

Laikipia in the Balance

A fraught mix of politics, drought, ancient livelihoods and modern-day pressures is putting Kenya's Laikipia County at the forefront of increasingly violent acts of land encroachment. **Harriet Constable** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ASHLEY HAMER



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arly on a crisp April morning hippos wallow in the cool muddy

waters of the Loisaba dam in Laikipia. The water ripples as their hefty bodies sink beneath the surface, weaverbirds twist and turn through the air singing their way into the day, and thorn trees rustle against the breeze. The moment is peaceful, the setting idyllic. In much of Laikipia, throughout many years, this scene would represent life as usual. But this is not a usual year.

Just beyond the dam, the sound of bellowing cows and yelling herders echoes over the hilltop. The previous night, 10,000 cattle were forcibly pushed off Loisaba Conservancy by the Kenya Defence Force (KDF) - Kenya's national army - after illegally invading this private land and grazing their cattle there for weeks.

This was a peaceful operation, but not all have been. Since late 2016 parts of this arid, beautiful, two million-acre county have been wracked by violence - against humans, against wildlife and against livestock. Locals have fled their homes and lost all their worldly possessions, wild animals have been sprayed with bullets and butchered while drinking from water holes or walking in the bush, properties have been destroyed and people have lost limbs and loved ones in the chaos.

TRAGIC LOSS

The reasons for the events of the past few months are complex and far-reaching: political incitement, good rains, bad rains, climate change, degraded rangelands, land mismanagement, livestock numbers and a rapidly growing population all play a part. The recurrent issues reached international headlines when Tristan Voorspuy, an ex-British army officer and co-owner of the luxurious Sosian ranch, was murdered outside a property on his land in March 2017 by illegal livestock herders.

Ranch owners and pastoralists alike have spoken critically of the government and their handling of the situation in Laikipia. Allowing the illegal herders to 'take over' is when things really got bad according to Sean Outram, general manager at Sosian. 'On 1 March 2017 police went out and got into a big fire fight [on Sosian land]. They killed a few cows and that was it - retaliation began.' In the next few days Sosian wildlife was massacred, properties were burned to the ground and Voorspuy was killed.

Having flown out from the UK to help, Voorspuy took a horse and, against the advice of



RIGHT AND PREVIOUS SPREAD: A team from Mugie ranch inspects a dead buffalo to check for the presence of 'heart water', a tick-borne disease. One side effect of the sudden influx of tens of thousands of cattle onto private land is the introduction of such diseases to the wildlife already living there

Outram, rode at least 20 minutes through the occupied Sosian land to the torched house of his friend and ranch shareholder Richard Constant to assess the damage. 'Moments after arriving, three or four Pokot guys went in and shot him. It was an execution,' says Outram. The police did nothing.

A few weeks after Voorspuy's death, we visit the crumbling shell of the house where he was killed. Dry blood is spattered on the ground at the site of his shooting, encircled by shell casings belonging to AK47s, manufactured in Kenya. Inside, the house is a mess of broken glass, crumbling bricks and broken bedframes. The crunch of charred wood underfoot turned soft as we walk over the ashes of hundreds of books. Outram picks one up and in the breeze it crumbles into a million pieces. 'Ten good guys could have repelled this attack, instead we had 250 shit ones,' he says, referring to the police.

He does, however, have positive things to say about the KDF. 'The army are a breath of fresh air. They're not scared to go out and patrol and they enforce the law.' Later, as we drive out of Sosian, away from the stench of the rotting carcasses of wild animals and dying cows, some order seems to be being restored. Outside the gate, our car squeezes past hundreds of cattle being herded down the road by KDF officers.

CRIMINAL ACTS

Much lesser reported than the Voorspuy killing, although equally as shocking, has been the impact to smallholder farmers as herders armed with assault rifles have driven tens of thousands of head of cattle into Laikipia.

Stephen Lomelo was shot in the thigh while ushering cows belonging to Samburu tribesmen off his land in November 2016. The bullet hit a nerve and damaged his arteries, cutting off circulation. His lower leg later had to be amputated. He now spends his days hunched over on a seat in the centre of Thome, a town in central Laikipia, crutches propped up against the wall, his bandaged stump sticking out of his shorts, feeling helpless and wondering how he will provide for his family.

This is where our reporting originally began: visiting the smallholder farmers of central Laikipia and learning about their losses. Esther Kadeli showed us around her plot, where in November 2016 she was awoken by the sound of gunfire. 'When I heard the shots I fell to the ground with my family,' she says. 'We listened as [Samburu herders] broke the boma [livestock enclosure] and took our goats. Eventually it went quiet. We thought they had moved on so my cousin got up to check.' Esther's cousin opened the front door to be confronted with an armed herdsman. He was shot and killed on the spot.

Esther had spent eight years breeding her goats and growing her herd to over 100. She had planned to sell them to pay for her children's secondary school education, but all were stolen

during the raid. She says these herders had travelled far from neighbouring counties to steal her livestock, which is not normal. 'It is a political issue, people of the Samburu tribe want to maintain power.' Currently, a Samburu politician by the name of Mathew Lempurkel occupies the position of MP for Laikipia North. 'Their strategy is to scare people in other tribes like us Turkanas, and overpower us,' Esther says.

PLAYING POLITICS

Throughout the months spent reporting on this story, the name 'Mathew Lempurkel' kept coming up. Not least due to his arrest in March on charges of orchestrating the murder of Voorspuy, only to have those charges later dropped due to lack of evidence. Smallholders, ranch owners and political commentators spoke of his incitement - encouraging pastoralists to invade private ranches, gorge their cattle on the grass, and turn violent if anyone tries to stop them. Most importantly, they say that if these thousands of herders stay in Laikipia long enough to vote in Kenya's elections this August, Lempurkel stands a good chance of retaining his seat.

Kenyan media reports Lempurkel denying the accusations of incitement. 'Political rivals are using the situation for political gain. The fact is that the herders are being driven by drought,' he said in a statement.

Of all the issues facing Laikipia, politics and drought are the triggers that have tipped matters over the edge. One of the hardest hit private ranches has been Mugie, a 49,000-acre private conservancy in northern Laikipia. In January, cattle and herders flooded in from the west and north, cutting down 40km of fencing, and trashing solar panels and boreholes. General Manager Josh Perret estimates that at its height around 50,000 cows were illegally grazing on the property.

'One hundred per cent if there wasn't an election this year this wouldn't be happening,' says Mugie Wildlife Manager Jamie Manuel. While illegal grazing is a common problem, never before have Manuel and his team experienced the issue to this extent. 'This year it was different,' he says. 'Everyone came [onto Mugie land] and by force.'

Historically, Samburu and Pokot tribes - the main ones illegally entering Mugie land - have fought with one another, but Manuel believes this year there is a politically-motivated truce at work: 'Pokot and Samburu don't support the Jubilee government [currently in power], so they're joining up to vote.'

As in most countries, there are restrictions governing the movement of cattle in Kenya because of their ability to spread disease. At Mugie, the knock-on effect of 50,000 extra cows arriving from all over the north of the country has been the outbreak of the tick-borne disease heart water. Already weak from the added competition for resources and distressed by the violence and disruption, buffalo and antelope on the

conservancy have rapidly succumbed to this highly infectious disease. Hundreds have died.

Driving around Mugie, the scenes are deeply upsetting and almost apocalyptic. Dead and dying animals are everywhere, sadly splayed out on the ground or struggling to get up. We followed Manuel and the team as they identified sick animals, then shot and dissected them to test for and confirm the disease. One buffalo - normally a fearsome beast among Kenya's wildlife - spent its last feeble moments in the shrubbery before being shot and dragged out by the horns into the open by a truck. As the vet sharpened his knife and began his dissection, a trickle of fresh blood flowed down the creature's stomach like a tear. A bleak representation of the price wildlife is paying in the region, Manuel expects that 'up to 50 per cent' of the wildlife on Mugie will die this season.

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CASH COWS

A 2012 report by the Laikipia Wildlife Forum, an organisation which focuses on natural resource management and sustainable land use, describes Laikipia as 'one of East Africa's most important areas for wildlife conservation.'

Home to higher populations of larger mammals than any other landscape in the country other than the Maasai Mara National Reserve, the region is a haven for half of Kenya's black rhinos, the country's second largest population of elephants, the third largest population of lions, wild dogs, reticulated giraffes, Grévy's zebra and other unique and endangered animals found in few other places on Earth.

The question of what will become of these creatures if not only political violence, but also the impending issues of population explosion, climate change and extended periods of drought all have an effect is one many conservationists are concerned about. Alayne Cotterill, Executive Director of conservation organisation Lion Landscapes, believes preserving space for wildlife is fundamental for the future. 'The Laikipia ranches act like National Parks - usually wildlife numbers are high while livestock numbers are low. They are protected areas. You need that in the landscape to provide refuge for these species.'

The increasing strain on resources is also a threat to the future of wildlife in the region. A 2016 report published by the Public Library of Science shows that as livestock populations have grown in Kenya, wildlife numbers have dwindled. Between 1977 and 2016, the report shows wildlife losses of about 68 per cent across the country, meanwhile livestock numbers increased markedly by 76.3 per cent. Overall, there is almost triple the number of livestock across Kenya than there was 40 years ago. 'The effects of drought are much more extreme now that there is so much livestock competing with wild animals for the same resources,' says Dr Joseph Ogutu, Senior Statistician at the University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart and author of the report.

'Right now the issue is politics, but it goes back to humans,' says Manuel over at Mugie. 'There are such large densities of livestock grazing on land... We've degraded the earth and never let it recover. It's overgrazing. Everyone wants more and more [cows, goats and sheep] and before long there are too many.'

Prior to the current drought six years of good rains in Laikipia have exasperated the current situation according to Manuel, because they allowed pastoralists to feed and grow their livestock herds tremendously.

'Cows are a good way of making money,' says Abdi Mamo, a cattle owner from central Laikipia. 'You can buy at KES17,000 (£127) when they are weak, then when it rains and the grass grows they become fatter and you can sell at KES40,000 (£300), within just three months. I once brought a cow for KES1500 (£11) and sold for KES50,000 (£370).'

Even so, cash has little use in largely-pastoral northern Kenya, where banks are few and far between and poor infrastructure means getting to them could take days. Instead, value for the communities in and around Laikipia is entirely tied up in livestock. People sell cattle to pay for school fees, buy land or build homes.

But livestock also has a deep social and cultural importance to pastoralist communities. Naisula Lepariyo, a Samburu woman who is building a platform to provide young pastoralists from all tribes with information on a range of issues from sexual reproduction to education opportunities, explains the importance of livestock, particularly cows, in her society. 'The myth among the Samburu is that first God sent us to Earth, and then he sent the cows for us,' she says. 'When cows suffer we really feel the pain of it. If I get married no one will offer my father money, he will offer him cows. If someone wanted to marry me and offered my dad \$1,000 in cash or a cow that was worth \$400, he would take the cow. The cow is more symbolic.'

Over at Mugie conservancy, Manuel told us about how he had recently met a wealthy, educated Samburu man living in Switzerland. The pair got talking, and it turned out the gentleman owned 1,500 cows. With no land of his own to



ABOVE: Esther Kadeli lost her cousin and her goat herd during a cattle raid on her farm by invading herdsmen last November; **BELOW:** That same month, Stephen Lomelo lost his leg and his livelihood when he was shot by herdsmen while trying to clear illegal cattle from his land. Now he struggles to support his family



ABOVE: Increased security measures are seen as one of the few ways to protect land from invading herdsmen. But private forces only go so far and many are reliant on the national army to fill in where the local police are finding it hard to cope; **BELOW:** Sean Outram inspects the burnt-out remains of the property where Tristan Voorspuy lost his life during a raid



graze them on, he had sent them to Mugie and, hearing of the violence in Laikipia, had flown over to check on them. According to Manuel, the man told him that although he has the money to send his Samburu nephews and nieces to school, he deliberately keeps them uneducated so that they can tend to the cattle.

'The more cattle you have the stronger you are in the community,' says Manuel. 'You feel sorry for people but you can't walk around with 1,000 cows and no land and expect them to live through the drought. If everyone had 20 cows they'd still be strong and able to survive. It's not worth destroying everything for a bunch of cows.'

HERDING TO LIVE

For the herders, however, this line of thinking simply does not make sense. Naisula's uncle, Samburu herder Peter Lepariyo, says: 'Cows are the core of our life. We don't have crops or farming. We depend on them to live.' He is one of many herders to whom we spoke who feel victimised, attacked and unrepresented by the government and their handling of the situation in Laikipia.

'We are being harassed, treated as though we are not human beings,' he says. 'You'll find the government shooting cattle, they beat the herders and the children looking after the cattle. They burn the houses where they are staying. It is terrible. It is very bad... People are using a bad impression of the pastoralists, giving a negative image of Samburu herders. We respect the government and people, but we are trying to graze our livestock because of persistent drought.'

Twelve-year-old herder James Teregua walked seven days from Samburu East with his cattle to graze them illegally at Mugie. He has been tending to the cattle since he was five-years-old and has not received an education. His reasons for coming to Laikipia are driven by drought and politics. 'I was at Suyian [a private ranch next to Sosian], and got caught by the KDF with my cattle for illegal grazing,' he recalls. 'They beat us with their army belts, so we came to Mugie. It hurt getting beaten but we had to take our cattle there, they need grass.' Teregua and other herders were told exactly which private ranches to target in a meeting. 'We had been told Suyian had grass in a political meeting, so we went there in a big group.'

Yet not all herders are grazing illegally, and not all members of these tribes are violent. The Pokot, for example, have been labelled as particularly aggressive and 'war-like' by the press, but it was members of the Pokot who intervened during the violence of early 2017 at Sosian and tried to stop it. 'On the northern end of Sosian we are leasing land to Pokots [for legal grazing]. They actually protected our huts up there when some violent Pokots wanted to burn them,' says Sean Outram.

Sammy Sarich is a Pokot man living in Nairobi. Asked what his thoughts are on the violent actions of some members of his tribe in Laikipia, he says, 'We Pokots do not condone violence. The



ABOVE: James Teregua is a 12-year-old Samburu herder that has been forced to graze his cattle on the private lands of others. When caught, he has suffered beatings, but he feels he has no choice

violent Pokot are not many. There are criminals in every community. When they go and harass people and kill people, the government needs to intervene. Those who are shooting wildlife, they are criminals. They should be arrested.'

I asked Executive Director of the Electoral Law and Governance Institute, Felix Odhim, if the government's poor and slow handling of the situation in Laikipia is because elections are approaching and that it might not be popular to be seen coming to the rescue of rich, private land owners, especially white ones? 'This government's ineptitude has nothing to do with whether people are white or not,' he said. 'In every crisis we have had, including the Garissa and Westgate shootings, the handling was one of ineptitude. I don't think it has anything to do with race.'

RADICAL THOUGHTS

Government ineptitude, teamed with the proliferation of guns and the breakdown of traditional tribal relationships between elders and youth, is a scary concoction for violence both in Laikipia and beyond into northern Kenya. One

only has to browse a Facebook group like Pokots Countrywide to see the hate speech and incitement young people have access to: 'All Pokots are reptiles,' says one user. 'You Satanist Pokots kill children,' says another. Some believe young people are now ignoring the traditional peaceful relationships set up by tribal elders and taking matters into their own hands.

Raila Odinga is a veteran Kenyan politician who is the main opponent of current president Uhuru Kenyatta in the general election due to take place in August. What does he think is the best solution is for Laikipia? His answer, which is based on historical land injustices, seems worryingly short sighted. 'We need to renegotiate to allow [people] access to graze their cattle on ranch land so they don't lose livestock,' he says.

But a simple open-access solution is fraught with pitfalls. The largest being the tragedy of the commons: open resources to all, and when the hundreds of thousands of livestock have eaten all the grass and there is nothing left, what then becomes of the wildlife, livestock and humans that depend on a working rangeland system to survive? This may not be a normal year, but as the pressures on Laikipia increase, falling back into 'business as usual' will not suffice either. So what are the potential solutions?

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One radical, somewhat perplexing idea proposed by Josh Perret at Mugie is to shift the focus from protecting wildlife and get more cows. Despondently, he argues: 'If we have grass we're an attraction, so we've got to get rid of as much grass as possible. We'll get more cows to eat the grass, then there won't be a threat. It doesn't really matter what educated people in the West think, they're not the ones living here.'

SECURITY MEASURES

Yet there are private conservancies, albeit with different geographical locations and pressures than Mugie, who are still making money and protecting wildlife. These privately-owned lands are bringing in revenue for Laikipia - they pumped almost KES4billion (£30million) into the local economy last year according to a 2017 report by the Laikipia Farmers' Association.

Michael Dyer, General Manager at Borana Conservancy, a privately-owned plot in eastern Laikipia that has not been invaded, believes that 'The more tax you can generate [as a business], the more employment you can generate and the better off you are. We have to make big contributions to keep [Kenya and conservation] going.' Borana already runs a number of other initiatives that seem to be working, from investing in education for the local community, to running a mobile health clinic that gives women a choice about pregnancy.

There is the suggestion from Outram, however, that Borana might have evaded the troubles due to their excellent security. Home to the last of Kenya's highly-endangered rhinos, Borana employs an expert team of security professionals to give the animals 24/7 protection from poaching. For Outram, upping security is going to be a key focus at Sosian as they work to rebuild operations following the attack that killed Voorspuy.

Tom Silvester, manager of the 56,000 acre Loisaba Conservancy, believes that the solution fundamentally comes from building bridges not walls, not just with immediate neighbours but also across counties. 'The conversation needs to start from way further north,' he says, adding that the benefits of conservation and tourism need to trickle down better. He believes the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) model, which promotes community ownership, works well. 'There has been a failure to correctly value wildlife and the benefits that accrue from it,' he says. 'Conservation is a luxury. If you're worried about your next meal, who cares about an elephant? Ownership is important which is why the NRT model works.'

Others talk of the urgent need for the government to implement caps on livestock numbers and to create new livelihood options for pastoralists. Naisula Lepariyo believes these initiatives are important, but also worries that with modernisation could come a complete loss of culture. She is somewhat conflicted in her mission to bring modern information to young herders. 'Pastoralists need to understand you can no longer cut trees to feed cows,' she says. 'We need to invest in education. I know that cows are not sustainable, but how do we maintain our culture and individualism and also create opportunities?'

While it's clear that the challenges facing Laikipia and the surrounding counties will remain far beyond this extraordinary year, many believe it is not too late for the area. 'Out of crisis comes opportunity,' says Silvester with a wry smile. He feels that now is the perfect time to have a good, hard look at Laikipia and come up with creative solutions that give communities near and far a better seat at the table.

Back on Loisaba, tufts of luscious green grass have begun to appear by the dam, exhaling out of the dry, reddish brown earth like a sigh of relief, their blades stretching toward the sunlight. A sign, perhaps, of hope? ■