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Fund community conservancies to reduce elephant poaching, says study.



An elephant in the Lewa Conservancy in Samburu. A new study published in the PLUS ONE scientific journal indicates that funding community wildlife conservancies can significantly reduce elephant poaching. PHOTO | FILE | NATION MEDIA GROUP

In Summary

- Pastoral communities living in Northern Kenya must benefit from ecotourism proceeds as well as avail the area under conservation for grazing cattle all year round, asserts the study.
- The study found that elephants living outside government protected areas within the Laikipia-Samburu region were more than those living within Shaba, Buffalo Springs and Samburu Game Reserves.
- The unoccupied community pastoral areas had the highest overall levels of poaching during the entire study period," the report observes.

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Establishment of community wildlife conservancies is the best solution for reducing elephant poaching in Northern Kenya, says a new study released on Monday.

[Community involvement would create understanding among pastoral communities](#) that wildlife conservations can bring in the much needed revenue for funding development projects, says the study published in the scientific journal PLOS ONE and conducted by researchers from the Kenya Wildlife Service, University of Twente, Northern Rangelands Trust, Save the Elephants and the Colorado State University.

ECOTOURISM BENEFITS

Pastoral communities living in Northern Kenya must benefit from ecotourism proceeds as well as avail the area under conservation for grazing cattle all year round, asserts the study.

“Financial investments in anti-poaching and elephant protection should prioritize the newly established community run conservancies to accelerate their growth towards self-sustainability,” says the exhaustive report that rummaged through data spanning over a decade.

It found out that elephants living outside government protected areas within the Laikipia-Samburu region were more than those living within Shaba, Buffalo Springs and Samburu Game Reserves whose total areas is 533 square kilometres.

Land outside the protected areas is pivotal for elephant conservation in the Laikipia-Samburu ecosystem because it accounts for 98.5 per cent of the elephant range.

The unprotected land under private ranching and community conservation had the highest densities of elephants, indicating their importance for elephant conservation in the ecosystem.

“Significantly higher densities of elephants in the community conservancies than in the community pastoral areas indicate the success of this model of conservation: management of wildlife alongside communal grazing,” it observes.

The study says that despite lower densities of live elephants and higher ratios of illegally killed carcasses, the unprotected community pastoral land is important for connecting the formally protected areas and the wildlife friendly private ranches and conservancies in the greater ecosystem.

The unprotected areas that are largely unoccupied were found to play an important role as corridors for elephants’ migration from one area to another thereby raising the need for

communities which 'preserved' the vast hinterlands as 'pasturebanks' to look into ways of forming conservancies to manage the areas.

PROTECTING WILDLIFE

The study adds that the unoccupied areas must be closely monitored since they usually turn into battlegrounds between pastoral communities during the dry season.

It observed that heightened conflict forced elephants to migrate en masse but where conservancies had been established, communities held deliberations and conflicts had been eased creating room for establishment of eco-tourism bands that bring in the much needed revenue for local communities.

"Encouraging and promoting land owners to adopt land use types that recognize the importance of protecting wildlife would substantially reduce poaching levels.

"The unoccupied community pastoral areas had the highest overall levels of poaching during the entire study period," it observes.

It says that unhindered access to the forest reserves created lush grounds for poaching to take place but the same was effectively curbed where forested sections fell under community sanctuary management.

"In areas where community sanctuaries thrive, elephants numbers continue to increase as compared to unprotected pastoral areas. Community sanctuaries create employment for rangers, drivers and camp staff with the community conservancy management committee creating a forum for conflict resolution," it says