. Thus, the alteration of land use, which introduced economic perspectives, has also altered local traditions, and cultural traditions have been influenced. Based on this background, the study thus sought

to analyze the effect of socio-cultural practices that affect the conservation of the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive research design was used because it allowed the researcher to collect data that directly represents the characteristics of the targeted research population, and explore in-depth the relationship between socio-cultural practices and conservation efforts in Maasai Mara National Reserve.

The research was conducted in the Maasai Mara National Reserve, and targeted stakeholders involved in the conservation of the tourist destination: 2 county executive committee members, for tourism and environment, 2 park wardens (The chief and the Deputy), 13 sector wardens, 5 Kenya wildlife service officials, 95 members from the Mara guides Association, 28 hoteliers, and 55 village elders, making a total targeted population of 200 (Narok County Government Tourism Department, 2025). Since the population was small, a census was carried out.

Data collection was done using semi-structured questionnaires. Additionally, secondary data were used to support the research findings. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data, and content analysis on qualitative data. Data was presented in themes. A pilot study was carried out in Mara Siana conservancy, adjacent to the Maasai Mara National Reserve, using 10 percent of the study sample, to ascertain that the research instruments were valid and reliable. Research authorization was sought from Kenyatta University, and a research permit from the Kenya National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Anonymity and confidentiality were also adhered to.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Response rate

A total of 178 out of 200 respondents were reached, making a response rate of 89%, denoting its adequacy to analyze the collected data, as advised by Mugenda and Mugenda (2013). Their years of service were recorded, with 39% of the respondents having worked for over 7 years, 30% between four and seven years, 22% within 103 years, and 9% less than one year. The majority had experience in working with the conservation of the Maasai Mara in their different capacities, making them ideal candidates for the study. Academically, the majority (36%) were holders of diplomas, 27% secondary education, 26% bachelor's degree, while 11% were post-graduates. This denoted that all the respondents were learned and capable of reading and understanding the questionnaires, and respond accordingly, thus adding to the validity of the responses given.

Contribution of Socio-cultural practices

The research sought to examine how socio-cultural practices affect the conservation efforts of the Maasai Mara National Reserve. In particular, respondents were asked to indicate whether the Maasai communities' social and cultural practices support conservation. The majority of the responses 78% agreed that the traditions and local customs involved regulations that in their own right, were pro-protection of the wildlife. A few, 22%, were of the view that the traditions were not supportive of conservation in the ecosystem.

The majority who agreed that the Maasai community's social and cultural traditions supported conservation had been reported in previous studies. Nelson (2012), while investigating the relationship between land use among the pastoral communities and the protection of wildlife in the Maasai community in the Serengeti rangelands, noted that the community's traditions involve the maintenance of an open Savannah ecosystem that favors wildlife populations in large numbers. The setting aside of dry season grazing reserve is a local practice that prevents overgrazing, thus leading to the sustainability of the vegetation as well as the entire wildlife biodiversity.

Effectiveness of the Socio-cultural Practices

The respondents were asked to provide their opinion on how effective the local community's social and cultural practices were in supporting the conservation of the Maasai Mara National Reserve biodiversity, using a scale of 1=Highly non-effective, 2=somehow not effective, 3=Neutral, 4=Effective, 5=Highly effective.

From the responses, 3.9% viewed the local cultural traditions and social practices as highly ineffective. Another group, 12.4%, reported that they were not effective, 24.5% took a neutral stance, 36.0% rated them as somehow effective, while 23.0% reported that they are highly effective. The mean and standard deviation of the responses were 3.66 ± 1.10, showing that the socio-cultural practices were moderately perceived as effective measures for conservation in the Maasai Mara National Reserve. Moreover, the assumption is not the same among all the targeted groups of respondents.

This outcome has been reported by previous studies. Among the Ogiek community, Tenjei, Wabwire, and Paul (2022), in a study that linked conservation to taboos and sacred sites, noted that totemism, a practice that protects some specific plants and animals, taboos that discourage deforestation, and observation of sources of water as sacred grounds have, over time, proven that they are critical in conservation efforts. Abwalaba (2021) also reported that indigenous knowledge among the Maasai community protected the wildlife. This included knowledge on the traditional ecology, rules imposed on the entire community on grazing, and the interaction with wildlife, as well as the oral tradition of passing the knowledge from one generation to the next.

The Maasai cultural traditions and respect for wildlife

The respondents were asked to give their answer in a five-point Likert scale question that sought to determine if the Maasai cultural traditions promoted respect for wildlife. The responses followed the scale: 1=strongly agree and 5=Strongly Disagree. A majority 36.5% strongly agreed, 32.6% agreed, 16.9% neither agreed nor disagreed, 8.4% disagreed, while 5.6% strongly disagreed. The responses posted a mean and standard deviation of 2.14±1.12. The outcome, therefore, meant that most of the responses were in agreement that indeed, the cultural norms and practices among the Maasai People have elements that conserved wildlife, both flora and fauna.

This outcome had been clearly documented in other contexts habited by the Maasai community. Nelson (2012), while establishing a relationship between conservation models and pastoralism in Tanzania's Northern part, particularly in the Maasai rangelands, found that the Maasai traditional practices, such as pastoralism and cattle grazing rules, have played significant roles in maintaining the current habitats that host the global large mammals. Additionally, the community practices certain rules that include the dry season reserves, maintained only for grazing during the dry seasons, which is a critical strategy that has maintained the wildlife ecosystem in Tanzania. The Maasai, in this study, were therefore described as conservationists by nature, based on their traditional cultural practices tied to pastoralism.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2011) investigated the nexus between cultural stems of the Maasai and wildlife. The focus was on the Maasai agro-pastoral heritage in the Northern part of Tanzania. Results supported the findings of this study by reporting that their cultural practices had a strong link to wildlife. The community does not compete with the wildlife, but rather functions in synergy. Moreover, they hold the belief that the cosmos calls for natural protection, respect, and ecosystem sustainability.

Role of Traditional Leadership in Conservation

Asked about the effectiveness of the traditional leadership in bringing conservation, 37.5% strongly agreed, 33.1% agreed, 16.9% chose to maintain a neutral position,9.6% disagreed, while 2.8% strongly disagreed. The responses posted a mean and a standard deviation of 2.07±1.03. This meant the traditional Maasai leaders have roles in conservation efforts of the Maasai Mara National Reserve. This outcome was reported by other

studies. McCabe, Leslie, and DeLuca (2010), while investigating the Northern Tanzania Maasai community and their livelihood, found that traditional leadership included decisions around the utilization of communal lands and involved decisions that ensured exploitation of grazing lands was sustainable throughout the different seasons. The leadership ensured decisions adhered to the cultural respect for the land and the ecosystem, thus allowing time for regeneration.

The Cultural Survival (2009) noted that local leaders utilized local customs and traditions that allowed the community in Amboseli and Maasai Mara ecosystems that curbed overgrazing, which consequently allowed the ecosystems to regenerate, as they practice a livelihood that is environmentally friendly, for both plants and wildlife. Additionally, Bedelian, Goldman, and Nkedianye (2016) reported that the Maasai traditional leadership involved the utilization of ecological knowledge that classified landscapes as suitable for different functions. These included lands that were suitable for grazing, for access to water, and some for other environmental conditions. This thus led to sustainability in land utilization, especially for the maintenance of wildlife habitat and for grazing.

Zabriskie (2021), when investigating environmental decisions and leadership among the Maasai community in Tanzania's northern part, particularly in the Ngorongoro conservation area, further reported that the community leaders, inclusive of elders and local chiefs, played critical conservation roles thanks to their leadership positions. They make decisions that dictate the timelines and places that grazing takes place, and have an upper hand in controlling how the community accesses both water and pasture. This, in turn, allows the ecosystem to regenerate post-utilization and maintain a sustainable environment.

Additionally, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2011), while exploring the heritage of the Maasai, reported that the Traditional leadership, coupled with strong cultural practices that respect the ecosystem, led to the conservation and long-term sustainability. The research further attributed this to the strong values around conservation and the passing of ecological knowledge down generations.

Cultural tourism and enhancement of conservation

The respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on whether the practice of cultural tourism enhanced conservation of the Maasai Mara. From 5.6% strongly disagreed, 11.8% disagreed, 19.1% were neutral, 34.3 % agreed, while 29.2% strongly agreed. A mean and standard deviation of 2.30± 1.15 showed that cultural tourism plays a role in conservation in the reserve.

In other studies, this has been reported. Honey (2008), while focusing on the Maasai in Northern Tanzania, especially those that live around the protected areas, reported that there are Maasai villages, popularly known as 'bomas', that have been opened up for tourism visits. They entail a series of cultural events, such as the sharing of local traditional knowledge and the performance of cultural music and dance. Aside from bringing in revenue from both local and international tourists, it supports conservation since it offers an alternative source of income, thus reducing incidences of poaching and the use of land in a manner that is unsustainable. Additionally, cultural tourism has led to a raise in the level of wildlife protection and maintaining the landscapes and ecosystems, thus creating a positive attitude towards conservation.

Nelson and Makko (2005) focused on the Maasai of northern Tanzania and their conservation efforts. The outcome of their study noted that the existence of tourism managed through the initiatives of the community had some key Maasai cultural elements integrated into programs implemented for conservation. Additionally, the provision of incentives has led to more cultural tourism that has also adhered to conservation policies.

Correlation Analysis

When a correlation analysis was carried out, the results were $r = 0.62$, and a p -value < 0.01. This indicated that a significant and positive correlation existed between the predictor variable, socio-cultural practice, and the outcome variable, the conservation of the Maasai Mara National Reserve. It is therefore clear that the Maasai Community, particularly those living around the protected areas, has some social and cultural

practices, traditions, and knowledge that positively affect how they use land and how they interact with wildlife, hence sustainable conservation. Similarly, other protected areas, such as the Samburu National Reserve, have reported similar practice (Walker et al., 2020), and also in India, where traditional beliefs that set areas as sacred, totemism, as areas set as holy grounds play critical conservation functions (Bain, 2017; Sasaki et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

Socio-cultural practices of the Maasai Community, living around the Maasai Mara National Reserve, are positively correlated to conservation of the reserve. The social and cultural factors are practiced through the community's inbuilt customs that respect wildlife, the presence of strong traditional leadership that makes decisions regarding land use and sustainability, and the adoption and practice of cultural tourism.

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