



INTERNATIONAL
LAND CONSERVATION
NETWORK

NEWS FROM OUR PARTNERS

In Kenya, a land trust redefines its call to duty under mounting social and environmental pressure

*Kiragu Mwangi — ILCN Regional Rep. for Africa & Jackson Mwato – Executive Director Amboseli Ecosystem Trust
March 14, 2023*

Since 2022, the East-African country of Kenya has been enduring severe droughts. As one of the world's most climate vulnerable nations, its communities, wildlife, and economy all suffer from longer dry periods and infrequent and unreliable wet seasons. Relief is coming to one region from an unconventional source: the Amboseli Ecosystem Trust (AET).

The Amboseli Ecosystem Trust serves Kajiado County, an area spanning 212.93 million hectares in southern Kenya. Its membership manages about 394,834 acres of land, supporting 65,881 households and nearly 500 rangers through the Amboseli Tsavo Community Rangers Association. AET is one of 12 subregional trusts in Kenya that, together,



Mount Kilimanjaro seen from Kenya near Amboseli National Park. Credit: Kiragu Mwangi

make up the Kenya Wildlife Conservancy Association (KWCA). It stands out for its innovative approach to conservation that extends trust services to include economic and humanitarian interests.

When drought conditions arose, and then persisted, in Kajiado County, the threat to the local Maasai community became strikingly apparent. The ethnic group relies mainly on pastoralism and, without adequate grass and water, its animals were dying and its economic stability was breaking down. The AET stepped in, purchasing and providing food and hay from other regions and providing it to the Maasai people to sustain themselves, their domestic animals, and wildlife.

While these services differ from those typically provided by land trusts, they may help define new expectations for conservation organizations in Africa, where terminology is still evolving. Land Tenure systems in Africa vary widely by country and the meaning of the term 'land trust' is relatively ambiguous. Typically, a land trust is an organization that owns and/or manages land and, sometimes, water. They are distinguished by the legal structure and purpose for which they are organized and operated. Community land trusts, or Conservation land trusts, are the set-up for organizations managing landscapes in Kenya where land is owned or controlled by Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

Within this context, the AET saw an opportunity to do more than protect land and has built a model for community-centered environmental work. Recently, that meant providing relief services for drought-impacted communities, but the AET has been redefining the role of land trusts in Kenya for years.

The AET was inspired by the conservancies revolution in Kenya that saw a deviation from the protectionist model of conserving biological resources in state-protected areas, such as parks and reserves. At this point, organizations were sprouting up that explored more adaptive conservation models. Some sought to expand space for wildlife by enlisting individual and communal landowners to allocate tracts of their land for conservation. This simultaneously increased wildlife protection and provided economic opportunities for communities.

That was the model the AET brought to the Maasai people within the Amboseli ecosystem. The grassroots organization has worked with the Maasai community to empower conservation-based enterprises and legislative developments and implications related to natural resources.

Two acts passed in the last decade serve as the main laws governing wildlife management in Kenya, and AET helped the conservancy members understand how to manage their lands within the requirements of the laws. The most recent is the Community Land Act of 2016, which defines how communally owned land should be managed to support wildlife, especially in protected-area buffer zones and migratory corridors within Amboseli National Park and Chyulu Hills National Park.

The AET also oversaw and coordinated the implementation of the Amboseli Ecosystem Management Plan from 2008 to 2018. This was the first ecosystem-wide management plan in the country. From there, it spearheaded the next 10-year phase of that plan, which runs through 2030. The plan integrates land use across six group ranches that make up the Amboseli ecosystem, working across sectors to outline plans for sustainable use and management of land and natural resources in the region.

The AET and other community-based land trusts have been recognized for their innovation. Following AETs work supporting communities through the drought period, the Kajiado County government invited the trust to expand its work across the country and provided financial support for it to do so. The Amboseli ecosystem is also one of the few wildlife-rich landscapes in Kenya where there have been no reported poaching incidents in the past five years. This achievement is widely attributed to increasingly positive attitudes toward wildlife among the community and the exemplary work of the Amboseli Tsavo Community Wildlife Rangers Association