

Wildlife harassment taints Maasai Mara National Reserve

by Mary Purvis

Kenya's legendary Maasai Mara National Reserve is such an epic game viewing destination that it's like a delicious dessert to any safari. Its vast undulating plains dotted with game and iced in an azure sky seem eternal and washed in tranquility. But now during our second day of game drives, an ingredient in that dessert was the target of tourist crowding and harassment.

About an hour into our drive we drove up behind a traffic jam that reminded me of parking lot gridlock at a shopping mall on Christmas Eve. The catalyst for the 22 assorted vans and jeeps was a leopard sleeping in a lone sausage tree. But we were so far away, we could barely catch a glimpse of the big cat. Drivers maneuvered vehicles giving clients a better view. A van scooted past and attempted to squeeze between a bush and a jeep. Consequently, it rammed into the jeep's tail light. As both drivers got out to inspect the damage, our driver skirted the spectacle bringing us closer to the leopard. The air was rife with clicking cameras and conversations from other groups. Some tourists perched on their van's back roof, hanging onto the pop-top. The leopard didn't seem to care.

Yet wildlife harassment isn't just a horde of vehicles parked around a carnivore or another species. Soon after this dismal affair, a cheetah cub was hit and killed from an overzealous driver's attempt to provide the perfect photo op for his clients, then a speeding vehicle intent on its destination struck a zebra that died hours later. And those incidents are just a taste.

Tourist congestion, hit and runs and various other aggravating activities that constitute harassment shouldn't exist in a reserve that unfolds over 580 square miles (1,500 sq. km). Granted, managing and enforcing an area such as this is a monumental task, so I wouldn't be remiss to say I've only spotted one ranger patrol since I started traveling to Kenya in 1982. But where were the rangers that day, who should have enforced the rules and cited the majority of drivers surrounding the leopard? Where were they when the cheetah cub and zebra violently met their demise? In response, James Sindiyo, chief warden for the Narok side stated, "it is our duty and responsibility to have anti-harassment vehicles and fully enforce park rules and regulations as provided by our byelaws." But then he pointed out that the two vehicles donated to them years ago to be used for anti-harassment enforcement have since broken down due to age and presently grounded.

Not far away in the Mara Triangle, the Mara Conservancy operates three wildlife anti-harassment units labeled Cheetah vehicles that regularly monitor driver/guides and visitor activity during peak game viewing hours. Yet back in the Narok side, Sindiyo says he has personally arrested tour vans headed towards the Triangle that were going off-road and harassing lions.

A senior guide with the Kenya Professional Safari Guides Association (KPSGA) confirmed that the lack of proper management and thus inefficient patrols on the Narok side contribute to wildlife crowding and harassment. He said, "management can stop the poor guiding ethics portrayed in the park as shown on the Mara Conservancy side. It is well noted that the same guides behaving badly in the Mara are well behaved in other parks where proper management is in place. That shows there is something missing in the Mara."

How long can mismanagement go on before the Rift Valley swallows Maasai Mara? When the Narok County Council managed Maasai Mara in the mid 1980s, administrators who could enforce wildlife harassment regulations were disorganized. Guiding standards were haphazard at best. The Trans-Mara County Council and the Mara Conservancy didn't exist. In the 1990s the reserve was divided into two sections: the Narok side, still governed by Narok County Council; and the Mara Triangle, administered by the newly formed Trans-Mara County Council. But by the late 1990s the Triangle's infrastructure was abysmal and in such a state of disrepair that collapse was imminent, so Trans-Mara appointed the Mara Conservancy, a non-profit organization, to revitalize infrastructure and establish a prime conservation area within the Triangle.

Since then, two management styles have emerged: the Triangle preserves biodiversity and the Narok side maintains some semblance of enforcement. Each have created their own code of conduct flyers that rangers pass out to driver/guides and visitors at various gates. Content covers topics such as visitor etiquette, maintaining safe distances from wildlife, and crowding - ruling that no more than five vehicles at any given time can view leopards, lions and cheetahs. However, a few of the rules are not universal. Sometimes this information is lost somewhere in the implementation process when administration runs out of copies, drivers don't receive them, they are not passed out to clients or ultimately not read.

Aware of inconsistent management and enforcement plus a plethora of other concerns that need to be tackled to preserve the Mara's biodiversity and wildlife, both county councils developed the Maasai Mara Management Plan 2009 - 2019. An excerpt from the plan's proposal states: "Very high levels of visitor use, especially the harassing/crowding of wildlife and off-road driving in unsuitable conditions and locations, as well as rapidly expanding tourism accommodation developments in the greater ecosystem, are all having a severe impact on the Reserve's environment and exceptional natural habitats." But the plan has yet to be implemented and the dates now read 2010 to 2020. Trans-Mara has signed the proposal, but as of this posting, Narok County Council has not. Without those signatures the government will not approve the plan.

Conservancies are vital advocates against wildlife harassment. Mara and Mara North are representative of several conservancies in the greater Mara ecosystem and throughout Kenya, who have developed stringent driver/guide/visitor regulations, as well as promotion of low density tourism, which has encouraged positive tourist/wildlife interaction. Mara Conservancy is

a superb model for guide improvement and has partnered with Tribal Voice Communications, a UK based tourism consulting firm. The collaboration develop workshops as well as holding the Most Responsible Safari Guide Contest, which is sponsored by the Born Free Foundation, to promote responsible guiding. Participants include nominated driver/guides from all lodges and camps in Maasai Mara and the greater Mara ecosystem.

Mara North Conservancy, established in 2009, lies outside of Mara's northern border in what was known as the Koiyaki-Lemek Conservation Area. Mara North is an exceptional example for low density tourism with a one bed per 350 acre policy that minimizes environmental impact and guarantees a unique safari experience. Riccardo Orizio, owner of Saruni Lodge, says that if a guide breaks a rule, then that respective lodge is fined and has to pay. They also risk being fined by Mara North Rangers, but this does not happen very often, since his guides and guides of other member lodges would never join a group of any number of vehicles to see a lion or any other carnivore. Saruni's guides are silver or bronze members of the KPSGA. As members of the association, they know they could have their membership revoked if they are caught in violation of any rule.

Also in the area, Koiyaki Guiding School trains local Maasai for positions within industry. In order to attend, students must be sponsored by safari companies, NGOs or anyone else interested in providing a promising future for a Maasai. The curriculum is based on KPSGA's guidelines, and after graduation most alumni will elect to join the association. Both education and certification of Kenya's guides are essential in alleviating wildlife harassment.

Yet there are some guides who contribute to wildlife harassment. Since government liberalization, freelance guides who own their own vehicles have saturated the industry. They sub-contract to operators and since they answer to no one, they can do what they want, which breeds unethical behavior says Paul Kirui, chairman of the KPSGA. He added, "it is very sad since most companies in Kenya now are using such guides to avoid overhead costs of maintenance of staff and vehicles. The guides in employment are manageable since they are supervised and have a job to keep."

Freelancers are not affiliated with a conservancy, nor employed by a private lodge or tour operator such as Micato. They may or may not be professional guides. The reality is high that some have never attended Nairobi's Utalii College for Hospitality and Tourism, or been certified through KPSGA. The situation worsens when operators contract unethical and/or inexperienced freelancers to meet increasing tourist demands, especially during peak season. Those freelancers then guide a group of excited, unsuspecting tourists who want to see it all. This combination promotes dangerous interaction with wildlife.

With the KPSGA around, scenarios like this should not occur. One would expect a universal code of ethics with mandatory certification thus holding every driver/guide in the country accountable. But according to Kirui that's not the case since the association is still voluntary. He

says the Ministry of Tourism is working on new policy requiring that all guides take a proficiency test before they can obtain their guiding licenses. He added that a Ministry of Tourism representative sits on the KPSGA board as well as representatives from the Kenya Association of Tour Operators and Kenya Wildlife Service. Presently, an estimated 4,000 out of 6,000 guides throughout Kenya have passed KPSGA certification exams. But some are choosing not to renew their membership. It takes unbridled commitment to become certified by KPSGA, so why would a guide not elect to renew his/her membership as certification lends credibility and an assertion of responsibility?

Along with guide issues, effective marketing has created too many tourists in too many vans, which can contribute to wildlife harassment and crowding. The Kenya Tourist Board recorded that as of December 31, 2010, the number of tourist arrivals were at an all time high, over 1.1 million, and revenue earnings experienced an 18 percent gain, which translates into approximately 740 million USD (74 billion Kenya Shillings), over 2009 making 2010 the most lucrative year ever for tourism. According to the Ministry of Tourism, 2011 is on track to receive two million tourist arrivals by the end of the year. So the industry continues to boost Kenya's economy, but it's steadily gnawing away at the integrity of Mara's wildlife and ecosystem.

This conundrum is nothing new. In 1984, Edward Ricciuti wrote a series of articles addressing the same problems in *Animal Kingdom* magazine, then published by the New York Zoological Society. Ricciuti had observed: "Kenya's booming tourist industry has so successfully marketed the wildlife wonders of the reserve, that is flooded with visitors, probably more than the land can take. Vehicles carry tourists not only over established viewing tracts but helter-skelter across the countryside as well." He also said investors wanted to add an additional 400 beds to keep up with the demand.

But Richard Leakey, who at the time was director of the National Museums of Kenya, believed that the Mara could not handle additional visitors. Then there were four lodges and camps within the reserve and six properties outside, for a total of 700 beds. Now there are ten times the amount of beds and over one hundred lodges. Are these lodges and camps really needed to keep up with the demand especially during migration months when it's difficult to find a room anywhere in the Mara? It's evident a delicate juggling act of management and enforcement is essential to impede indiscriminate building, as well as alleviate tourist crowding and harassment.

Whether or not the Maasai Mara Management Plan is implemented and stricter tourism controls enforced, tour companies and ground operators have the power to reduce negative impact by limiting group size, educating clients on game drive guidelines and reviewing ways to reduce costs for clients who want to visit conservation areas.

The cost of a safari shouldn't dictate whether or not a client visits a conservation area that offers low-impact tourism with eco-friendly practices or ends up at a commercial lodge with

oodles of other people, but it does. Tour companies focusing on eco-tourism safaris and custom tours, which are higher priced, often book clients into a lodge or camp such as Saruni Lodge in Mara North thus ensuring guests will have personalized game drives with highly educated guides away from tourist crowding. Companies that normally sell budget and moderately priced safaris, which a higher percentage of tourists can afford, will book guests into commercial lodges or camps with high bed counts thus reinforcing wildlife harassment and crowding.

It doesn't help when rates escalate every year for accommodations, transportation, and park/reserve admission fees. Tour companies and ground operators then have to factor in a higher percentage for operating expenses and profit margins thus passing on the increase to the client. That said, a low-impact, conservation-minded safari should be available for everyone, regardless of their budget.

Group size matters. American companies used to book as many clients as possible on one safari departure, which reduced the tour company's cost owed to the ground operator. Some companies still practice this. I have also seen notices in safari brochures reassuring prospective clients that they keep their groups small - no more than 20 people, which translates into at least three vans if the tour books completely. Not a small group. Providing low-impact safaris starts at home limiting group size.

I know many companies think safari etiquette will be discussed by the Nairobi ground operator or driver/guide assigned to the clients. I also know that once in Nairobi, sometimes safari guidelines are just skimmed over or not discussed at all. It's essential tour companies become more proactive by providing game drive guidelines in their pre-departure packets, as well as talking to clients about safari protocol and what the ramifications are to drivers and wildlife if etiquette is not followed.

Most tourists have invested a substantial amount of money for their safari. The airfare alone is expensive. They expect to have a professional driver/guide who is certified. They insist on seeing the "big five." They anticipate the best. They are determined to live the safari of their wildest dreams because they know they may never return to Africa. If I were a client, I would feel the same way. But every safari has requisite preparations, such as inoculations, visas and packing guidelines. Whichever safari clients select, game drive guidelines need to be included with pre-departure information. If clients are not given these guidelines, then they are going into a situation totally unaware of what to expect and what is expected from them.

Yet even with the most comprehensive planning, and regardless of how well-travelled and educated the client is, something disturbing happens. Perhaps it's exuberance at seeing animals free for the first time that pre-empts any information the client received on safari etiquette. But once on safari they decide they should be able to do anything they want, see what they want, and tell the driver what to do and where to go. They forget they are visiting someone's home and that someone could be placed on the endangered species list at a moment's notice.

At this point, one would surmise the guide would intercede and gently bring that client back to reality. But sometimes the guide gives in, since it's his duty to ensure that his clients have the best safari possible. Some drivers will acquiesce to clients wishes for another reason, says Paul Kirui. These drivers are not well paid, and knowing that they will be receiving a tip at the end of safari, they will do anything to please their guests. Mara conservancy officials have observed tourists trying to bribe rangers out of a fine, which they deserved, then behave even more badly when their bribe backfired. During many of my safaris, my clients and I have witnessed littering, crowding, excessive noise and tourist-laden vans chasing after a cheetah attempting to make a kill for its dinner. Are these infractions due to naiveté on the part of the client, or guide or both?

In any case, it's logical that if clients arrive for safari armed with the knowledge of game drive guidelines and why they are essential, then more often than not, they will be the tourists every tour operator and guide dreams of working with. They also will be the tourists who will have a positive influence on others creating more awareness about client/wildlife interaction.

Those many years ago Edward Ricciuti wrote, "Like other ecosystems big and small, the Serengeti-Mara is as fragile as a house of cards, mutable and vulnerable to changes wrought by both nature and humanity. The modern world is closing in on the Serengeti-Mara, bringing tribulations that, unless averted, will shatter its ecological integrity." Harassment is not unique to Maasai Mara. It's spreading like pestilence across the plains. We cannot allow it and other indiscretions against wildlife to continue, as well as the devastation of a pristine ecosystem. Together, we can each do our part and make a difference.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, the famous American author and abolitionist wrote, "We should remember in our dealings with animals that they are a sacred trust to us... They cannot speak for themselves." If wildlife could talk what would they say to us? Would they ask - why are you treating us this way? Would they say - when you visit our homes, please respect us. Leave us in peace.

Footnote: During the writing of this article, the more layers I peeled back, the more questions I discovered. Clearly, I only covered a minutia of the harassment issue. I pray that the discourse this article will raise, will bring further questions and eventual actions toward solutions.

To download your copy of game drive guidelines please go to: www.makenasafaritalles.com

