

How Tourism Could Actually Help African Wildlife In One of Kenya's Important National Reserves



<https://serengetiwatch.org/friends-of-serengeti/>

03-08-2025 ~ *Unsustainable tourism threatens Africa's wildlife and ecosystems, particularly in the Maasai Mara. The travel industry can help tourists contribute to the solution.*

The Serengeti ecosystem is regarded as one of our planet's greatest natural treasures, where one can witness "the largest remaining unaltered animal migration in the world," [according](#) to UNESCO.

Kenya's share of the Serengeti plains includes the Maasai Mara National Reserve (583 square miles) and the Greater Mara, a wildlife and human-inhabited area of about 2,500 square miles. The Mara seamlessly joins with Tanzania's Serengeti National Park ([around 5,700 square miles](#)), which is surrounded by the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and several other reserves, including the Maswa Game Reserve, the Ikorongo and Grumeti Game Reserves, and the Loliondo Game Control Area.

Tourism has long been seen as a way to protect this ecosystem by providing income for development. But now, tourism has joined a growing list of issues threatening the area, which include agriculture, development such as housing and roads, poaching, invasive species, water security, and human-wildlife conflict. The

travel industry needs to take stock and determine its next steps to ensure a sustainable model that helps protect the ecosystem and wildlife.

The Mara: A Case Study in Overtourism

After independence in 1963, Kenya saw the slow but steady beginnings of its tourism industry. Media reports gush about African wildlife and safari lodges [hosting celebrity guests](#). The Swahili word *safari* became synonymous with adventure. The Oscar-winning 1985 film *Out of Africa* [helped supercharge](#) an influx of tourists, and Kenyan tourism was firmly on its way.

Unfortunately, tourism in Kenya, especially at the Maasai Mara National Reserve, has followed a familiar scenario: It began with a few intrepid travelers, the word got out, and mass tourism arrived, often corrupting the experience that attracted people in the first place.

“Kenya earned about... \$1.8 billion from tourism in 2022. It’s pivotal to the economy, contributing 10.4 percent to the national GDP and accounting for 5.5 percent of formal employment,” [stated](#) a 2024 article by Joseph O. Ogutu, a Kenyan senior wildlife researcher and statistician at the University of Hohenheim in Germany.

Without thought of guardrails or limits, the Mara has become overgrown with lodges and camps, some of which have been built without legal permits. By the 1980s, the reserve suffered from corruption and mismanagement, benefitting a few politically connected elites. In her 1999 book [Ecotourism and Sustainable Development](#), Martha Honey, co-founder and director emeritus of the [Center for Responsible Travel](#) (CREST), called the Mara “Kenya’s poster child for tourism overdevelopment.”

The impacts on wildlife have been devastating. Joseph O. Ogutu wrote in a 2024 article for the Conversation that Kenya lost nearly [70 percent](#) of its wildlife between 1977 and 2013. The Mara has been hard hit: Giraffe populations declined 95 percent, warthogs 80 percent, and hartebeest populations saw a 76 percent decline between 1989 and 2003, [stated](#) a Guardian article. These numbers, based on a study by the Nairobi-based [International Livestock Research Institute](#) (ILRI), blamed the “explosion in human settlement around [the] reserve” for the dwindling populations of the wildlife living on the reserve.

These facts have made no difference to the Mara’s popularity, which is still

regularly listed as the ultimate wildlife safari destination. This is even though the number of wildebeest migrating from Tanzania into the reserve has dropped by 75 percent, from a million in the 1970s to [fewer than 250,000](#), according to a 2021 article.

The growing human and livestock population has compressed wildlife into a smaller range, where they compete with cattle for food and graze within the reserve. Robert Buitenwerf, an assistant professor of biology at Aarhus University in Denmark, [noted](#) that while some species can coexist with cattle, larger animals such as elephants and buffalo require vast amounts of food and typically steer clear of areas previously grazed by cattle.

In some areas, fences have been built to protect cattle from predators, disastrously curtailing wildlife movement. To counter this, Maasai have been encouraged to set aside land as wildlife conservancies for tourism. In some cases, this has worked, though the income often [does not trickle down](#) to everyone in the community.

Tourism shares the blame for the Mara's wildlife decline. [Maasai Mara National Reserve](#) and the nearby conservancies are estimated to have more than 150 camps and lodges. By contrast, the Serengeti, ten times the size of Maasai Mara, has only [four lodges and five camps](#). Overcrowding, overbuilding, poor tourism practices, and a lack of regulation enforcement have all contributed to stress on the Mara's wildlife, particularly regarding reproduction.

The Maasai Mara is famous for being a [critical habitat for cheetahs](#), but their populations are threatened. These big, graceful cats face significant challenges, including habitat loss and dwindling prey populations caused by human activities. Additionally, they are threatened by human-wildlife conflicts and the illegal wildlife trade. As of 2025, the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species [classifies cheetahs as "vulnerable,"](#) meaning they are at risk of extinction in the wild.

In 2018, Femke Broekhuis, who was then the senior research associate at the University of Oxford, [wrote](#) an article for Quartz stating that tourism affects cheetahs' reproductive success, the number of cubs they rear, and their ability to hunt. She argued that there was a need to limit tourist numbers to prevent cheetahs from becoming endangered.

According to the [World Bank](#), "lodges built near watering holes compete for prime

habitat. In these areas, excessive construction of tourist lodges combined with [the] withdrawal of water from the Mara River for upstream irrigation has reduced wildebeest densities, with concomitant impacts on predator abundance and tourist satisfaction.”

Simon Espley, head of Africa Geographic, a travel and conservation company, told the [New York Times](#) in 2023 that he watched in alarm as 60 vehicles stood on both sides of the Mara River during a wildebeest crossing. There was a “crazy, chaotic rush as hundreds of tons of steel lunged forward with screaming engines... It was surreal and sickening as we all converged on only a few hundred meters of riverbank, jostled for position, and somehow avoided collisions.”

Tanzania’s Serengeti National Park

As [capitalist Kenya](#) was busy developing its tourism, Tanzania was on a different path. Tanzania’s experiment with “[Ujamaa](#)” (African socialism) viewed tourism as cultural pollution and shunned private investment. Tourists were tolerated, though [not warmly welcomed](#). Over time, all that changed. Key players in Tanzania realized what a tremendous economic asset tourism could be, and the race to attract travelers began. In 2024, [Tanzania](#) and [Kenya](#) announced the hugely ambitious goal of attracting 5 million tourists each in the next few years.

Tourism companies are actively marketing wildebeest river crossings, which has resulted in many vehicles scrambling for space. These vehicles interfere with migrating animals and cause them to divert to less suitable crossing areas.

According to a [report](#) received by the nonprofit [Serengeti Watch](#), a vehicle “jockeying for position at a crowded wildebeest crossing” hit a young zebra. Meanwhile, a traveler narrated another horrific incident. “We were driving along beside a herd when we realized that a wildebeest mother was dropping her baby, so we stopped to watch the birth. Then, our driver informed the other vans in the area, and they came racing up to where we were. And because of that approach, the female dropped the newborn baby and ran off with the rest of the herd ... She never came back, so I presume the baby was taken by a lion or something.”

YouTube videos show cheetahs near or even [entering safari vehicles](#). [Human interactions with wildlife are harmful](#), as they can cause injuries, fragment wildlife populations, and make animals accustomed to human interaction, making them more vulnerable to hunting. Photos of trophy hunters with their victims

usually elicit such outrage, and now, anger is spreading to tourists wanting to get close to animals in the search for the perfect photo opportunity.

A Perfect Storm of Threats

Tourism's impacts do not operate in isolation; many other stressors exist in the ecosystem. Tanzania's [population](#) is on track to more than double by mid-century, from 69 million people in 2024 to 92 million in 2035 to 130 million in 2050. [Studies](#) have shown that increasing external human pressure is causing wildlife to be spatially compressed into the core of the ecosystem, affecting grass cover, soils, beneficial natural fires, and increasing the impacts of climate change.

Moreover, heavy water use for irrigating crops threatens water supplies from rivers and freestanding water, as well as the ability of grasslands to support large herds of herbivores and animals' regular seasonal movements.

Other threats exist, too. [Invasive plants](#), like devil weed, displace native species and affect wildlife nutrition. Wildlife lodges sometimes bring in ornamental plants that are not native to the areas for their gardens.

"According to... research, scientists have found that a number of invasive alien plant species initially introduced as ornamental plants at tourism facilities are now spreading rapidly throughout the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem, posing a major threat to wildlife, including the annual wildebeest and zebra migration as well as a range of other plant and animal species," [stated](#) an article by the Center for Agriculture and Bioscience International (CABI), an intergovernmental organization, in 2017.

Roads also fragment the ecosystem, and poaching has changed from individuals supplementing the family diet to organized gangs, the byproduct of [legalized](#) bushmeat markets.

Safaris of Shame Displacing Maasai

An often-declared aim of tourism is to benefit local communities, which in turn help preserve their ecosystems and wildlife. In the Mara, some local Maasai communities have developed conservancies, which are private land devoted to wildlife and tourism. This has helped. But the [benefits have not trickled down](#) to everyone.

"Our study in Kenya's Mara ecosystem reveals that land-rich older men reap the

biggest rewards, often at the expense of women, young people, and the landless poor,” [stated](#) the article by Ogutu in the Conversation.

It’s different in Tanzania, where the state owns all the land. Tourism generates jobs and income that haven’t reached local communities around the Serengeti. Despite bearing the brunt of human-wildlife conflict, these communities are seen as obstacles to tourism development. The Maasai are being [evicted](#) from lands they’ve occupied for hundreds of years.

The Maasai have lost [1,500 square kilometers of grazing land](#) in Loliondo, a migration corridor near the Serengeti National Park in Kenya. The government turned this into a game reserve, resulting in violence between the Maasai and the police. The area is now being [used](#) as a hunting block by the royal family of the United Arab Emirates, who regularly fly into their own airstrip, shoot wildlife, and fly out. This is done under the banner of “tourism.”

A more significant conflict is emerging in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA). Created in 1959, when Maasai agreed to vacate Serengeti National Park, its population has grown exponentially. In 1966, the Maasai population in NCA [numbered](#) around 8,700. By 2017, that number had grown to about 93,000. By 2027, it’s estimated to be 161,000 and will likely continue to rise upward.

Livestock has grown at a similar pace, though numbers vary with drought. Given the threats of climate change, frequent drought, and land degradation, this trajectory is considered unsustainable for both people and wildlife.

The Tanzanian government [believes](#) the Maasai threaten tourism and is systematically pressuring them off their land through cuts in health, education, and other social services. The government is [offering government-built housing near the coast](#), a plan many believe won’t work. In January 2024, the Oakland Institute, which has reported widely on the issue, released a public alert warning that [mass evictions may be on the horizon](#).

International press coverage has been extensive, from the [New York Times](#) to the [Guardian](#) to [Amnesty International](#). The media has widely defended Maasai rights and often blamed “fortress conservation.” Tourism is frequently viewed as being on the wrong side of this issue. In 2024, the European Union [canceled conservation funding](#) for Tanzania due to Maasai abuses.

Tanzania Tourism Evolving

The original safari tourism model was rooted in the desire for an authentic wilderness experience. Though industry reports say a new generation of travelers still seek authenticity, Serengeti accommodations are evolving toward luxury. Developers insist on infinity and plunge pools, golf carts, and new roads. Just outside the park, in the path of migrating animals, developers built a golf [course that will open in June 2025](#).

In December 2023, a tennis court was built near the Serengeti for a luxury [tennis safari](#). A hot spring in Ruaha National Park, “confirmed” by a team of experts to [reverse aging](#), will be marketed as medical tourism.

Opened in May 2024, Milele is the newest and most luxurious villa in Singita’s exclusive 350,000-acre Grumeti Reserve, a private concession on the northwestern border of Serengeti National Park. Perched atop Sasakwa Hill, the villa is part of Singita’s collection, which includes three lodges and four private villas. Milele commands a premium price, with [peak-season rates reaching \\$36,400 per night](#).

Marriott is expanding its presence in Africa’s luxury travel market by partnering with the Lazizi Group of Companies to develop the Ritz-Carlton, Masai Mara Safari Camp, and the JW Marriott Mount Kenya Rhino Reserve Safari Camp. Scheduled to open in early 2026, the JW Marriott camp will offer a premier safari experience in the heart of the Solio Game Reserve. Set within a [45,000-acre wildlife sanctuary and the 19,000-acre Solio Ranch Conservancy](#), it will provide guests with an intimate connection to nature. It will be located within one of the world’s most successful rhino conservation programs. What will happen to the rhinos when the tourists come?

An expert experienced in environmental impact studies in the region has reported anonymously to [Serengeti Watch](#) that established protocols and standards for construction are being ignored, and studies can even be bought. Decisions are being made without proper consideration of conservation priorities, instead focusing on making profits.

There is some recognition in Tanzania that the northern circuit (Tarangire, Manyara, Ngorongoro, and Serengeti) might soon be overwhelmed. The World Bank approved \$150 million in 2017 to develop a southern circuit that includes

Ruaha and Mikumi National Parks, Nyerere National Park (formerly the Selous), and the more remote Katavi National Park.

However, then allegations of gross human rights violations surfaced, including [mass evictions and violence](#) against local people. After an investigation, the World Bank suspended financing for the project in April 2024.

“At that time of suspension, 88 percent of the total \$150 million commitment (equivalent to \$125 million) had already been disbursed. The project was subsequently closed in November 2024,” [stated](#) the World Bank.

Tourism Will Happen No Matter What: Travel Companies Can Shape a Sustainable Future

Tourism needs to become firmly aligned with conservation and community development. The Serengeti-Mara ecosystem has entered a critical phase, and decisions made now will shape its future. Climate change is [altering weather patterns](#), which impacts wildlife migration and vegetation.

Human population growth, leading to more settlements and agricultural development, has increased pressure on land use around ecosystems. Overtourism is causing excessive tourism that affects wildlife behavior and disrupts local communities. Poaching, or illegal hunting, poses a significant threat to vulnerable species.

These threats cannot be ignored, and travel companies need to play a key role to prevent further damage to the ecosystem and the local communities in this region. Responsible travel companies are critical in protecting this vital ecosystem. They can:

- Uphold best practices of responsible and sustainable tourism.
- Support the rights and livelihoods of local communities.
- Educate travelers and the public.
- Encourage travelers to support conservation and community programs.
- Monitor the ecosystem and report issues for collective action.
- Ensure local operators and guides maintain high standards.

- Advocate collectively for responsible tourism policies.

Travel companies can nurture partner relationships with organizations to identify local needs and help carry out projects that benefit people and wildlife. They can also involve their customers by informing them about environmental challenges facing the communities living in their travel destinations.

Travel companies can solicit their customers for voluntary donations when paying for their trips to help offset their environmental impact and support local conservation and wildlife protection groups.

[Author's note: The [International Galápagos Tour Operators Association](#), which I founded, is just one example demonstrating that the voluntary donation model can be successful. Travelers are willing to donate to a worthy cause—especially if it helps offset their travel impact.]

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