

# Poverty, invasions by wild animals fuel poaching in Tsavo

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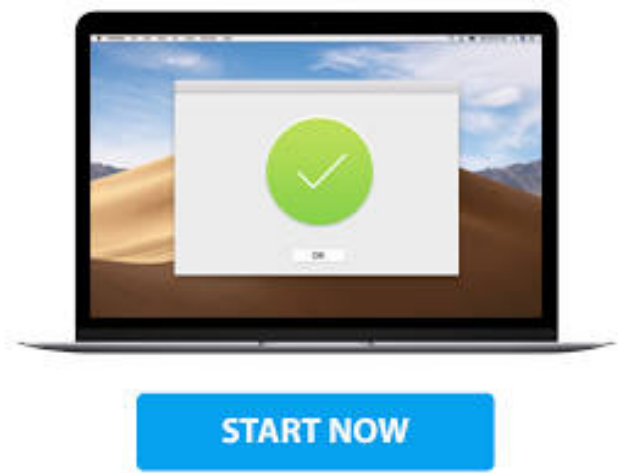
Mr Pascal Mbogho and his wife Susan Wakio at Mbulia Ranch in Voi, Taita Taveta County on July 20, 2019. Their home has witnessed invasions by wild animals. PHOTO | KEVIN ODIT | NATION MEDIA GROUP

## In Summary

- Davis Mwachia's animal shed has been empty since his large flock of goats and donkeys fell prey to roaming lions from Tsavo.
- Mr Mwachia says he has been rendered poor by wildlife after elephants also raided his farm and destroyed the crops.
- Mr Mwachia blames the Kenya Wildlife Service for failing to contain the animals.
- Some residents have lost their lives and others sustained serious injuries due to attacks by the animals, mostly elephants.

Everyday, Davis Mwachia sees tourist vans on the Voi-Taveta road heading to Tsavo West National Park to see wildlife.

For the tourists, the wildlife is a spectacle to behold, but not so for residents who neighbour the Tsavo ecosystem in Taita-Taveta County.



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As we enter his compound in Mwakitau village, we see the temporary fence made of thorny acacia trees heaped together to secure the house, a small granary and a livestock shed.

“This is the only security we have in case the wild animals invade our land. How can we even think of fences when we cannot afford a decent meal?” asked Mr Mwachia.

His animal shed has been empty since his large flock of goats and donkeys fell prey to roaming lions from Tsavo.

## **LOSS**

He has not recovered from the loss. When he hears goats bleating or donkeys braying in his neighbourhood, he recalls the fateful day and nothing but anger and fury.

Mr Mwachia says he has been rendered poor by wildlife after elephants also raided his farm and destroyed the crops. “My boma has been wiped out by lions. They killed all my 20 goats and two donkeys. We cannot rely on food from our farms any more,” he says.

To him, the wildlife is of no benefit. “Why should we protect wildlife yet it only benefits the government? The donkeys made fetching water easier, but now I have to trek many kilometres to find the commodity or buy from vendors. I have also been unable to replace the lost flock because I don’t have the money,” he says.

He adds that due to the frequent invasions by wildlife, many residents are wallowing in poverty. Their farms have become elephant grazing fields while their livestock are now easy prey for carnivores.

Mr Mwachia blames the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) for failing to contain the animals.

## **POVERTY**

Poverty has driven many youth in the county to poaching.

At dawn, the poachers, he says, hawk the bush meat secretly to the villagers before daybreak. The poachers use snares, bows and arrows to capture these wild animals. Zebras, dik diks, antelopes, impalas and wild pigs are highly targeted. He says they have no incentive to help in the fight against poaching as the wildlife “are a nuisance to us”.

Bush meat trade is also common in Mbulia and Ghazi.

Residents interviewed by *Sunday Nation* say some villagers have turned to poaching to fend for their families.

Mr John Mwadeghu (not his real name) says he has been hunting game for the past four years to pay his children’s school fees.





He has been creeping into the neighbouring Mbulia ranch at night to hunt for small wildlife. “I only hunt the small ones like dik dik. I cannot kill big animals like elephants. I use a torch, a bow and arrows,” he tells Sunday Nation, adding that he uses a head lamp to illuminate and startle the animal before killing it using his arrows.

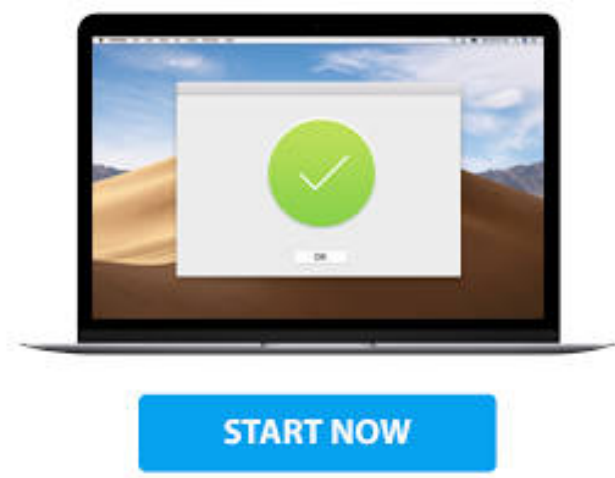
Before this he had been depending on his farm from where he used to harvest bags of maize for his household use. But, an elephant invasion on his farm destroyed maize that was almost ready for harvesting.

## **COMPENSATION**

He says he has never received compensation from the government despite lodging a claim at KWS offices in Voi. “Every time, especially during campaigns, politicians come here with empty promises. They tell us that we will be compensated, but we have not received anything,” he says.

The wild animals have been competing for water and pasture with residents bordering Tsavo National Park. At Mbulia, residents trek for long distance to fetch water.

They risk running into wild animals on their way as herds of elephants roam freely in the village.



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Villages are increasingly becoming conflict hotspots especially involving elephants, lions, leopards, hyenas and buffaloes.

Human-wildlife conflicts in the area have become more frequent and severe in the recent past.

Some residents have lost their lives and others sustained serious injuries due to attacks by the animals, mostly elephants.

The injuries and deaths from wildlife attacks often occur outside protected areas in human settlements. The attacks have left residents a resentful lot.

Conflict has been recognised as one of the challenges affecting conservation worldwide. It undermines public support for conservation.

## **POACHING**

The government has only compensated 10 wildlife related deaths with 15 proven cases still awaiting payment. Thousands of cases have not been compensated.

Poaching for game meat is an rampant problem for conservationists in the country.

Ranchers have embraced conservation by turning their land into conservancies. Sunday Nation established most residents are against the move, arguing that it would increase human-wildlife conflict in the area.

Mbulia ranch has leased at least 15 acres of its land to New African Territories, a travel and tourism association. The investor has put up a tourist lodge within the ranch where tourists visiting Tsavo West National Park can see wildlife.

Kipalo Hills Lodge, found deep in the wild, has offered jobs to residents employed as rangers and hotel workers. Most of the staff in the conservancy come from the neighbouring community.



The manager of the lodge, Mr Samuel Kyembeni, says they are working with residents to end game meat trade in the area.

He, however, says there has been progress and poaching has gone down due to the mutual relations with residents.

According to him, community awareness programmes to sensitise residents on the importance of wildlife have come in handy.

“We don’t arrest and hand them over to KWS. We empower them to stop the illegal trade. That is how we can eradicate this vice,” he says.



## TOURISM

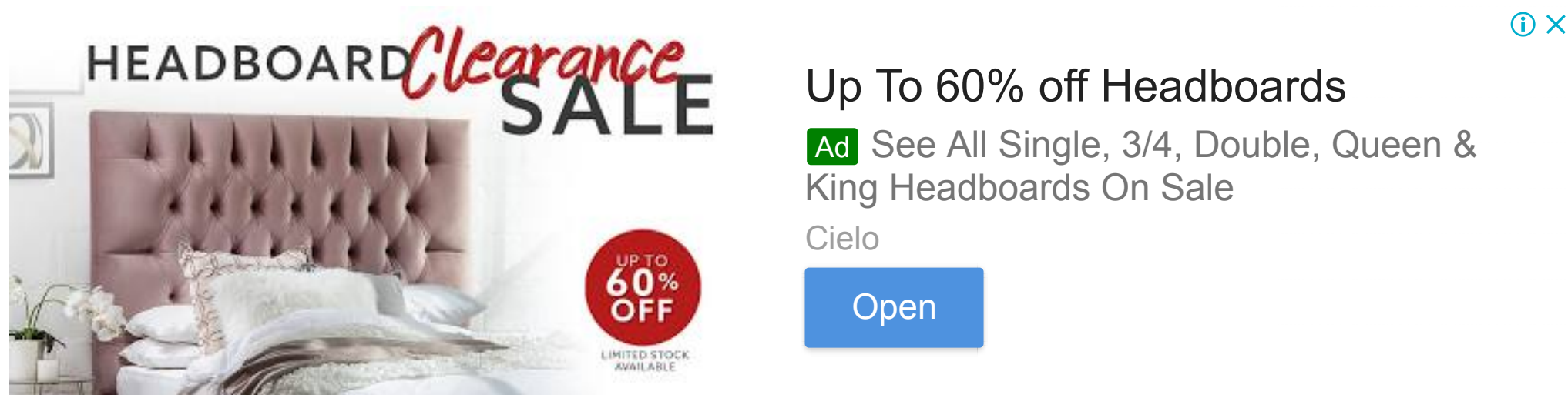
There should be a way of ensuring that locals benefit from tourism for them to be involved in conservation, says the manager.

“For instance, in our case, 14 per cent of bed charges go to the community,” he says.

The lodge has sponsored a number of students through their secondary education in five villages in Ngolia. “We want the residents to see the importance of wildlife, so that they become ambassadors of conservation,” he says.

Speaking to Nation, KWS Acting Head of Corporate Communications and Service Spokesperson, inspectorate Ngugi Gecaga, says subsistence poaching is rampant, but they are working hard to eliminate the vice. “Commercial poaching has not been happening for about four years now because we have increased more wardens on the ground and helicopters to ensure our Big Five are secured,” he says.

The animals targeted are dik diks, hares, gazelles and zebras which most people hunt for food.



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Mr Gecaga warns residents against poaching, saying they face a jail term of up to one year and half when caught with bush meat in their homes. “So far, we have arrested some culprits

found with bush meat and taken them to court. It is illegal and also against the will of God for us to kill wild animals because they were created by God and humans were commanded to protect them,” he adds.

## **CONSERVATION**

The KWS spokesman praises the few people who have reported poaching and also encourages the community to help them fight the vice. “We are dealing with this issue before it escalates to hunting of the big animals. If subsistence poaching is not stopped, in the next 20 to 30 years some animals will be rare to find,” he says.

Through the KWS conservation education department, they have been able to reach out to various schools, teachers and residents teaching them on the importance of wildlife.

“We also attend the chiefs’ barazas to talk to the locals about the harm caused by poaching. Seventy per cent of visitors come to see our wildlife and that boosts our revenue and we cannot afford to kill wildlife,” says the spokesperson.

On the issue of human-wildlife conflict, the officer blames the residents for not alerting KWS on time.

“We have a toll free number and they should use that to reach us. We are always on patrol, moving around and handling other issues under our jurisdiction,” he adds.