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The Effects of Colonisation on the Interactions Between Indigenous People and Wildlife in Kenya

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Summary

Colonisation redefined the interactions between wildlife and Indigenous people in Kenya. The field of nature conservation in Kenya is still significantly grounded in colonial values and models, often perpetuating inequalities that arose during colonisation. This thesis therefore aims to challenge certain aspects within the field of conservation by producing a nuanced perspective of the historical and contemporary dynamics that have given rise to this field. The research will advocate for inclusion and prioritisation of Indigenous knowledge in conservation efforts, promoting decolonial alternatives like Wangarĩ Maathai's 'utu' philosophy where social and environmental justice cannot be separated. This thesis explores the ways in which human-wildlife interactions have been affected, with the results mostly demonstrating that peaceful coexistence between Indigenous people and wildlife has been inhibited as a consequence of colonisation. A few crucial factors have been identified to have influenced this change, including an ontological shift toward fortress conservation, fencing and the militarisation of conservation, and a complex land ownership legacy from colonisation. Some of their benefits and drawbacks are explored. Data is collected through a literature review, interviews and case studies (Laikipia, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy). 10 interviews were conducted with a range of different people in and around the field of conservation, including Maasai and Samburu pastoralists and academics.

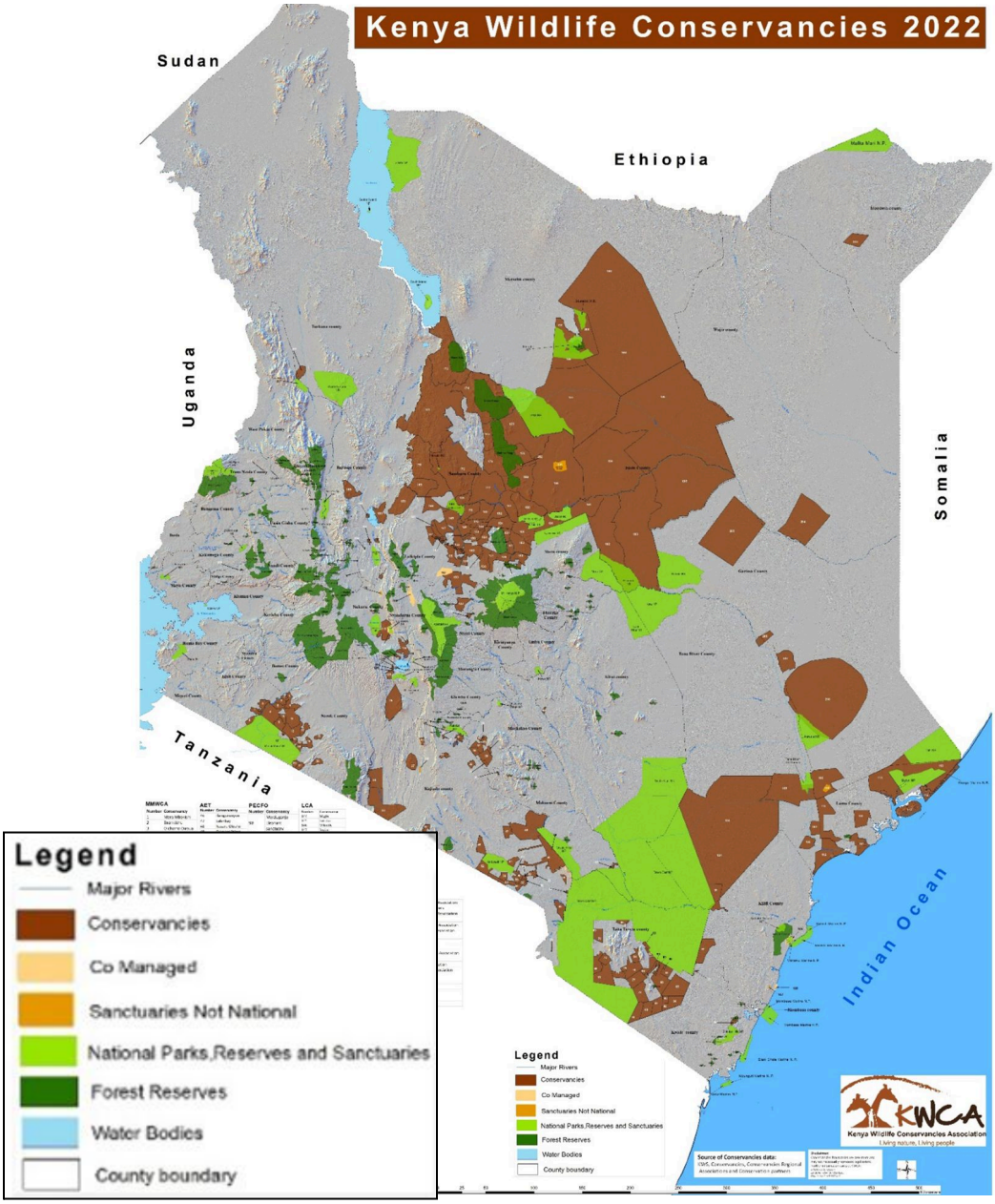
Introduction

Kenya, like many other African countries, has a turbulent history of colonisation by the British. Historically, Indigenous people such as the Maasai helped maintain its beautiful landscapes and diverse wildlife. During the colonial period, these local sustainable systems were replaced by Western conservation models, changing the Indigenous practices and, as a result, the landscapes (Enns and Bersaglio, 2024). Through its private, communal and government-managed conservancies, Kenya is praised for its impressive wildlife, holding among the most intact conservation systems in East Africa (Bashir and Wanyonyi, 2024). The country has 23 National Parks, 28 National Reserves and 4 National Sanctuaries on land managed by the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS, 2024). In 2016, there were 160 conservancies in Kenya, 113 of which were registered under the Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association (KWCA). Out of those 113, 56 are community conservancies, 39 are private, and 18 are group conservancies (KWCA, 2016). Although conservancies are more frequently community-owned, national parks, for instance, are state property and "out-of-bounds for anyone else, apart from tourists" (Ogada and Mbaria, 2016, p. 21). However, while tourists from all over the world enjoy these romanticised 'African landscapes,' the creation of this 'pristine nature' often comes at the expense of local communities and Indigenous knowledge. This can be seen as a legacy that

remains from colonisation. Although many of these events occurred in the post-colonial period, they are largely built on colonial conservation strategies and ways of thinking (Ofcansky, 1984). Hence, important questions are raised about equity and inclusion within the field of nature conservation in Kenya.

Figure 1

Map of conservancies and government-protected areas in Kenya in 2022



From "Winning space for conservation: the growth of wildlife conservancies in Kenya," by M. A. Bashir and E. Wanyonyi, 2024, *Frontiers in Conservation Science*, *5* (https://doi.org/10.3389/fcosc.2024.1385959).

Several scholars have called for a shift in strategies and policies to involve communities "to own not only the conservation efforts but have increased benefit from these resources" (Otieno, 2023, p. 1). The growing need for integrating Indigenous knowledge systems in conservation would not only bring about increased equity, it would also allow Indigenous practices to contribute positively to the field of nature conservation and sustainable development in Kenya. Owuor (2008) suggests integrating Indigenous knowledge into Kenya's formal school system. Indigenous people have a long history of knowledge about resource-use practices and the specific local ecological systems in which they are positioned. While Western knowledge of Kenyan conservation is much more 'synchronic,' meaning that it does not have as much of a historical understanding, Indigenous observations are of great value as a result of their more 'diachronic' nature, implying that they have evolved in tune with local ecosystems over time (Gadgil et al., 1993). Therefore, this thesis would be very relevant by evaluating how the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife have changed due to colonisation. This study also contributes to sustainability and environmental justice by developing a more decolonial and equitable conservation framework.

Throughout this thesis, the term 'Indigenous' will be used to refer to the original inhabitants of a certain area, while 'locals' are the people currently living there, no matter how long they have been there. Local people may not always be Indigenous, while Indigenous people are usually local. According to Article 1 of ILO Convention No. 169 (1989), Indigenous people are descendants of those who "inhabited the … geographical region … at the time of … colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who … retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions". The primary focus group of this thesis are Indigenous pastoralist communities, primarily the Maasai, as most case studies that will be discussed are specific to them. Many similarities exist between the Maasai and other Indigenous groups in Kenya, especially certain structural pressures (ex. land dispossession, cultural marginalisation and state policies) which have affected these groups in comparable ways. Nonetheless, there remain considerable differences between Indigenous communities and how they interact with wildlife (Waithaka, 2012). Finally, the term 'wildlife' will refer to both fauna and flora.

Aims:

This thesis aims to explore how colonisation has altered the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife in Kenya. It will examine how Indigenous knowledge is positioned within current conservation approaches, advocating for conservation models that place Indigenous practices at the forefront of conservation. A shift will be encouraged from 'fortress conservation' to Wangarĩ Maathai's 'utu' approach, in which human rights and environmental conservation are seen as inseparable (Muhonja, 2020). To explore these various

aspects of the research, the thesis will offer a holistic analysis of the research question, *'In what ways has colonisation influenced how Indigenous people interact with wildlife in Kenya?'*

Hypothesis:

Colonisation altered the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife in several ways, often discouraging peaceful coexistence. This was done, among other things, through the imposition of a Western 'fortress' conservation model coupled with the fencing and militarisation of wildlife areas, and through the displacement of Indigenous people.

Theory

Colonisation altered the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife in Kenya, both directly, such as through laws, and indirectly, by shaping the narrative around conservation. Many contemporary wildlife parks were originally hunting grounds for British colonial elites (Ogada and Mbaria, 2016). Indigenous communities historically relied on the land and its resources, but in many areas, colonial laws changed the land ownership from communal to state-owned and privatised land. Natural resources that were previously sustainably managed by these communities were now being extracted for the benefit of settlers and the colony (Kameri-Mbote and Cullet, 1997). This land subdivision fragmented the land, adversely affecting wildlife (Bedelian, 2013). In the late 19th century, the colonial government introduced restrictions on hunting, and game reserves represented the start of national parks and British conservation in Kenya (Munro, 2021). During colonisation, Indigenous communities were displaced, reallocating the most profitable land to the small minority of white settlers (Ogada and Mbaria, 2016).

Over the years, conservation has become very commercialised (Fairhead et al., 2012). This can be seen in tourism revenue, carbon credits and the privatisation of wildlife management. In *Green Grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?* Fairhead et al. (2012, p. 238) dive into the commodification of nature and 'green grabbing,' which is "the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends". In their article, they reflect on all the actors that are involved in green grabbing, and the unexpected alliances that have been formed, including between businesses and NGOs, the military and ecotourism, and conservationists and mining industries. This often comes at the cost of Indigenous communities. Therefore, despite some advantages of the current nature conservation model, many challenges and controversies arise as well.

In their book *The Big Conservation Lie*, Ogada and Mbaria (2016) explain that during colonisation, a model of nature conservation was adopted in which local Kenyans were separated from wildlife; this was called 'fortress conservation'. Richard Leakey, who was head of the KWS twice in the 1990s, was a large supporter of fortress conservation and played a significant role in the militarisation of Kenyan nature conservation (Ogada and Mbaria, 2016). Fortress conservation is still one of the main models for conservation applied in Kenya today, and it has led to many evictions of Indigenous people in the name of conservation, such as in the case of the Ogiek people in western Kenya (Mbaria, 2022; Savage, 2016). Fortress conservation has negatively affected the interactions between Indigenous communities and wildlife by suppressing historical traditional practices that symbiotically benefited both humans and wildlife, such as the use of fire to manage pests (Enns and Bersaglio, 2024). Another consequence is that it excludes local and Indigenous people, painting them as 'threats' to wildlife, even though they have historically taken care of and coexisted with wildlife. This approach to conservation prioritises tourism and large international conservation organisations over local communities.

Other aspects of fortress conservation that will be challenged in this thesis are the 'green militarisation' and fencing, which, despite some benefits, have also jeopardised the relationship

between Indigenous communities and wildlife in Kenya. In *Green Militarization: Anti-Poaching Efforts and the Spatial Contours of Kruger National Park*, Lunstrum (2014) describes the concept of a 'green militarisation,' which is the increasing integration of military approaches and principles into conservation efforts (Duffy, 2014). Although Lunstrum's study was based in South Africa, the militarisation of conservation is highly applicable to Kenya. Certain arguments are in favour of militarised conservation, such as it being an effective solution in urgent situations, when trying to defend species at risk of extinction, and when poachers start using increased violence (Duffy et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the normalisation of militarised conservation needs to be challenged, as they criminalise Indigenous practices such as subsistence hunting and grazing in favour of tourism, disrupting traditional coexistence with wildlife. Green militarisation can be seen as an extension of wildlife management from the colonial period, excluding Indigenous communities and portraying them as threats to wildlife. Fencing also limits the interaction between wildlife populations, consequently compromising biodiversity and impairing ecosystem function (Tyrell et al., 2022). It may prevent wildlife from accessing water and other resources, resulting in rangeland degradation. While fencing has negative consequences for wildlife, it also puts pressure on pastoral livelihoods by limiting movement and drought resilience, decreasing the amount of livestock that can be kept per person and increasing vulnerability. Sedentarisation and land conversion are two other aspects that Tyrell et al. (2022) highlight in their article, which threaten conservation and pastoral livelihoods. Other literature highlights some benefits of fencing, most notably for agrarian communities. Fences may reduce human-wildlife conflicts by preventing wild animals from damaging and killing crops and livestock, and from attacking people (Pekor et al., 2019)

Throughout this thesis, a shift will be encouraged from traditional fortress conservation to an approach that integrates the Swahili concept of *utu*, what Wangarĩ Maathai describes as "what it means to be human" (Muhonja, 2020, p. x). Wangarĩ Maathai was a Kenyan advocate of human rights, democracy and environmental conservation. She founded the Green Belt Movement and was the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize (The Nobel Prize, 2025). Maathai highly valued the philosophy of utu, the Swahili word for *ubuntu*, which is a Bantu philosophy that forms the foundation of community organisation and interdependence in many Indigenous African societies. As Muhonja explains in her book *Radical Utu* (2020), "Maathai's holistic environmentalism is inseparable from utu" (p. 22). What Muhonja calls Maathai's 'radical utu' advocates for communities to be positioned as both agents and recipients of environmental action and justice, paving the way to economic, social and political justice (Muhonja, 2020). Colonisation changed many of the Indigenous ways of thinking and doing by portraying their environmental cultures as inferior to those of the West. Consequently, utu was replaced with a more colonial, capitalist and neoliberal approach that separated the people from their environment (Muhonja, 2020). Throughout this thesis, Maathai's radical utu will be implemented as a decolonial framework for conservation in Kenya, proposing an alternative to the Western human-wildlife dichotomy where land, people and wildlife support one another.

Methods

This thesis applied a mixed-methods approach, focusing mostly on qualitative data. First, a literature review was conducted, which is referenced throughout the thesis, predominantly in the theory section. Certain case studies were explored, such as land ownership in Laikipia and the consequences of fencing in the Lewa conservancy. For the Lewa case study, Google Earth was used to find maps on tree cover, comparing tree cover in 1984 and 2022, during which some areas in Lewa got fenced.

Ten semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted over a few months, of which two were deemed irrelevant to this thesis. These ranged from the authors of the book *Settler Ecologies* to an Assistant Professor within the School of the Environment and African Studies Centre at the University of Toronto to a Maasai pastoralist working at Lentorre Lodge. The goal was to interview a wide variety of people to gain a more holistic and nuanced perspective. Ideally, participants would range from people working for larger conservation NGOs to Indigenous people affected by these conservation efforts, whether for better or for worse. Unfortunately, representatives from key community-based organisations and associations, including the KWCA, did not respond to interview requests. Valuable insights were gathered from two Maasai participants and one Samburu participant, as well as a white 'nationalised Kenyan' farmer who is a board member of a ranch in Laikipia (born British, but lived in Kenya his whole life). These are crucial to this study as they offer direct lived experiences and knowledge passed down generations. The interviewees were found mostly through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, the participant was asked whether they had any resources, articles or connections to share; this way, new contacts were found. Verbal informed consent was an important part of the interviews, and after the interviewees agreed, the conversation was recorded on a mobile phone. Notes were taken during each interview. Two participants were anonymised. Due to time zone differences, one interview was conducted via voice messages on WhatsApp.

As a white, non-Kenyan researcher in this field, I want to acknowledge that my positionality influences my perspective and interactions with participants. On the one hand, I provide an outsider's viewpoint to this study, but on the other hand, I understand the historical and ongoing power dynamics related to colonisation, specifically in the field of conservation. My racial identity and my background, having grown up as an expatriate in various African countries, may influence how participants perceive or engage with me. This is especially important to reflect on because conservation is a largely white-dominated field in Kenya, with many conservation policies stemming from colonial legacies, and research in this field is often conducted by foreigners.

Results

A historical reconstruction of human-wildlife interactions

The book *Settler Ecologies* by Charis Enns and Brock Bersaglio (2024), with the foreword and afterword written by Ramson Karmushu, explores how nature conservation in Kenya still operates largely on colonial structures. Karmushu tries to portray the livelihood systems and rangeland management practices of Maasais in and around the Laikipia Plateau before colonisation. He describes this based on insights from his grandfather, father, and other elders from his community. Oral traditions such as these are a crucial form of data collection in Kenya, offering culturally embedded and historical narratives. The Maasai were historically nomads; today, they are semi-nomadic pastoralists living under a communal land management system. The cattle of the Maasai grazed together with many species of wild animals, primarily antelopes, while other animals stayed separate from the cattle, like the rhinos (Karmushu in Enns and Bersaglio, 2024). Karmushu describes certain Maasai traditions that served to conserve the environment, such as the use of fire to manage pests (such as ticks) and control the spread of diseases, avoiding areas where vegetation needed to regenerate. He explains that his Maasai ancestors, like nowadays, did not eat much wild meat as it was seen as a bad omen (Karmushu in Enns and Bersaglio, 2024; Waithaka, 2012). When they did, they would only eat animals that resembled cows, such as buffaloes and antelopes. Karmushu also explains that the Maasai's sheep used to be Indigenous, unlike the contemporary Merino and black-headed Persian sheep introduced during colonisation. During his interview, Brock Bersaglio describes how the red Masaai sheep in Northern Kenya, Southern Kenya and Northern Tanzania are "on the verge of extinction in some parts. It's a small animal, it feeds very lightly on the land. It's highly disease-tolerant and resistant in some ways, and that's through years and years of selective breeding by Indigenous peoples" (B. Bersaglio, personal communication, March 31, 2025). He argues that focusing efforts on conserving that species and supporting Indigenous people to rely less on hybrids or exported foreign species could transform the landscape.

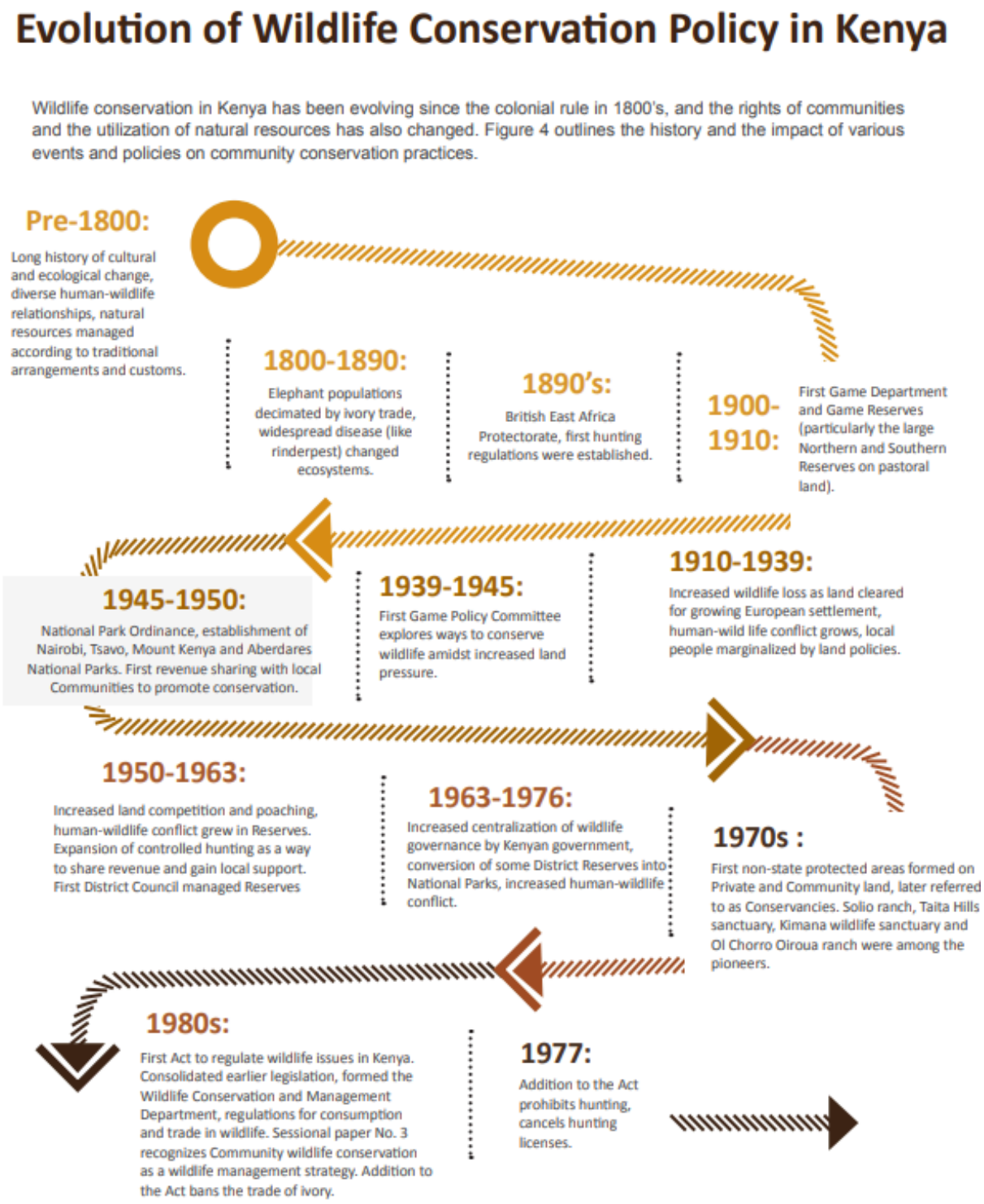
In an interview with Kelempu Kennedy, a Maasai who works at Lentorre Lodge as a professional safari guide, he explains that "before colonisation … many communities had a good interaction between livestock and the wildlife." "After colonisation, they were actually trying … to say that they are teaching Africans conservation. But Africans themselves know it; before colonisation, they had conservation of their own" (K. Kennedy, personal communication, April 15, 2025). As Enns and Bersaglio similarly discuss in their book, there is a popular narrative in Kenya that 'white people' care much more about wildlife than Africans do. In truth, the two seem to have a very different relationship to wildlife.

The relationship of European settlers to wildlife has changed drastically over time, as a result changing that of Indigenous people as well. In 1895, the British founded the East African Protectorate before it was officially declared a colony in 1920. Kenya gained independence in

1963. Soon after founding the East African Protectorate, the ‘White Highlands’ (the most fertile Kenyan highlands) were opened to white settlers, formally excluding Africans from owning land (Waithaka, 2012). In Laikipia, for example, many third and fourth-generation British settlers still own over half the land. It is among the largest wildlife havens globally and home to several endangered species. The British government gave white settlers the land during the colonial period, often as compensation for veterans of the First and Second World Wars, in return that they cultivated it (Murimi, 2024). Initially, settlers used it for farming and sport hunting for the elite populations. Many of these farms, ranches and hunting lodges were turned into wildlife conservancies after the country’s independence, financed by tourism and international wildlife charities. Today, conservancies in Kenya cover more than 6.3 million hectares (KWCA, 2020). Even in the years before WWI, large parcels of land were given to British settlers, who used the land for agriculture. This, along with commercial sport hunting for Europeans and Americans, led to immense wildlife and habitat destruction, causing concern among Western conservationists and leading to the formation of a 1939 game committee (Waithaka, 2012). In 1946, the Nairobi National Park was created, followed shortly by Amboseli, Tsavo and Mt. Kenya national parks (Akama, 1998). Enns and Bersaglio argue that rewilding came later as an attempt by white settlers to keep their land, diversify their livelihoods, and survive economically in post-colonial Kenya (Enns and Bersaglio, 2024).

Figure 2

KWCA's Timeline of Conservation Policies



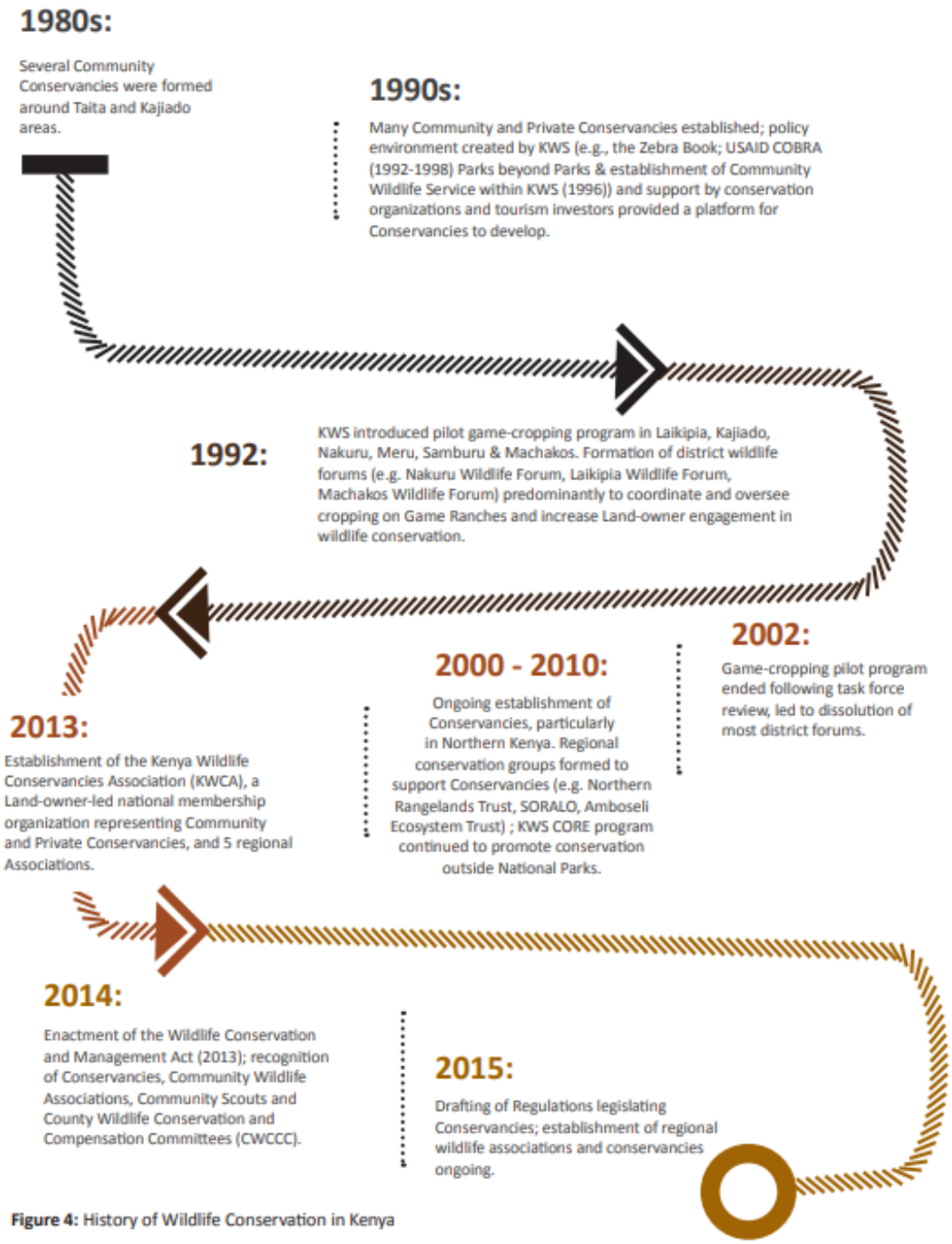


Figure 4: History of Wildlife Conservation in Kenya

Adapted from King J.,Kaelo D., Buzzard B. & Wairigia G. (2015) Establishing a Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya: a guide for Private Land-owners and Communities. Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association

Note. Kenyan wildlife conservation policies from the pre-1800s to 2015. From *State of Wildlife Conservancies in Kenya Report 2016* (p. 14-15), by Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association, 2016.

The effects of colonisation on the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife

Analysing the eight interviews revealed a few notable impacts of colonisation on the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife, including a change in the approach to conservation, fencing and militarised conservation, and land ownership. While fencing and the militarisation of conservation may not be directly because of colonisation, they were encouraged as part of the colonial fortress conservation approach.

Fortress conservation and an ontological shift

A significant impact of colonisation on the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife was the introduction of a new conservation model – fortress conservation. This 'colonial model' of nature conservation separated people from wildlife, completely altering their interactions (Mbaria, 2022). Esmee Mulder, a key informant who has worked on rangeland restoration projects in East Africa, explains that "one of the biggest things that I've seen and that you still see present today is a certain mindset, a certain segregation between humans and nature and certain stereotypes about pastoralists and how they're essentially ruining the land" (E. Mulder, personal communication, March 31, 2025). Mulder explains that whereas in the past, Indigenous people coexisted with wildlife peacefully, a narrative was implemented during colonial times that demonised local people, remaining the dominant discourse. "Some of those practices are also taught at the universities, even in Kenya," and many conservation NGOs run on that dominant narrative (E. Mulder, March 31, 2025). Many Kenyans, including some Maasai, have adopted this fortress approach. Kariuki Kirigia, Assistant Professor at the School of the Environment and African Studies Centre at the University of Toronto, mentions a similar point during his interview. "Conservation itself needs to be decolonised, because it comes with this idea that you need to separate nature from people, creating that binary or dualism, which is what we've seen in Kenya with the creation of national parks" (K. Kirigia, personal communication, April 8, 2025).

There are varying opinions on the topic, depending on the background and context of the person. A key informant, the white 'nationalised Kenyan' farmer and board member of a ranch in Laikipia, mentions that "one of the positive things of colonisation was potentially creating national parks" (personal communication, April 28, 2025). Despite their drawbacks, national parks have helped to protect many species, some of which are at risk of extinction (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). In contrast, Mulder answers the same question by saying that national parks "displaced Indigenous people, in this case, Maasai, and took away their resources. A lot of these national parks were in areas where there's a high abundance of wildlife … because there's a high abundance of resources, including water" (E. Mulder, March 31, 2025). 'Green grabbing' this land from the Indigenous people therefore leaves pastoralists more vulnerable to droughts, as the land is crucial for grazing, especially in the dry season. "When you

think of climate change in that setting, these kind of mobility practices were now reduced because key resources are taken, fences are built, national parks are built" (E. Mulder, March 31, 2025).

Corey Wright is an interviewee whose research has been primarily around indigenous land rights, decolonisation, conservation, conflict and pastoralism in East Africa. He explains that colonisation brought about an ontological transformation, which elicited a geographic impact. The Maasai traditionally referred to what we now call 'wildlife' or 'wild animals' as 'the livestock of God.' "They didn't differentiate wildlife per se from their own livestock". But "as this idea of wildlife emerges, along with different humanist influences through the colonial period, and with this modernisation, you suddenly have this hierarchy of human-non-human relations with humans at the top" (C. Wright, personal communication, April 23, 2025). This made it easier to objectify and exploit wildlife. The 'geographic impact' refers to the physical separation of Indigenous people and wildlife, for instance through displacements and fencing. Hence, there are both positives and negatives associated with fortress-model conserved areas.

Fencing and militarisation

Colonisation has indirectly influenced the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife through fencing. In *Settler Ecologies* (2024), the authors describe the landscape changes that occurred due to the fencing that took place in colonial and post-colonial times, often for the sake of conservation. They use the example of the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, but it applies to other conserved areas. In 1983-1984, the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary was formed by fencing 2,000 hectares of land in Lewa, followed by the fencing of the entire Lewa Downs area in 1995, forming the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (Giesen et al., 2017). Karmushu explains that in old maps, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy had much more tree cover. When these areas started getting fenced, elephants could no longer travel out of the fences, so they started destroying the trees, converting forests to grasslands (Karmushu in Enns and Bersaglio, 2024). Figures 3 and 4 show the forest cover in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in 1984 and 2022, in which there seems to be a slight decrease in forest cover generally. Some of the dark spots (forests) that can be seen in 1984, around the center of the conservancy, disappear before 2022.

In his interview, Karmushu, a Maasai who worked for IMPACT and the IIFB, explains that "you're fencing a land for conservation, but at the same time, you are breaking ecologies." "Next to humans, elephants are the second biggest deforesters, so if you close elephants in a small territory, they will finish all the trees" (personal communication, April 2, 2025). S. L., a Samburu man from Laikipia who is the protagonist in *The Battle for Laikipia* (2024), explains that fencing is especially dangerous for wildlife in the drought season, as "they just go around the fencing lines until they starve" (S. L., personal communication, April 25, 2025). Similar trends have been described in other literature, including the mass deaths of wildebeest described

by Mark and Delia Owens in *Cry of the Kalahari*, where 90% of the 1979 wildebeest population in the Kalahari is estimated to have died due to fencing in times of drought (Owens and Owens, 1984).

In Kenya, the use of fencing is especially contested because of the country's colonial history. Fences have become political because Kenyans often perceive them as tools to keep the locals out (Murimi, 2024; Evans and Adams, 2016). L. explains that fencing has become a huge obstacle for locals and pastoralists in Laikipia. "Trespassing is a crime by itself, but they offer punishment for the crime. They can even kill you" (S. L., April 25, 2025). Although fencing is often justified by wildlife conservation, in places such as Laikipia, the reasoning seems to be largely driven by land property. As is explored in *The Battle for Laikipia* (2024), with increasing droughts, pastoralists can no longer find grazing land for their cattle, sometimes leading them to invade private ranches (commonly owned by settlers). Cattle theft is also an issue during these land invasions, as pastoralists may occasionally steal cattle from the ranches (Wesangula, 2017). This has led to many conflicts in which pastoralists, ranchers, and the staff working on these ranches have been killed (Wesangula, 2017).

The militarisation of conservation has also sparked debates. While rangers were originally trained for conservation purposes, with increasing droughts, the proliferation of arms, and a complex land ownership situation, they are now being employed on ranches to protect these properties (Wesangula, 2017). L. explains that when he talked to local employees on the ranches, "they tell us these Mzungus (white people) are equipping themselves, arming themselves to their teeth, to finish you here in Laikipia" (S. L., April 25, 2025). He explains that fear is instilled on both sides, aggravating the tension. L. knows of many victims of this violence, including his uncle. It is often a response by the Kenyan police or security services in reaction to land invasions by pastoralists. He has seen pastoralists burnt in their houses, and he estimates that since 2017, roughly 49 Pokot and Samburu people (pastoralists) have been killed over land conflicts.

Lunstrum (2014) and Duffy (2014) explain that conservation is often used as justification for this violence. Their main critique of militarised conservation are the resulting repressive and coercive policies, leading to injustices and the alienation of local communities. The result is an "arms race in conservation" (K. Kirigia, April 8, 2025). This arms race hinders community involvement in wildlife conservation while fostering an increasingly dangerous scene where conservation intersects with state actors, private operators and poachers, perpetuating a cycle of militarisation (Duffy, 2014). Although the media focuses on the increase in rhino poaching, an estimated 300 suspected poachers were killed between 2008 and 2013 in the Kruger National Park (Lunstrum, 2014). Kenya has a similar militarised conservation model. Karmushu expresses that "when a wild animal is injured, it is treated very quickly by the conservation NGOs. … Yet, when a person is injured, there is a very slow response. … Human lives are treated lower than wildlife" (R. Karmushu, April 2, 2025). Duffy (2014) exposes the colonial character of this violence, when European sport hunters were portrayed as conservationists, while criminalising

African subsistence hunting. These racial stereotypes around poaching are still present (Duffy, 2014; Ogada and Mbaria, 2016).

There are varying opinions and contradicting research around fencing and militarisation. One interviewee was asked whether he believes that fencing helps human-wildlife conflicts. He responded that "wild animals have interacted with people since way back, and fencing them away from the people, you make the animal more hostile than giving it free movement" (S. L., April 25, 2025). He later mentions that fencing can be beneficial where people are farming or planting their seeds. Similarly, the British-born farmer explains that fences are mainly there to protect the people, generally agrarian, around conserved areas. He argues that with an increasing population, fencing becomes all the more needed; "the correlation is between population pressure and conservation practices now rather than necessarily the colonial experience." "It's cause we've got rhino that we have to have quite a serious fence, but it's good because elephants getting out and raiding crops on our neighbours is very unpopular" (April 28, 2025). Other research shows that, when planned and managed correctly, fences have been found to reduce human-wildlife conflicts by decreasing destruction to crops, predation on livestock, attacks on humans, and the killing of large herbivores and carnivores. Additionally, fences prevent poaching (bushmeat or commercial), logging, and the spread of diseases between livestock and wild animals (Pekor et al., 2019). There are also certain advantages to militarised conservation, including reductions in wildlife trafficking, protection of species in conflict zones, and a decrease in poaching (especially in the short term), as is the case with rhinos across Africa (Annecke and Masubelele, 2016).

Figure 3

Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and Neighbouring Areas in 1984.

Note. Satellite imagery showing Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and the neighbouring areas in 1984. From *Google Earth* (Image © 2025 Landsat / Copernicus, 0°13'26"N 37°29'08"E), 1984.

Figure 4

Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and Neighbouring Areas in 2022.

Note. Satellite imagery showing Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and the neighbouring areas in 2022. From *Google Earth* (Image © 2025 Landsat / Copernicus, 0°13'26"N 37°29'08"E), 2022.

Land ownership

Land ownership is strongly linked to fencing and militarisation. Land ownership in Kenya generally went from a communal ownership system to a privatised and state-controlled system under British colonisation. This has evolved into a more mixed system after independence, although there are still many inequalities in land ownership. In an interview with Corey Wright, he explains that while in the north there is less privatisation of land, "in the south of Kenya, … all of Maasai space was created into group ranches historically, post-colonial period into the 80s, and so on, then those got privatised into individual parcels" (C. Wright, April 23, 2025). British colonists wrongly assumed that there were no property rights among Maasai communities because the communal land ownership ensured equal access to the resources. Colonial authorities therefore changed this system to a model they considered more economically beneficial, introducing private and state property rights (Kameri-Mbote and Cullet, 1997). The 1915 Crown Lands Ordinance and the 1920 annexation 'Order-in-Council' both left Kenyans with no legal rights to the land, unable to hold private land titles (Ruto, 2005). This facilitated the displacement of Indigenous communities to make way for white settlers. "Individual privatisation really, really, really devastated these ecosystems and Masaai indigenous livelihoods [and] ways of living on the land, because you can imagine a system that's based on common property and mobility and movement and sharing–well, how do you how does that operate in a context of individual privatised parcels of land?" (C. Wright, April 23, 2025).

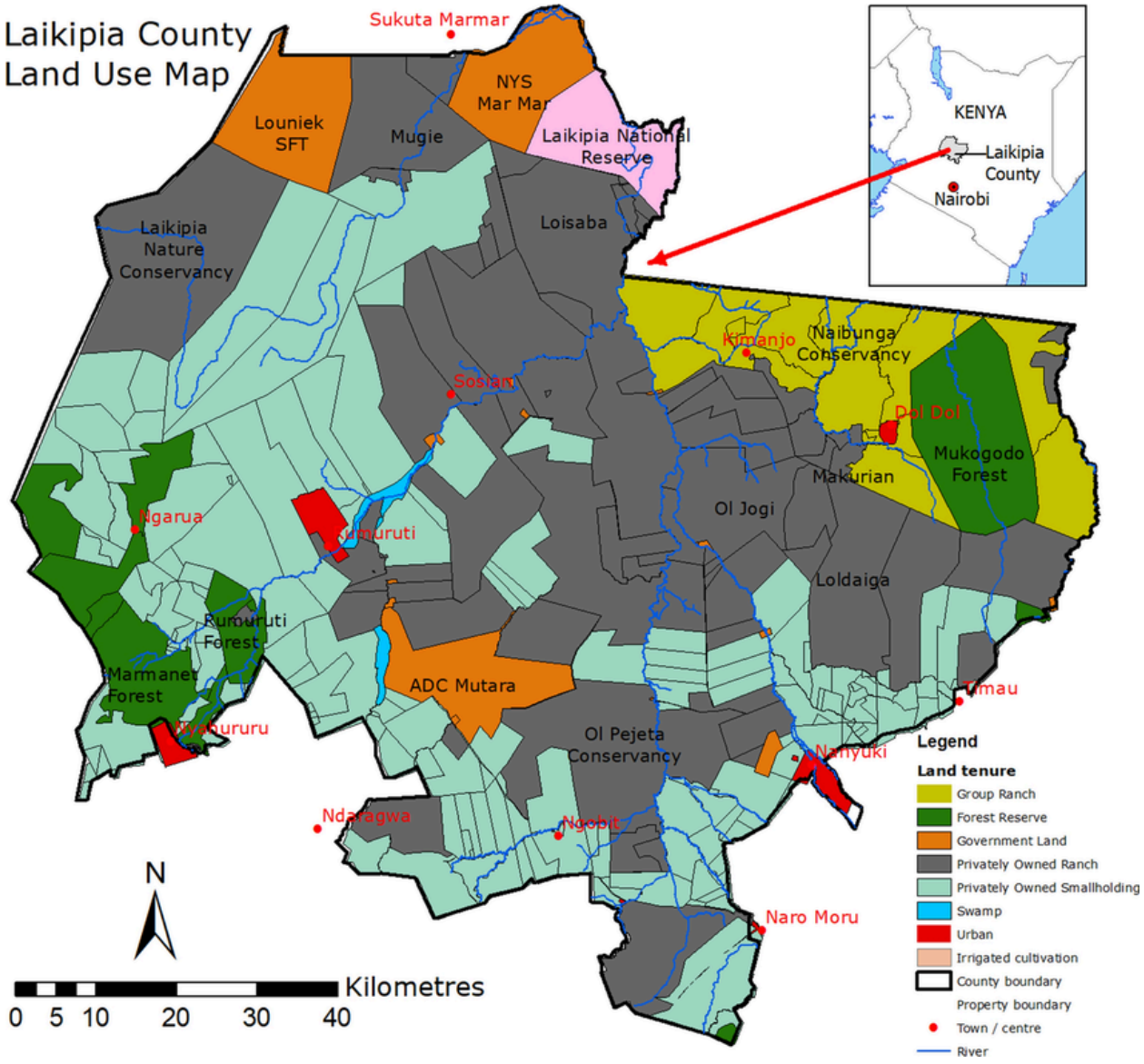
Laikipia (Figure 5), one of Kenya's 47 counties (Kenya Law Reform Commission, 2025), has a considerable history of colonial dispossession and faces contemporary struggles over land rights. Most notable are the 1904 and 1911 Maasai Agreements with the British (the Anglo-Maasai Agreements) (Hughes, 2023). The 1904 Agreement led to the displacement of some Maasai groups from their central Rift Valley grazing grounds to two reserves, one of them being in Laikipia. Although the British had emphasised that this agreement was permanent, in 1911 they violently moved the 'northern' Maasai again from Laikipia to the Southern Reserve. This was to make space for white settlers, which included a small number of South Africans fleeing the Boer War. Estimates show that the Maasai lost at least half of their land, although this number could be closer to 70 percent (Hughes, 2023).

Although outright colonial land dispossession no longer happens, the descendants of those white settlers still own most of the land, much of which is in Laikipia. The colonial legacy can therefore be seen in the land ownership situation in Kenya. Karmushu expresses his frustration in his interview: "[they] remain with their land, 99 years with the lease agreement have passed because there was a 1904 and 1911 agreement. All those are events that have now passed, and up to 2004 and 2011. If they were to go then they should have packed their things

and leave the Maasai lands to the Maasai, but that's not happening" (R. Karmushu, April 2, 2025). He then goes on to explain land dispossession in post-colonial Kenya where "ranches are now converting into conservancies and becoming private conservancies. Others are becoming rhino sanctuaries, like Lewa, which was the first to convert into a rhino sanctuary" (R. Karmushu, April 2, 2025). This is what Fairhead et al. (2012) describe as 'green grabbing,' land grabbing in the name of conservation. As a result, conservation becomes one of the drivers of land dispossession, as has been the case with many communities, including the Ogiek people of western Kenya and pastoralists in the Mara (Savage, 2016; Bedelian, 2013). It is not always necessarily 'green grabbing,' however, as in many cases, the land rights have belonged to the descendants of white settlers for a long time, but they are now changing what the land is used for to keep their land. Karmushu mentions that they bring these rhinos from community lands to these private sanctuaries, "so why are you not protecting them from where they are?" (R. Karmushu, April 2, 2025). This reflects how conservation efforts are being used to justify the removal of wildlife from community lands, withdrawing access to or benefits from these resources for local and Indigenous people. Property rights start becoming intricately intertwined with conservation. This is a concern that is shared by many Indigenous and local people, as is conveyed in the movie *The Battle for Laikipia* (2024) and is addressed by several scholars (Ogada and Mbaria, 2016).

Figure 5

Map of Land Use in Laikipia



From "Interactive effects of biological, human and environmental factors on tick loads in Boran cattle in tropical drylands," by R. K. Chepkwony, S. Van Bommel and F. van Langevelde, 2021, *Parasites & Vectors, 14*(1) (https://doi.org/10.1186/s13071-021-04683-9).

Discussion

The findings, based on literature, a few maps and interviews, mostly support the hypothesis. The interactions between wildlife and Indigenous people have been fundamentally altered due to colonisation, often alienating Indigenous people from wildlife. Some of the most significant factors that have influenced these interactions were identified during data collection and have been explored. These include a change in the conservation approach – from utu to fortress conservation, fencing and militarisation as part of this conservation model, and a shift in the land ownership situation. Fencing and militarised conservation both involve many benefits and drawbacks, making it difficult to grasp their impacts on the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife.

Fortress conservation and an ontological shift

The colonial fortress conservation approach alienated Indigenous people from wildlife, both geographically and ontologically, as Wright puts it. Ogada and Mbaria's (2016) arguments align with the findings of this thesis. Muhonja (2020) on Maathai's utu can also be discussed here to better understand the implications of the ontological shift that colonisation brought about in the field of conservation. In the interviews that were conducted, one of the things that frequently re-emerged was the separation of wildlife from humans, and especially from local and Indigenous Kenyans. Key informant interviews with some academic researchers in the field, including Kirigia, Mulder, Wright and Bersaglio, reflected similar themes to what the Maasai and Samburu interviewees, Kennedy, Karmushu, and L., were articulating. From both sides, the interviewees mentioned this alienation of Indigenous people from wildlife, often describing it as a consequence of colonisation.

On the surface, the goal behind conservation policies that were introduced during colonial times was to manage natural resources to ensure they were preserved and used sustainably. Nonetheless, they allowed the colonial government to use these natural resources in their favour to benefit the colonial state economically, hence controlling the African communities that relied on these resources. Laws were created under the label of 'nature conservation or protection,' which demonised African communities by portraying them as a threat to nature. By doing so, the colonial state further exerted control over these local populations. Hence, nature conservation did not exist with the sole goal of protecting the environment, as social control and money were equally involved (Shanguhyia, 2024). The findings for Laikipia reflect a similar concept, as colonial conservation policies displaced Maasai pastoralists to give British settlers access to the most fertile land (Enns and Bersaglio, 2024). Therefore, despite the benefits associated with fortress conservation, it has also had negative implications on wildlife and has led to the institutionalisation of racialised power. Kelempu

Kennedy expresses a frustration that colonisers "were actually trying … to say that they are teaching Africans conservation. But Africans themselves know it; before colonisation, they had conservation of their own" (K. Kennedy, April 15, 2025). Similar concepts come up in *Settler Ecologies* (2024) and *The Big Conservation Lie* (2016), where "most Kenyans today exclusively associate wildlife conservation care, compassion, and even ownership with white people" (Ogada and Mbaria, 2016, p. 9). This narrative was built during colonisation, when Africans were deemed as 'threats' to wildlife under the fortress conservation model, while there was a lot of hero worship for Western conservationists (Ogada and Mbaria, 2016).

Fencing and militarisation

Fencing and militarised conservation are highly disputed topics in Kenya due to their colonial history and because of the various benefits and drawbacks that come with it. There is a growing body of literature criticising the extensive use of fencing, which has become an integral part of the contemporary conservation model. Scholars like Tyrell et al. (2022), Enns and Bersaglio (2024) and Owens and Owens (1984) have highlighted the detrimental effects of fencing on wildlife. They argue that fencing reduces biodiversity and ecosystem function by fragmenting ecosystems, can transform landscapes by keeping populations of certain species high within the fence boundaries, and limits accessibility to important resources. In their interviews, Karmushu, Bersaglio and L. describe very similar trends in which wildlife is left more vulnerable due to fencing. Figures 3 and 4 show the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in 1984 and 2022. Although the difference is not very pronounced, a slight decrease in overall tree cover can be observed from 1984 to 2022 in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (not including the Ngare Ndare Forest), especially in the spread of tree cover. This agrees with what Karmushu describes in his interview and in *Settler Ecologies* (2024).

On the other hand, certain benefits of fencing have been identified in previous literature, as well as in the interviews. Some data suggest that fencing can reduce human-wildlife conflicts by preventing wild animals from destroying crops, preying on livestock, attacking humans, as well as inhibiting poaching, logging, and the spread of diseases between livestock and wild animals (Pekor et al., 2019). One key informant, the board member of a ranch, mentions that fencing is beneficial to the protection of endangered species such as rhinos, and it prevents elephants from raiding the crops of neighbouring communities (April 28, 2025). Additionally, Wright and L. also highlight some advantages of fencing, such as "to shift elephant paths and migratory routes as a way of reducing human-wildlife conflict" or to protect the crops (April 23, 2025; April 25, 2025).

There is a lot of conflicting information about whether fencing does more good than harm, both ecologically and socio-culturally. Pekor et al. (2019) explore the pros and cons of fencing, but they argue that fencing has effectively mitigated human-wildlife conflicts. Contrary to this, L. expresses in his interview that he does not think that fencing reduces human-wildlife

conflicts, as he believes that fencing them in makes them more hostile (April 25, 2025). Overall, it therefore becomes difficult to assess the impact on the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife due to these contrasting results. Perhaps it varies from one location to the next, depending on the livelihoods of the inhabitants (pastoralist, agrarian, etc.) and the abundance and types of wild animals.

Lastly, fencing and militarisation have both had significant social impacts, often leading to violence justified by conservation. Laikipia is an example where fences have been politicised, often protecting private property instead of fulfilling their conservation goal (Murimi, 2024; Ogada and Mbaria, 2016; Evans and Adams, 2016). This sentiment is further supported by the interviews with the Maasai and Samburu participants (S. L., April 25, 2025; R. Karmushu, April 2, 2025). Colonial-stemming approaches to conservation have led to increasing use of the military to protect wildlife, sometimes violating human rights (Duffy et al., 2019). The result is an "arms race in conservation," as Kirigia refers to it (April 28, 2025). These have led to the alienation of Indigenous communities from wildlife, often portraying them as threats and keeping them out of conserved areas.

Land ownership

The results indicate a strong connection between land ownership struggles and fencing and militarisation. Most key informants addressed the challenges relating to land ownership in Kenya, especially for pastoralists who rely on grazing land for their livestock and livelihoods. A lot of the land, especially in southern Kenya, got given to British settlers during the colonial period, leading to the displacements of countless Indigenous Kenyans. To this day, most of the land in the 'White Highlands' still belongs to the next generations of those settlers. In Laikipia during independence, when their landholdings and livelihoods were threatened, settlers took advantage of the wildlife and ecotourism to turn their property into wildlife conservancies (Enns and Bersaglio, 2024). The privatisation of land during the colonial period, which mostly occurred in southern Kenya, fragmented the landscape and often also affected the interactions between Indigenous communities and wildlife negatively. While conservationists may view pastoralism as a wasteful use of land, and one that does not benefit the economy, pastoralists perceive conservation as 'green grabbing' their land (Halakhe, 2017). Conservation has been used frequently as a justification for land dispossession, such as the "evictions from forests by the Kenyan government [of] the Ogiek people" (K. Kirigia, April 8, 2025; Savage, 2016). Pastoralists, who have historically conserved wildlife, are increasingly losing their livelihoods to wildlife conservation schemes (Halakhe, 2017). Fairhead et al. (2012) describe this commodification of wildlife and green grabbing, which are practices derived from colonisation that have fundamentally changed the ways in which Indigenous people interact with wildlife. By displacing these Indigenous communities, they lose part of their connection to the land and the wildlife that they have coexisted with for many generations, severing their relationship.

There is a call for re-evaluating the approach to conservation and the land ownership systems, especially on ranches such as those in Laikipia. “If these ranches can be kept, it is beneficial to the wildlife, to conservation, and even to the Samburu community, if done the right way” (S. L., April 25, 2025). As L. describes, conservation should not have to come at the cost of Indigenous rights. Wright similarly argues that “fences might be able to play a role if it’s being used to assist in this strategy to live harmoniously together across human-non-human relations, but not for the sake of property” (C. Wright, April 23, 2025). Therefore, fencing should not be used to protect territories under the guise of conservation, unless it is done appropriately and with the necessary input from local communities.

Decolonial framework of Utu

Maathai’s concept of utu can pave the way to change the narrative from the colonial fortress approach to one where environmental and social justice are inseparable (Muhonja, 2020). As Kirigia emphasises, “conservation itself needs to be decolonised” by doing away with the binary view of people as separate from nature (K. Kirigia, April 8, 2025). These colonial logics still significantly underpin the current conservation model in Kenya and around the globe, so there is need for the application of a decolonial framework. Utu opposes this hierarchical and dualistic human-nature relationship, instead encouraging a healthy balance between Indigenous people, the land and wildlife (Muhonja, 2020).

The displacements of the Ogiek and Maasai pastoralists for the sake of conservation, for example, operate under colonial ways of doing, disregarding utu’s inclusion of human rights in environmental management and the idea of shared belonging (Savage, 2016; Bedelian, 2013; Muhonja, 2020). The violence in Laikipia over property rights and grazing, which is justified by conservation, is an example of where a utu approach would be valuable. Instead of painting Indigenous people as a threat to wildlife, utu recognises their value in environmental protection, advocating for a situation where both Indigenous people and wildlife benefit. Traditional Maasai fire management and rotational grazing tactics are more ‘diachronic’ and in tune with utu, as opposed to the colonial ‘synchronic’ knowledge (Enns and Bersaglio, 2024; Gadgil et al., 1993). Overall, utu can serve as an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between Indigenous people and wildlife, promoting Indigenous-led conservation.

Limitations

Some limitations have been identified. First, the snowball sampling method that was used for the interviews usually gathered participants in the same circles or with similar opinions, making the data slightly one-sided. The study lacked input from government conservation

agencies such as KWS, larger conservation NGOs and the white settler perspective. Nonetheless, participants did range from pastoralists to people more involved in academia, as well as a British-born farmer, providing a more holistic view of the topic. The sample size was quite small (8 relevant interviews). Longer periods of ethnographic research could address this gap. Another limitation is the focus on certain regions (ex., Laikipia) and Indigenous groups (ex., the Maasai), which may not accurately represent the wider scope of experiences and landscapes. The main focus was also on pastoralist communities, which generally interact more peacefully with wildlife. For a more holistic perspective, agrarian and other local communities should be considered. Lastly, my positionality as a young, white, female researcher may influence or limit the information that some participants share.

Conclusion

Overall, this study has explored some ways in which the relationship between Indigenous people and wildlife has been changed by colonisation. The results mostly indicate a negative change, in which peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife has been inhibited, with Indigenous communities increasingly being alienated from wildlife as a direct or indirect consequence of colonisation. The direct impacts of colonisation include Indigenous land dispossession and a shift to fortress conservation, while fencing, militarisation and the current land ownership struggles have come about as a result of the latter.

Although this thesis addresses colonisation specifically, current-day large powers also highly influence the conservation field, which often have their roots in colonial practices or ways of thinking. Ellis and Tutu (2012) refer to Africa's 'perverse integration' into global systems, referring to the resource extractivism that is occurring across Africa, including green grabbing for conservation. Capitalism, which in nature conservation took root in colonial resource extraction and commodification, also highly influenced the interactions between Indigenous people and wildlife. Texts like Brockington and Duffy's *Capitalism and Conservation* (2011) provide insights into how biodiversity conservation has largely been driven by "larger political projects such as nationalism, colonialism and capitalism" (p. 47). Lastly, other actor groups such as the NRT and large conservation NGOs have also had tremendous impacts on human-wildlife interactions, including human rights violations by organisations like the WWF (Survival International, 2017). These would all be very relevant and interesting areas for future research.

Moving forward, the field of nature conservation in Kenya is undergoing changes towards a more inclusive model that tries to give more say to Indigenous communities. As Wright notes, "the community conservancies have potential … if they can be done well, if leaders are well educated and well informed and empowered in the right way" (C. Wright, April 23, 2025). Some community conservancies are run by Indigenous communities, in a way that allows them to make their own decisions and reap the benefits from ecotourism. Of course, the effectiveness of these conservancies depend on their leadership structures and the powerful interest groups that are involved. Nonetheless, by integrating an utu approach and putting Indigenous communities at the forefront of conservation, the relationship between the people and wildlife can be rebuilt to the advantage of both.

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