



“Swara” - the magazine of the East African Wildlife Society - interviews Jake Grieves-Cook, CEO of Gamewatchers Safaris, on Kenya’s tourism industry and the future for Kenya’s wildlife.



Q&A with Jake Grieves-Cook

The name of Jake Grieves-Cook has been synonymous with tourism in Kenya for four decades, especially in the Maasai Mara. A former chairman of the Kenya Tourist Board and Council member of EAWLS, he is now CEO of Gamewatchers, which operates prize-winning low-impact camps in the Mara along the sustainable, community-centred lines he so passionately espouses. SWARA will be visiting one and reporting back in the 2015 - 02 issue.



Q People say the balance between conservation and tourism in the Mara has reached tipping point, crisis point or already gone into critical decline. What's your view?

A The Mara was where I started my career in tourism over 40 years ago, based at what was then the only tourist lodge in the Reserve, so I have seen some big changes over the years! During the past two decades there has been a huge increase in the number of tourist accommodation facilities, with new lodges and camps mushrooming both inside the Mara Reserve and outside on the periphery in places like Talek or as ribbon developments along the Mara River. There have been complaints that sometimes new camps and lodges have been built on sites that were the home territory of various wild animal species but the main adverse impact of all this new development has been to greatly increase the number of tourist vehicles inside the Reserve during the July to October peak season. This is when masses of minibuses and 4x4s congregate along the Mara River in the hope of seeing a "crossing". There are now just far too many vehicles in the Reserve during the migration season with the tourism density often so high that it spoils the visitor experience and can actually obstruct the animals and prevent them from crossing at their favourite spots. Another problem has been caused by the greatly increased human settlement in recent years near the Reserve and the accompanying

increase in livestock numbers. This puts pressure on the Reserve with frequent livestock incursions as herders look for grazing for their cattle after much of the outer Mara has now become over-grazed, or privately owned and fenced off by the owners following subdivision, or cultivated by wheat farmers. Livestock grazing on the savannah plains can actually have a positive effect for wildlife in providing short grass and stimulating the new growth favoured by some animals such as gazelles or warthogs. Also areas which have been grazed down are preferred by many herbivores which deliberately avoid the long grass in which predators such as lions could be hiding. Unfortunately, nowadays the amount of grazing by livestock is often so excessive during the dry season that nothing remains for the wildlife and this causes real problems. However one positive development, which addresses both the issue of tourism density in the Mara and grazing for livestock, has been the establishment in the last ten years of new wildlife conservancies on community-owned land adjacent to the Reserve at Ol Kinyei, Naboisho, Olare Motorogi and Mara North Conservancies. These conservancies have created a buffer zone taking the pressure off the Reserve, increasing the area of protected habitat for wildlife, and providing a greatly improved wildlife viewing experience for tourists while at the same time generating incomes and livelihoods for the hundreds of Maasai landowners whose plots have been leased to form the conservancies and where small scale controlled livestock grazing can

be allowed on a limited and rotational basis.

Q Is there sufficient coordination between all Mara stakeholders - inhabitants, the tourism industry, Conservationists, KWS, Local Government and Central Government?

A There have been numerous workshops, conferences, meetings and studies in recent years looking at ways of reducing the tourism density inside the Mara Reserve and seeking to identify the best ways of protecting the Mara as one of the world's greatest wildlife parks. At one stage a few years ago there was an attempt to have a moratorium or a "freeze" on any new tourist lodge developments, which meant that no new applications could be considered by National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA), in the hope that this would stop the increasing number of camps and lodges that were springing up. However all that happened was that many developers just went ahead without bothering with NEMA approval, so that many more beds were added during the moratorium period. There was also an attempt to introduce a management plan for the Mara Reserve, which would have established high use and low use zones as a means of controlling tourism density but this was not approved and the recommendations were not adopted. Since more tourists means more income from park entry fees, there has been some resistance to

any suggestions that visitor numbers should be limited. However, as mentioned, one positive outcome has been a new co-operation between the private sector and the local communities to set up conservancies adjacent to the Reserve which have now been given recognition by government as legal entities. Within the conservancies there is a strict control on tourism density as they adhere to a formula of a maximum of one tent (2 beds) per 700 acres of conservancy and a maximum of one vehicle per 1400 acres. The income earned by the landowners, whose plots make up the conservancies, is based on a fixed fee per acre and so does not depend on visitor numbers. There is now a growing realisation that the form of tourism provided in the conservancies is more responsible and sustainable and the conservancy safari experience is gaining popularity with visitors as can be seen by recent articles in the international media and the many positive reviews on TripAdvisor.

Q **If nothing is done, and current trends continue unchecked, how do you see the Mara as a world tourist attraction in 10 or 15 years' time?**

A The Mara is still a world-class safari destination and offers wonderful wildlife viewing for visitors. Fortunately it is not isolated but is part of a vast protected eco-system, connected to the larger Serengeti and with the new conservancies further expanding the habitat for wildlife. So there is no reason why it should not continue as a huge draw for tourists, an important repository of bio-diversity and a valuable national resource. If action can be taken to control excessive tourism density during the few weeks around the August high season period every year, by coming up with ways of reducing the number of vehicles that congregate along the river, and if the conservancies can go on providing a protected

dispersal area beyond the Reserve, then the Mara can continue as one of the world's finest places for seeing large concentrations of wildlife in great variety and in a spectacular natural setting. However, a serious challenge is posed now by the fragmentation of the former group ranches and community lands beyond the conservancies. The sub-division of this vast area into thousands of small plots owned by individuals has meant that the traditional nomadic pastoralist lifestyle of the local people has had to change. Pasture land and communal grazing areas are being lost as they become individually owned, fenced off, sold to developers and speculators, or turned into sprawling peri-urban settlements and trading centres. Livestock herders no longer have the same areas available for their cattle to graze and are being forced to look for free grazing in the Reserve and the Conservancies. What is urgently needed is for areas to be set aside to protect livestock rangeland



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARA WILDLIFE CHEETAH PROJECT

CONSERVATION

for cattle in the same way that the conservancies have been established for wildlife. Unless this is done now, within a few years there will be nowhere left for many of the Maasai livestock owners to graze their livestock herds. This will cause a huge pressure on the wildlife habitat in the Mara Reserve and the new conservancies with the very real threat of serious environmental degradation through over-grazing by livestock in the remaining areas available to them. The conservancy movement has shown how savannah grassland can be conserved and set aside for wildlife to generate an income and livelihoods for the landowners and we need a similar movement to conserve pastureland for the Maasai livestock so that we do not end up with a situation where the only grazing left is in the areas meant to be for wildlife. There is also a need for changes to the form of livestock husbandry with a greater emphasis on smaller herds but higher quality livestock and use of feedlots and hay as an alternative to nomadic grazing.

Q Kenya's tourism industry is reeling after Westgate terror attack, the Travel Advisories and media-driven misperceptions. How does Kenya go about rebuilding its international profile?

A Kenya's tourism industry has had its share of ups and downs over the last 30 years and most of the downturns have been as a result of negative media reports relating to security issues over the years such as armed robberies, civil unrest or terrorist attacks. However in the past these problem periods were usually short-lived as action was always taken to address the issue and to rebuild Kenya's image in the key overseas markets. What is different now is that we have had an extended period of decline lasting for more than two years without any concerted efforts being made to address this, until fairly recently. For as long as potential visitors are being made to feel convinced that it is unsafe

to come to Kenya for a safari or a beach holiday, the demand will remain depressed and the numbers of visitor arrivals will be unlikely to reach the level required to generate an adequate return on investment for the industry and to give the boost that tourism could make to Kenya's economy. This will mean the loss of thousands of jobs for Kenyans, a big reduction in tax revenue for the government and a lack of income for KWS, the parks, reserves and conservancies. Tourism is the biggest contributor to conservation and if we allow our nature-based safari tourism to collapse then this will have a massive negative impact on conservation of Kenya's iconic wildlife. If media misperceptions are causing the collapse then there needs to be a serious effort to re-build a positive image for Kenya in the major markets which have international flights coming into our national airports and which have the highest volumes of outbound travel such as Germany, with 80 million outbound trips, or the UK with close to 60 million overseas visits a year. Ideally we need the services of a well-established international PR company that can assist this country by lobbying the foreign governments on behalf of Kenya to make them aware of the damage caused to both sides by blanket warnings to their citizens against travelling here, to make them recognise any actions taken to enhance security and to engage with the media owners to secure more positive reporting on Kenya and its attractions.

Q Wouldn't a few years of low tourist numbers actually be a boon for both the eco-system and the tourism industry, enforcing a breathing space in which to rethink and repackage both?

A Definitely not! If tourist arrivals fall to such an extent that there are inadequate funds to pay for conservation then the eco-system will certainly not benefit and will actually be harmed since alternative forms of land use will quickly replace conservation of

habitat in the protected wildlife areas used by tourism and many of these alternatives will result in wildlife habitat being lost forever. And if the tourism industry collapses further, so that hotels and safari companies close down, then this will cause considerable hardship to the many thousands of Kenyans who will lose their jobs with little hope of finding alternative employment. Our tourism industry in Kenya is closely linked to many other sectors of the economy which are suppliers of goods and services for tourists such as agriculture, transport, aviation, banking, insurance, breweries and soft drinks, food producers, printers, car dealers, fuel companies and many others as well as being an important source of tax revenue for central and county governments, so all of these will also be adversely affected. What is needed is for the government to succeed in addressing the security situation effectively, combined with a concerted effort to repair Kenya's image and to carry out Marketing and Public Relations campaigns to compete with other destinations. This will help to attract the growing numbers of outbound tourists travelling from the key international markets while also encouraging more visits to our tourist attractions by the local resident market.

Q Are the days of high-volume low-cost tourism in Kenya over?

A Kenya is served by many international airlines from all over the world and is a mature tourist destination with some wonderful attractions and a wide variety of tourist products ranging from mass-market beach hotels and big safari lodges to small, high quality boutique hotels and up-market exclusive camps in private wildlife conservancies. Tourism offers Kenya a great opportunity to create jobs for hundreds of thousands of its citizens, to bring in foreign exchange and to boost the country's economy. We need a greater realisation by all in government,

the local media and other institutions in Kenya that our tourism industry, which has been taken for granted and undervalued for so long, can actually be an economic engine of growth for the nation as it is for so many other countries in the world which earn an income from tourism even though they may not have Kenya's natural resources and attractions. We are wasting what could be a valuable national asset and we need the government to recognise the economic importance of tourism and give it more support to fulfil its true potential. Look at the example of countries like Malaysia, Mauritius, Barbados, Turkey, Australia and Greece, all of which have used tourism as a means of boosting their economies and creating employment for their citizens. Developed countries have long understood that tourism is an important sector in their economies, for example the USA earns \$140 billion a year from tourism, Spain earns \$60 billion, France \$56 billion, China \$51 billion and Italy, Germany and UK each earn over \$40 billion a year. However Kenya is not a cheap destination and is becoming less competitive. The recent imposition of VAT on tourism, combined with the current visa charges and relatively high park fees, has added an extra layer of costs so that Kenya is becoming more expensive. However we have seen price-cutting and "added value" offers in recent months by many hoteliers

in an attempt to encourage bookings and if visitors can be encouraged to travel outside the peak season months of July to September they will find that costs are lower. As the security situation improves and travel advisories are softened and if the government supports more effective marketing and PR campaigns to boost awareness of Kenya as an attractive destination in the biggest markets, then we should see higher volumes once again.

Q Kenya's population rate is rarely mentioned as part of the mix of things building pressure on land and resources. Do you think population numbers are given the importance they deserve?

A Kenya's rapid population growth is definitely putting huge pressure on land and resources. Kenya now has approximately 80 people per square kilometre which is more than most other countries in Africa that have wildlife-based tourism. This figure of 80 people per sq km in Kenya compares with 51 in Tanzania, 41 in South Africa, 17 in Zambia and only 4 in Botswana. And considering that many areas in Northern and Eastern Kenya are arid and sparsely populated, this means that the density in most places in Kenya is actually more than double what it is in

Tanzania and South Africa. We must realise that one of the main reasons for the global decline of wildlife in the world is loss of habitat. Today we are one of the world's 30 most populous countries with one of the highest birth rates and rapidly heading towards a population of 50 million. We already have over 20 million Kenyans under the age of 20 and the population of children in Kenya is now double that of a country like the UK. This is going to put greater pressure in the future on land and will cause increasing demand for space to grow food and for access to water. As a result of the rapid increase in Kenya's population, people need new places to live and have already settled on land that was previously wildlife habitat so that outside the parks and reserves the rangeland for wildlife is fast disappearing. Forests and woodland are being cut down for charcoal or cleared for cultivation or for housing developments. As well as causing habitat loss for wildlife, the increasing growth in human settlements has also caused human-wildlife conflict as wild animals are seen as pests or are considered dangerous and end up being exterminated. In order for wildlife habitats to be conserved there is an economic imperative which requires them to be economically viable and to generate an income for the landowners and local people that can match other alternative land uses. ●

