

Tanzania launches airstrip in wildlife park to fight poaching, boost tourism amid conservation concerns

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As a dense fog blankets Tanzania's Ruaha National Park, a small plane emerges from the mist. Inside, four tourists clutch their seats in excitement. With a final tilt and adjustment, the pilot aims for the 1.2-kilometre gravel runway. For those on board, this journey, shrouded in the mid-morning haze, promises an adventure into the heart of Tanzania's untamed wilderness.

Tanzania has unveiled a new airstrip within the heart of the renowned Ruaha National Park popularly known as RUNAPA, located in the country's southern highlands. RUNAPA covers over 20,226 square km and is the largest national park in Tanzania. The Msembe airstrip, costing 780 million Tanzanian shillings (\$335,000), was launched in Mlungu village, Mbarali district in June 2024.

While the tourists flying over the park are enchanted, the wildlife in Ruaha has a different reaction to the plane. The sound of its engines and the sudden burst of dust sent animals scrambling for cover. Elephants trumpeted in alarm, and a herd of impalas darted into the underbrush. Birds took to the sky in a flurry, their routines disrupted by the human intrusion.

Environmentalists have opposed the move, saying increased air traffic could disturb wildlife and upset the park's ecological harmony. Critics argued the airstrip's construction prioritises tourism over conservation, potentially setting a precedent for further infrastructural developments in protected areas.

"Building an airstrip in the middle of a national park goes against the principles of conservation," said Grace Mwakyusa, an ecologist with the Tanzanian Wildlife Conservation. "The noise and activity associated with air traffic can disrupt animal behaviour, affect breeding patterns, and even drive some species away from critical habitats."

Frequent disturbances like this can have long-term effects on the park's ecosystem, she said.

Mwakyusa's concerns are echoed by local bird watchers, who have already noticed changes in bird activity around the park. "We've seen fewer sightings of certain bird species near the airstrip since construction began," noted Samuel Lema, a local ornithologist. "It's worrying because Ruaha is home to many rare and migratory birds that rely on this habitat."

The park's tranquil landscape has long provided a haven for elephants, lions, and other wildlife. However, poachers have repeatedly exploited Ruaha's vastness. Perched deep into the wilderness, the new airstrip is a crucial addition to Ruaha's anti-poaching campaign, enabling faster deployment of rangers and quicker transportation of supplies, according to officials.

"Poaching here has been rampant. We've lost so many elephants to poachers," said Raphael Komba, a seasoned park ranger. "Before the airstrip, reaching remote areas of the park could take hours. Now we can be on the scene in minutes. This rapid response time is necessary for catching poachers in the act."

According to Komba, the airstrip facilitates badly needed aerial surveillance to monitor the park's vast terrain and provide real-time information to rangers on the ground. "This airstrip is a huge

boost to our efforts. We conduct frequent patrols over a larger area,” he told this reporter.

The new airstrip has provided job opportunities and infrastructure improvements in nearby villages, fostering goodwill and cooperation. “Local people have seen the benefits of protecting wildlife,” said Mariam Waziri, a local farmer. “The airstrip has created jobs and improved our lives. We're more willing to support anti-poaching efforts.”

In addition to jobs, the airstrip has spurred investment in education and healthcare in surrounding communities. By improving living standards, authorities hope to reduce the lure of poaching for locals.

Despite its advantages, environmentalists fear the airstrip could disrupt wildlife and attract more tourists. “We need to balance conservation with development,” said Moses Chuma, a wildlife biologist at Ruaha University. “While the airstrip is essential for anti-poaching, we must ensure it doesn't harm the very wildlife we're trying to protect.”

Park authorities are keenly aware of these concerns and have implemented strict guidelines to mitigate environmental impact. Flights are limited to essential operations, and no-fly zones protect sensitive areas.

Denis Mwila, District Commissioner for Mbarali, emphasised the airstrip's role in enhancing air patrols and deterring illegal activities in the park. “Air patrols from the strip will intensify the war against poachers and prevent livestock from entering the park,” Mwila said. “It will also attract airlines to introduce direct routes to Ruaha and provide quick assistance whenever an emergency arises.”

Since the airstrip became operational, several poaching attempts have been thwarted and rangers have reported a decrease in illegal activities. “Just last week, we intercepted a group of poachers thanks to aerial surveillance,” Komba said. “They didn't stand a chance. This wouldn't have been possible without the airstrip.”

However, challenges remain. Poachers are becoming more sophisticated, using advanced technology and tactics to evade capture. The fight against poaching requires constant vigilance and adaptation. “We can't afford to be complacent,” said Chuma. “The airstrip gives us an edge, but we must continue to innovate and stay ahead of the poachers.”

Many in the conservation community see the new airstrip as a significant step forward in the fight against poaching. One of the airstrip's early successes was the dramatic capture of a poaching gang last month. Just days before the airstrip's official opening, a team of rangers, assisted by aerial reconnaissance, apprehended a group of armed poachers deep within the park.

“We received intelligence about their location and were able to deploy a team swiftly,” said Julius Makoye, a senior ranger at RUNAPA. “Without the airstrip, this operation would have taken days instead of hours.”

Beyond its anti-poaching potential, the airstrip is expected to bring significant economic benefits to the local community. RUNAPA is one of Tanzania's hidden sanctuaries, offering amazing wildlife experiences to those who venture off the beaten path. The new airstrip aims to make the park more accessible to tourists, potentially boosting visitor numbers and local revenue.

“The airstrip will bring in more tourists, which means more business for local guides, hotels, and artisans,” said Betrita James, the park's senior conservation commissioner.

The airstrip's opening also coincides with a broader debate about the human impact of conservation efforts in Tanzania. The World Bank recently halted funding for the Resilient Natural Resource Management for Tourism and Growth project in Tanzania amid allegations of human rights abuses, including forced evictions and violence against local communities. These allegations have cast a shadow over international conservation projects, raising questions about their true cost.

In Mlungu village, some residents expressed mixed feelings about the new airstrip. While there is hope for economic benefits, there is also fear of displacement and loss of traditional grazing lands. “We have lived here for generations, herding our cattle and living off the land,” said Mwajuma Ngonyani, a local pastoralist. “Now, with the airstrip and increased patrols, we are being pushed out. Where are we supposed to go?”

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