
Displacement and Dispossession in Tanzania: How “Conservation” is Destroying the Maasai

For the past eighty years, the Maasai have been displaced and dispossessed of their land, livelihoods, and more in Northern Tanzania, all under the guise of “conservation.” This article traces the origins of this dispossession through to present day struggles, calling for international solidarity in support of the Maasai.

“It has been estimated that 50 per cent of protected areas worldwide has been established on lands traditionally occupied and used by indigenous peoples.” – UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz (1)

While today, Serengeti National Park is a household term to many around the world – evoking images of the great wildebeest migration, sweeping savannah landscapes, and iconic acacia trees – for centuries the region has been home to pastoralists, including the indigenous Maasai. Despite this long history of co-habitation and stewardship of the land, for the past 80 years the Maasai in northern Tanzania have faced resettlements, forced evictions, marginalization, violence, and on-going oppression – all in the name of conservation. (2)

The origins of Serengeti National Park date back to 1940, when the British colonial government passed a Game Ordinance to support the protection of wildlife in the area. (3)

While the law contained restrictions on human settlement in and use of the region, it exempted people born or residing in the park from these rules and thus did not initially impact the Maasai. (4)

But in the years after its creation, **pressure mounted to further restrict human activity, including from international conservation groups such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Frankfurt Zoological Society. (5)** By 1957, a British-led “Committee of Enquiry” put forth the suggestion to split the then-Serengeti National Park into two regions. One region would become present day Serengeti National Park, where all human habitation, including by the Maasai, would be prohibited. (6) The second region would become known as the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) and was proposed as a multiple land-use area with three goals: conserving natural resources, protecting the interests of indigenous groups, and promoting tourism. (7)

In order to enforce these plans, **the colonial government needed to persuade the Maasai, who had resided in the Serengeti for centuries, to vacate.** In exchange for leaving the plains, the Maasai were told they could inhabit the newly formed NCA and were promised, among other things, the development of better water resources. (8) They ultimately agreed and their promises to vacate the Serengeti were enshrined in two pieces of legislation passed in 1959. But the promises of the colonial British were never legally recorded, and instead only made verbally. (9)

In the following years, **international conservation organizations doubled down on their efforts to control and influence the Serengeti region.** In 1961, amidst fears that African independence would upend colonial conservation projects, the IUCN, with funding from UNESCO and the FAO, sponsored an international conservation conference in Arusha, Tanzania. (10) A report prepared by the IUCN on

the conference elaborated these fears: “An impartial assessment of worldwide wildlife conservation problems had led the IUCN to the conclusion that the accelerated rate of destruction of wild fauna, flora and habitat in Africa ... was the most urgent conservation problem of the present time ... These great and unique faunal and floral resources could become exhausted merely because the indigenous people had not had adequately demonstrated to them the methods to maintain maximum economic and cultural benefits from them.” (11) The outcome of the conference was the Arusha Manifesto, which, amongst other things, created a specific role for international conservation organizations to provide technical expertise in the planning and management of conservation areas across Africa. (12) **These groups lobbied for increasing restrictions on cultivation, grazing, and movement within the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA). Throughout the 1960s, enforcement of these rules increased, including imprisonment, fines, and the confiscation of property of the Maasai.** (13)

The 1970s saw additional “victories” for conservationists. The 1974 Wildlife Conservation Act forbade grazing cattle without a permit in game reserves [large areas where wild animals can be hunted for sport] - restrictions that would eventually further marginalize the Maasai. (14) The 1975 NCA Ordinance Amendment banned all forms of cultivation within the NCA, (15) dealing a serious blow to the Maasai who, for centuries, have relied on subsistence farming combined with cattle grazing for their livelihoods and food security. (16) And in 1979, without consultation or the consent of the Maasai, the NCA was classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, adding additional conservation pressures. (17)

These actions, together with the continued marginalization and silencing of the Maasai from NCA governance processes (18) had a massive impact, bringing death and starvation to the Maasai in the following years. (19) These actions also set the foundation for the repression that continues to plague the Maasai today, all in the name of conservation.

On the part of international organizations and conservation groups, the additional UNESCO Heritage designation that was awarded to the Ngorongoro region in 2010 was once again done without the consultation and free, prior, and informed consent of the Maasai. As detailed in an article by William Olenasha in 2014, **the legacy and actions of UNESCO, the IUCN, and others have continued to be a disaster for the Maasai.** (20)

The Tanzanian government has likewise continued the colonial legacy of marginalization, refusing to identify the Maasai as indigenous, (21) continuing to pass laws that negatively impact the Maasai, and launching numerous violent evictions of Maasai villages over the past decade. (22) **One of the most recent evictions took place in August 2017, reportedly damaging 5,800 homes and leaving 20,000 Maasai homeless.** (23) These evictions led to courageous action by four Maasai villages who, in September 2017, took the Tanzanian government to the East African Court of Justice (EACJ) to try to secure their rights to their land once and for all. While a recent injunction awarded by the EACJ to the Maasai is positive news, (24) those on the ground have reported that the government has repeatedly violated the injunction, bringing continued harm to the Maasai. (25)

In recent decades, **another actor in the plight of the Maasai has emerged – safari tourism companies.** With tourism representing 17.5 per cent of the country’s GDP and 25 per cent of its foreign currency earnings in 2016/17, (26) this sector holds significant power in the country. As detailed extensively in a recent report by the Oakland Institute, two safari companies have had a particularly negative impact on the Maasai – Tanzania Conservation Limited, a company owned by the same couple that owns the award winning, Boston-based Thomson Safaris, and the United Arab Emirates-based Ortello Business Corporation (OBC). (27) Allegations regarding the two companies

include that **the Maasai have been denied access to vital grazing areas and watering holes, face intimidation and violence from police who are sometimes called in by the companies, and, in the case of the OBC, collaboration between Tanzanian government forces and company security guards to violently evict Maasai communities.** (28)

The present day impact of this so-called “conservation” on the Maasai has been disastrous. With restrictions on grazing and cultivation on-going, malnutrition lurks around the corner for many. (29) **Evictions have continued, with intimidation, harassment, and violence being used by the Tanzanian government against those who resist and speak out.** (30) Meanwhile, over a million tourists from around the world flock to Tanzania each year to catch a glimpse of the exquisite flora, fauna, and landscapes that have been protected by and integral to Maasai life for centuries. (31)

While devastating, perhaps the greatest tragedy is that the story of the Maasai is one that is all too familiar to indigenous groups worldwide. As noted by UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, “for over a century, conservation was carried out with the aim of vacating protected areas of all human presence, leading to cultural destruction and large-scale displacements of indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands in the name of conservation.” (32) This has happened with the collusion of conservation organizations, governments, multilateral organizations like UNESCO, and today also tourism companies.

But the story is not over. While the Tanzanian government continues to prioritize supporting groups like the Ortello Business Corporation, who use the Ngorongoro region as their personal hunting playground, (33) **the Maasai continue not only to steward the land but also to wage their courageous campaign for the rights to their land, lives, livelihoods, and culture.** It is time for the rest of the world – in particular former-colonial-turned-donor governments, conservation organizations, and safari companies – to get behind this and honour the true stewards of the broad Serengeti region: the Maasai.

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