

# Q&A

WITH

## DICKSON OLE KAELO CEO, KENYA WILDLIFE CONSERVANCIES ASSOCIATION

Dickson ole Kaelo has been at the forefront of community-based conservation for the last 18 years. In this interview with **Joyce Mbataru** he reflects on his journey working for conservancies in the Masai Mara ecosystem and his new role and vision at the helm of the national conservancy body.

### How did your engagement with conservancies start?

Born and brought up in the Lemek group ranch of the Mara, my life has revolved around pastoral-wildlife systems. After completing my undergraduate degree in livestock and wildlife management, I got a job with the government as an animal production extension officer involved in training farmers to adopt better husbandry methods and new innovative technologies in dairy farming. I later joined the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) as a researcher and community facilitator collecting data and sharing the findings with communities.

In 1998 I made a presentation on the need for a new approach to secure space for livestock and wildlife, given the threats of land privatization in the Mara adjacent group ranches. Inspired by my thoughts, Koiyaki and Lemek elders invited me to join their newly established trust and I became the third manager of Koiyaki Lemek Wildlife Trust. I facilitated the preparation of the first ever land use zoning plan for the two group ranches [and] this plan became the precursor to community conservancies in the Mara Region. Fast forward, I was fully involved in the initial establishment of Olare Orok, Motorogi, Mara North, Naboisho and Enonkishu Conservancies in the Mara ecosystem, an effort that inspired the setting up of another nine conservancies. I believe this process was critical to sustaining the Mara by preventing the fencing and sale of critical habitat. To date an area slightly larger than the Masai Mara National Reserve has been secured by communities for livestock grazing,

wildlife conservation and ecotourism.

### What are you doing now and how has your role in conservancies evolved?

My involvement with conservancies has now grown to the national level as the CEO of KWCA. At KWCA, we are tasked with the responsibility of bringing conservancy members together to share information and ensure their ideas and opinions are represented in decision-making processes that

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affect them. Today, communities have a voice in the conservation arena and at the national policy making level. I am pleased to represent this voice and to work in an organisation founded on the idea that community voices and actions matter. I hope this marks the end of an era where communities and private landowners are excluded or misrepresented by

others in decision-making processes, and the end period where we see local people living with the costs of hosting wildlife on their land while others reap the benefits.

### Often conservancy development in Kenya is referred to as a 'national movement.' Do you think Kenyans understand what conservancies are?

It is a movement. Conservancies have increased from just four in the early 1990s to over 150 today. They are found in 27 counties, in private and community land and in a few cases overlap with public land, from forests to marine areas. More than five million people are involved and many more conservancies are sprouting each year. Although conservancies vary in their governance structure and management models, they are similar in their overall purpose: landowner-led action to conserve natural resources and create benefits needed to offset the conservation costs. Because conservancies evolved ahead of policy and without a structured guideline, many Kenyans misunderstand them. Some see conservancies as a way of acquiring land, others think they are new parks for wildlife that exclude people, and some perceive them as being owned by very rich people. Fundamentally, the conservancy as a concept is a democratic institution, a multiple land use, a system to negotiate use of scarce resources among multiple users and a mechanism for securing peace in volatile landscapes.

### Kenya is losing its wildlife with 68% decline between 1977 and 2016. Do conservancies present an opportunity to reverse this trend and how are they

# CONSERVATION

## critical to conservation?

Kenya has sadly lost 68 per cent of its wildlife in a short 4 decades. This is within my lifetime, and at this rate, we will have nothing to hand over to our next generation. We have the opportunity and the responsibility to change this. I hate to imagine that Kenyans won't take decisive action, we owe it to our future generations.

Conservancies contribute directly to the conservation of wildlife and is Kenya's best hope for securing the majority of wildlife found outside state protected areas. Conservancies compliment the parks and reserves through maintaining corridors and dispersals, protect endangered plants and animals such as rhino, hirola, Grevy's zebra, and the wild dog among others, and provide incentive and income generating opportunities. Conservancies provide a structure to implement land-use plans and by-laws that deter poaching, wildlife trafficking, forest destruction, and conversion of land into non-wildlife compatible uses. Through conservancies, Kenya stands the chance of meeting its global target of 17 per cent of its land area under conservation, in the process maintaining its position as the conservation leader of Africa.

## How did KWCA emerge?

Realizing the progress being made by conservancies, stakeholders under the leadership of KWS and with the support of The Nature Conservancy, WWF, AWF and Kenya Wildlife Trust met in 2012 to decide how best to nurture the conservancy movement. KWCA was the outcome. The lack of an enabling policy framework and absence of a coordination structure for conservancies were recognized as two big challenges to be addressed through this new outfit. KWCA opened doors in April 2013 and immediately engaged in the drafting of a new Wildlife Act 2013 where conservancies were recognized and promoted as a conservation strategy for Kenya.

## How is KWCA structured and how does it link to conservancies on the ground?

Conservancies form the membership body of KWCA. A conservancy is a full member and each has a vote during the AGM [Annual General Meeting] to decide how the organization functions and what its priorities



are. To take advantage of Kenya's devolved structure 'Regional Associations' have been set up for each ecosystem, 10 of them have been established to link conservancies within one landscape. Examples of these include the Masai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association, the Northern Rangeland Trust, or the Amboseli Ecosystem Trust. These associations provide a platform for engaging with county governments and to support landscape level planning and management.

## A gap exists between national conservation policies and practices of communities in conservation. How is KWCA addressing this issue?

Historically, conservation policies have been developed without the contribution of the policy implementers. The voice of the private landowners and communities was seldom sought nor their wishes incorporated. KWCA positions conservancy members to participate and contribute to policy reforms. Conservancy members as practitioners are best placed to recommend policy interventions that will have a positive impact on conservation on the ground. KWCA, as a recognized genuine voice, provides an avenue for policy tracking, awareness and public participation. By enlisting participation of the communities in policy development, conservation practice and policy are linked.

## One criticism of conservancies is that they are donor dependent and unsustainable?

At the onset, conservancies have relied on donor funds to establish and many to date rely on donor funds to implement their mission. Several questions come to mind: first, why aren't there government funds to support conservation on community and private land as this would mean less reliance on donors? Secondly, wildlife is a national asset and should its costs be borne entirely by private landowners and communities? Finally, conservation is costly and the majority of people that live with wildlife lack capital and are underserved by public infrastructure so how are they to engage? This situation dictates that some level of donor and government funding would be necessary in the short to medium term.

Today we have many conservancies that are generating their own income through livestock sales, ecotourism benefits, and micro enterprise. This income generating capacity is growing and is a demonstration that over time conservancies can become less donor dependent and more self reliant. However, to facilitate this, barriers to economic success, remove disincentives, provide incentives and diverse innovative enterprises must be provided. ●