

THE AFRICAN CONSERVANCIES FUND

Impact Report



The African Conservancies Fund

Every year, thundering herds of wildebeest, zebra, eland and gazelle embark on a “great migration,” following seasonal rains from the Serengeti to Kenya’s Maasai Mara region. It’s the largest movement of animals on Earth — typically drawing droves of tourists who generate income and wages for local communities.

In this area, Indigenous communities own vast swaths of land, which they conserve and lease to tourism companies for safaris. The arrangement has effectively doubled the area of land under conservation while generating revenues for families that have few other economic opportunities.

But in 2020, after the pandemic shut down travel, tourism revenues in the Maasai Mara dropped by more than 90 percent. This steep decline threatened local livelihoods and efforts to conserve Kenya’s iconic wildlife and savannas. Communities in the Maasai Mara needed immediate financial support to weather the crisis. Without it, they faced the difficult choice of replacing lost income by fencing off their lands for grazing, converting it to agriculture or selling to developers — all of which would have brought drastic consequences for the Maasai Mara’s people and biodiversity.

Through a collaboration with landowners, tourism partners, fellow NGOs and the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association, Conservation International launched the African Conservancies Fund — a rescue package to offset lost revenues in this critically important ecosystem. The loan program aimed to:

- Cover lease payments to landowners — maintaining household incomes for

approximately 100,000 people in the area who rely on tourism income.

- Keep conservancies intact — minimizing land sales, agricultural conversion and other land-use changes that would degrade the ecosystem.
- Build a more resilient and inclusive management model for community-based conservation.



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Channeling funds to communities and conservation

Between December 2020 and December 2022, Conservation International supported the African Conservancies Fund by providing more than \$2 million in loans that were distributed to four conservancies spanning a total of 70,000 hectares (173,000 acres).

The loans allowed families in the Maasai Mara to continue receiving income from their lands to pay for healthcare, home repairs, children’s school fees and more. And because tourism revenues — not government funding — support wildlife protection in the privately-owned conservancies, partner organizations such as the nonprofit Maliasili arranged grant funding to ensure wildlife patrols continued normally, with rangers working full time.

In addition, as a condition of the fund’s financial support, the conservancies set about improving their governance and operations — and exploring opportunities to diversify their revenue streams and build financial resilience to future shocks.

Now, as tourism in the Maasai Mara returns to pre-pandemic levels, conservancies are repaying their loans well within expected timeframes. They have not only survived the pandemic but are emerging stronger. Some

have expanded their lands, while others have diversified their boards of directors or formalized lease agreements — legalizing verbal agreements that had previously been sealed with a handshake.

Working with partners such as the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association, Peace Parks and a network of private sector investors, Conservation International is now exploring funding for new conservancies and looking for opportunities to extend the fund to other African countries. What began as an effort to help the Indigenous landowners in the Maasai Mara survive the pandemic is evolving into a mechanism to strengthen other conservancies so they can continue to invest in communities and wildlife.



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COVID-19 WAS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO THE ICONIC MAASAI MARA ECOSYSTEM. THE SUDDEN DROP IN TOURISM, MEANT WE WERE LOOKING AT THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION, WITH RIPPLE EFFECTS FOR WILDLIFE ACROSS THE AFRICAN CONTINENT. WITH THIS FINANCING MECHANISM, WE’VE WORKED WITH LOCAL PARTNERS TO HELP THE CONSERVANCIES BUILD BACK STRONGER.”

Bjorn Stauch

Conservation International Vice President
of Conservation Finance

What are conservancies and why do they matter?

Two-thirds of Africa's total protected areas lie outside of national parks — that's 170 million hectares (656,000 square miles), more than twice the size of France. They have varying degrees of conservation and are organized under different legal structures. One of those is known as a conservancy: land that is collectively owned and managed by Indigenous communities — and set aside for protection.

In the Maasai Mara, conservancies offer a way for communities with historic ties to the land to benefit financially from their stewardship of these important habitats. They help safeguard wildlife, drive sustainable development and conserve cultural heritage.

Communal landowners earn income from tourism-based ventures like ecolodges, entrance fees and other services. The income is distributed to Indigenous landowners as rent — helping to reduce rural poverty, stimulate local economies and fund schools, health clinics and other services.

“Under the conservancy model, community members profit from protecting their lands,” said Daniel Sopia, Chief



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Executive Officer of the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association. “Rather than turning to practices like slash-and-burn farming or poaching for bushmeat in order to survive, local people receive tangible benefits from conservation — which ultimately provides a global good.”

In addition to supporting local communities, the conservancy model is vitally important for elephants, wildebeest, lions and other

animals that migrate across vast grasslands, traveling in and out of protected and unprotected areas. Studies show that in open ecosystems, African species spend about 80 percent of their time outside the boundaries of national parks. This makes conservancies, like those that buffer the Maasai Mara National Reserve and other state-owned parks, critically important to protecting the diminishing savanna wilderness.



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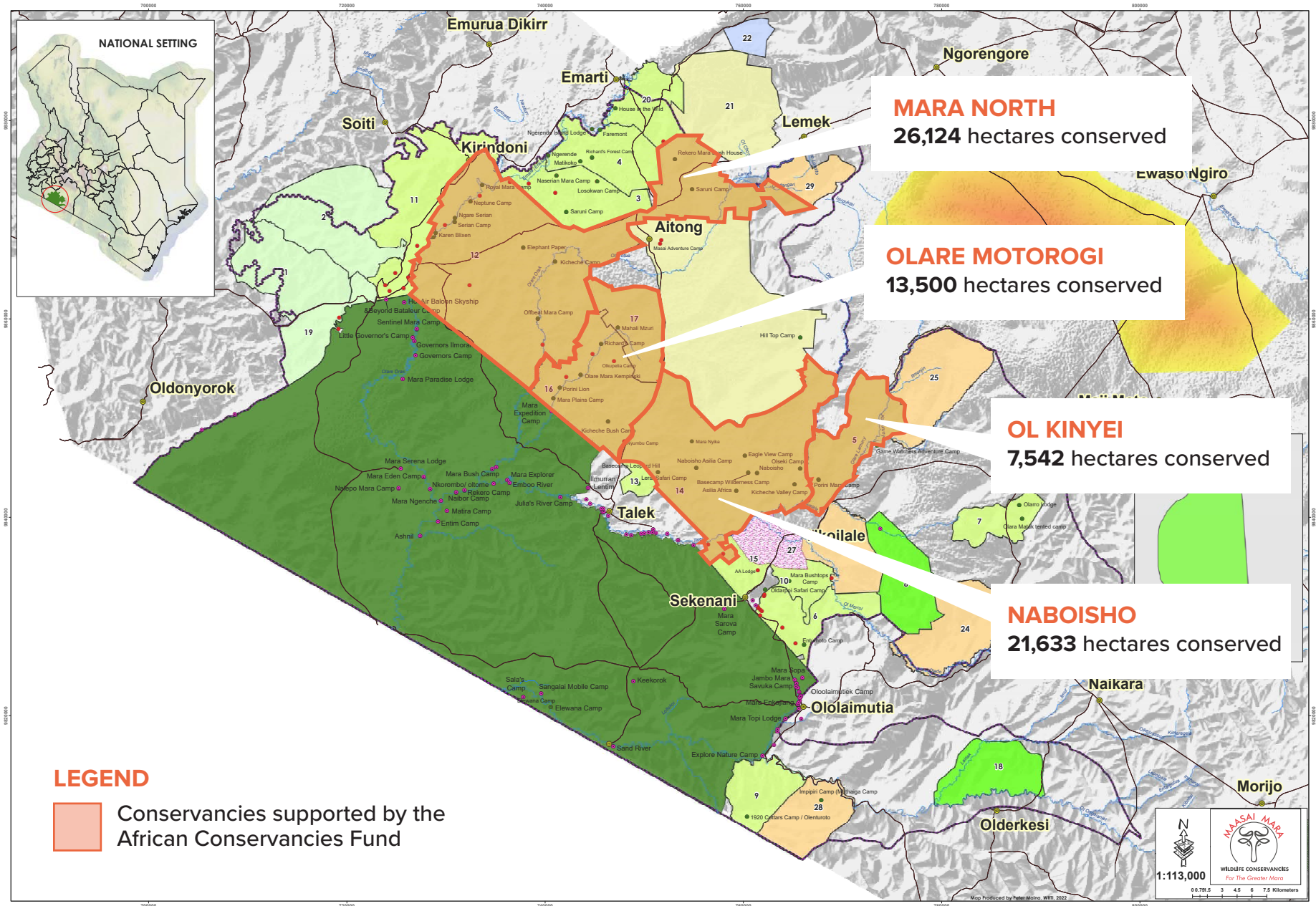
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TOURISM IS OUR MAIN SOURCE OF LIVELIHOOD. WE PARTIALLY LOST OUR LIVELIHOODS, BUT WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO BOUNCE BACK, THANKS TO THE EMERGENCY SUPPORT WE RECEIVED.”

Meliyo Noosaron

Mara North landowner

African Conservancies Fund locations



Wildlife and habitat protection

The conservancies supported by the fund are privately owned; their anti-poaching patrols and other enforcement actions are completely reliant on tourism. Though these wildlife areas do not receive public funds, they play an important role in providing Africa's species with safe room to roam. For example, the conservancies bordering the Maasai Mara National Reserve — including those supported by the African Conservancies Fund — have in effect doubled the size of the region's protected areas.

During the pandemic, with no cash influx from tourism, many conservancies across Africa feared they would have to decrease anti-poaching patrols, cut wages for rangers and curtail other enforcement actions that protect threatened species.

In the Maasai Mara, loans deployed to the conservancies allowed wildlife rangers to work full time, earning 100 percent of their salaries. Funding — complemented by a grant pool arranged by the nonprofit Maliasili — helped pay for expenses associated with protecting wildlife, from the gasoline that powers rangers' vehicles to radios and cell phones for communication, and more.

While reports of widespread poaching and other crimes emerged in Kenya and East



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Africa, the Mara largely remained safe for wildlife. Rangers conducted at least three patrols a day, marking the locations of key species, such as lions, elephants, cheetahs and leopards. No cases of poaching were reported in the supported conservancies, although there were attempts as rangers recovered snares. According to the Mara Predator Conservation Program, there have been no notable differences in wildlife populations observed during the COVID crisis other than expected fluctuations.

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AT THE ONSET OF THE COVID CRISIS, WE HAD ORGANIZED TO CUT A NUMBER OF RANGERS BECAUSE OF REDUCED INCOME. LUCKILY, SUPPORT CAME ON TIME, SO WE NORMALIZED OPERATIONS AS IF THERE WERE NO CRISIS. WE ARE NOW OPERATING A FULL HOUSE. OUR RANGELANDS HAVE REMAINED SECURE.”

Simon Nkoitoi

Senior Warden,
Ol Kinyei conservancy

Governance, transparency and inclusion

Traditionally, most of the Mara conservancies have been governed by elder male leaders. Many also lacked transparent voting mechanisms at annual meetings.

The African Conservancies Fund linked rescue loans to improvements in governance, with the goal of promoting more equitable and representative decision making around the management of and benefits from natural resources. The Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association helped the four participating conservancies, plus many others in the region, develop

policies on human resources, benefit sharing, grazing and finance.

To date, directors and members of all participating conservancies have signed binding resolutions to improve representation and voting procedures. They also have requirements to ensure that one-third of their boards are made up of women and youth representatives — and have committed to provide training to build the capacity of women leaders. This commitment is reflected in an increase in the number of female rangers, from 10 to 34 since 2020.

All four participating conservancies have also committed to making tourist occupancy transparent. Previously, there was little disclosure of tourism volumes and revenues, resulting at times in a lack of trust between landowners and tourism partners, such as lodge managers and tour operators. Occupancy rates are now reported by each tourism partner to the conservancy and accessible to all stakeholders to improve their understanding of the funding flows and the resulting share in benefits.

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FOR LONG, WE HAVE LAGGED, BUT THIS IS SLOWLY CHANGING IN THE LANDSCAPE AS CONSERVANCIES INCLUDE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP.”

Nailepu Kereto

Landowners' Committee member at Mara North Conservancy



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Financial resilience

Conservancies are solely dependent on revenues from ecotourism and historically have had no financial reserves to operate when those revenues ran dry – as they did during the pandemic.

The fund sought to improve conservancies' financial management by helping them set up reserve fund minimums, to cover lease payments, rangers' salaries and operational costs in the event of another emergency. All four conservancies that participated in the fund signed resolutions to contribute a portion of their tourism proceeds to their reserve funds. At the time of writing, contributions to these reserve funds have already begun, building the base of a robust financial structure.

The Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association reported that new landowners committed parcels of land to conservation during the pandemic when they realized it was a reliable livelihood option. The association also helped establish new conservancies to the Northeast of the original ones, further expanding the disbursal areas for the great migration.

Conservation International has now begun to work with partners in the region to

develop alternative revenue streams for local communities. Carbon credits, which provide financial incentives to protect rangelands for the purpose of storing planet-warming carbon, present one option to strengthen landowners' financial resilience. Together with the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association, Conservation International is currently conducting a feasibility study across the entire Mara ecosystem to determine how to establish and govern a carbon project for the landscape and its people.



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WITHOUT THE EMERGENCY FUND, I THINK EVERYTHING WOULD HAVE COLLAPSED. CONSERVATION WOULD HAVE COLLAPSED. WE WOULD LITERALLY HAVE LOST EVERYTHING.”

Calvin Cottar

tourism Investor

At-a-glance



\$2 million in COVID emergency loans disbursed to four conservancies spanning 70,000 hectares (173,000 acres).



Funds provided a lifeline for **100,000 people** in the Maasai Mara, who rely on tourism revenues.



Loans were linked to improvements in conservancies' governance and transparency, resulting in new requirements for women and youth to make up **one-third** of conservancies' boards.



Conservancies remained **protected and intact**, avoiding conversion to agriculture or development.



Four new conservancies were established to benefit local communities and wildlife.



No interruption in wildlife ranger patrols and no notable differences in species populations.



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