



Origins of Human-Wildlife Conflicts in Meru District, 1920-1939

James Mwiti Mutegi, Paul M Kyalo

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPPG/v1-i1/802>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARPPG/v1-i1/802

Received: 02 Jan 2014, Revised: 11 Feb 2014, Accepted: 26 Mar 2014

Published Online: 22 Apr 2014

In-Text Citation: (Mutegi & Kyalo, 2014)

To Cite this Article: Mutegi, J. M., & Kyalo, P. M. (2014). Origins of Human-Wildlife Conflicts in Meru District, 1920-1939. *International Journal of Academic Research in Public Policy and Governance*, 1(1), 60–75.

Copyright: © 2014 The Author(s)

Published by Knowledge Words Publications (www.kwpublications.com)

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this license may be seen at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

Vol. 1, No. 1, 2014, Pg. 60 - 75

<http://kwpublications.com/index.php/pages/detail/IJARPPG>

JOURNAL HOMEPAGE

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<https://kwpublications.com/pages/detail/publication-ethics>



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PUBLIC POLICY & GOVERNANCE



Origins of Human-Wildlife Conflicts in Meru District, 1920-1939

Mr. James Mwiti Mutegi, Prof. Paul M Kyalo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences - Mount Kenya University (Kenya)

Email: james.mwiti@gmail.com, chalopaul@yahoo.com

Abstract

Human-wildlife conflicts have been a major problem in parts of Meru District since the 1920s. There have been numerous cases of loss of human lives due to wild animal attacks, predation of livestock and crop destruction by wild animals in the district. Despite the magnitude of human-wildlife conflicts (HWC) in the district, the underlying causes for the conflicts have not been studied. This study therefore examined the social, political and economic aspects of HWC in Meru District in the period 1920 to 1939. The study analysed the impact of wildlife conservation on people's livelihoods and the responses by government and local communities to the conflicts. To achieve these objectives, the political ecology perspective was used. This perspective examines interactions between political, economic, social and environmental factors over time. The research relied on both secondary and primary sources. The former included published works that were obtained from various resource centres, while the latter were obtained from the Kenya National Archives (KNA) and field interviews. Sources from the KNA included both monthly and annual reports from the provincial administration and the Ministry of Wildlife and Tourism. Oral interviews were also conducted in the study area. Forty informants were interviewed during fieldwork. Purposive sampling was used in selecting the informants. This ensured that only knowledgeable persons were interviewed. Initial informants directed the researcher to other potential informants. Interview schedules targeting local residents, the provincial administration and wildlife conservation agents were used. These categories of informants enriched the study through different perspectives to the HWC Phenomenon. Data analysis involved usage of "data cards" that were useful in sorting out data. The cards were categorised according to the themes highlighted in the study objectives. Chronology was also used in the categorisation of "data Cards." In the analysis, the data were tested against the objectives of the study. The study found out that, while there were efforts to ameliorate HWCs in the district which included logging, poaching and destruction of crops and livestock by wild animals, the methods used were ineffective. The findings of the study may assist policy-makers to formulate wildlife conservation policies that could help ameliorate HWC, which could lead to improved standards of living in the district.

Introduction

This period marked the beginning of human-wildlife conflicts (HWC) in the district. Formerly, people utilised wildlife resources in a more sustainable way thereby ensuring there was proper balance in the ecosystem. However colonial administration and the resultant enforcement of wildlife conservation regulations upset the ecological balance, engendering HWC. Logging, which started in the 1920s for instance, destroyed the habitats of the larger animals such as elephants, prompting them to invade farms.

Many people in the district lost their land to the government in the 1930s. The most affected were the Chuka people who lost a twenty mile strip of land to the Meru County Council in the 1930s. The piece of land has been the source of protracted conflicts between the Forestry Department and the residents as the latter tried to regain it as their population increased. The 1930s also marked a period when many forests and bushes were cleared as people tried to create land for farming. This was as a result of an upsurge in human population in the district. Such activities led to the intensification of HWC in the district as wild animals lost some of their habitats.

The Spread of Human-Wildlife Conflicts in the District

From the 1920s, the interaction between the residents and wildlife changed. The movement of people from the Mount Kenya Forest and the subsequent incorporation of the areas into the Mount Kenya Forest Reserve in the 1930s seriously affected the socio-economic status of the residents. The inclusion of the people's land often referred to by the residents as *maganjo ma Chuka*¹ into the forest reserve abruptly changed the way people utilized wildlife resources.

In the late 19 century and the early 20 century, game was abundant in many parts of the country due to scarce human population then. During establishment of white settlement in Kenya, the government enlisted army officers to shoot wild animals on sight to clear land for habitation. This went hand in hand with the sport hunting that was in practiced in the country, especially in Meru District which was favored by hunters due to the abundance of game. Previously, people dealt with wild animal populations through hunting and killing of problematic animals. However, after the coming of European settlers in the early twentieth century, African hunting was prohibited. The killing of wild animals, regardless of whether they were a nuisance to the residents or not, became punishable under the law. This forced residents to apply crude methods of game control that were hardly effective. For example, to chase away marauding elephant and buffalo for instance, the residents resorted to drumming and yelling. The methods were initially effective but later became redundant. Elephant soon got used to drums and any attempt to scare them by drumming sometimes turned tragic. An elephant would listen carefully to the source of the noise, then when everybody was convinced that it had gone, it would charge with vengeance towards the assailants.² Many residents lost their lives in such incidents. Soon, the residents devised the use of fire to scare away elephant. They would throw lighted objects at them. The elephants on seeing sparks from an approaching torch would get scared and run away. The use of fire was

¹ The term *maganjo ma Chuka* is synonymous with the old residence of Chuka people.

² M. Micheni, Chuka, Informal Communication, 2009.

quite effective in the control of wild animals. The only shortcoming with the method was that it was only applicable at night. Thus, the animals causing destruction during day time were mostly unaffected.

The introduction of the Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC) rule in 1888 led to the development of the idea that East Africa, especially Kenya, was a sportsman's paradise.³ The establishment of the colonial government and the arrival of European settlers led to rapid decline of wildlife populations and their habitats. Such a decline was occasioned by the high number of hunters and ivory seekers at the time. This kind of destruction, especially of large wild animals, alarmed the Western conservationists who raised concern about excessive destruction of wildlife in Africa. By the turn of the twentieth century, there was a growing interest in the West for wilderness conservation especially in the colonies. The pioneer naturalists fueled by the realization that pristine natural areas in most frontier territories were rapidly shrinking due to increased human populations with attendant settlement, industrialization and uncontrolled hunting started to organize conservation awareness campaigns throughout Europe and North America. The conservationists put pressure on governments which had colonies in Africa and elsewhere such as Britain, France, Germany and Italy to initiate policies and programs of nature protection. In 1888 the East African Game Regulations were promulgated and became the basis for wildlife conservation in Kenya. In 1898, a Wildlife Regulation was enacted to curb indiscriminate loss of wildlife through hunting and trade in wildlife products in the country.

It was against this backdrop that the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire (SPFE)⁴ was formed in 1903 in Britain. SPFE quickly demanded control over the killing of wildlife in the Empire and the establishment of national parks or reserves using the American experience of national parks. The main aim of SPFE was to pressurize the British government to initiate and implement policies and programs on wildlife conservation in the East African Protectorate and other colonies. The implementation of the recommendations of the 1900 London Convention in the protectorate involved the establishment of a one-man Game Department in 1901 with A.B. Percival as the Game Ranger. In 1907, the Game Department was established essentially to control hunting. The staff of the Department rose to four men when J.H. Patterson was appointed the game ranger with three assistants. Patterson did not stay for long and Percival was appointed the acting game warden in 1909. In 1910 a new warden restored the Department's European staff to four officers. At the same time the Department began to recruit African game scouts and had about thirty by the beginning of the First World War. A fifth European officer had also been recruited in 1912. In pursuance of the 1898 Ordinance, a number of game scouts were recruited in Meru District by the Game Department in 1912 to obtain information on hidden ivory and

³ R. W. Beachey, 'The East African Ivory Trade in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of African History*, 8 (2), 1967: 271.

⁴ SPFE was formed by private British citizens in 1903 under the leadership of Edward North Buxton, a former hunter. Its main objective was to pursue throughout the empire awareness of the need to establish wildlife sanctuaries and enforce suitable game laws and regulations. See R. Matheka, "The Political Ecology of Wildlife Conservation in Kenya, 1895 – 1975," PhD Dissertation, Rhodes University, 2001: 73.

rhino horns amongst the “natives.” The outbreak of war in 1914 however disrupted the Department and its activities until 1925 when it was restored to its pre-war strength.⁵

Although there were always small episodes of HWC in Meru District, it was not until the 1920s that the conflicts intensified. The reasons for the intensification of HWC ranged from logging, land alienation from residents for the establishment of conservation areas, encroachment of wildlife habitats by the residence and the clearance of forests to create space for crop cultivation. The most common forms of HWC in the district included destruction of crops and other property by wild animals, killing of people by animals, tension between wildlife conservators and the residents and poaching by residents. The most affected areas included those surrounding the Meru Game Park, Lower and Upper Imenti Forests, Mount Kenya Forest, Tharaka and the Igamba Ngo’ombe areas.

Before the 1920s there were hardly any cases of forest destruction in Meru District. According to the Meru District Commissioner, the area under “native” forest was approximately 5000 acres by 1916 and it was in good condition without any cases of forest depredations by the natives.⁶ From the 1920s however, cases of HWC started being reported in the district. People engaged in various anti-conservation practices as they attempted to continue their old ways of wildlife utilisation. Some cases of violation of wildlife regulations were purely motivated by the desire to revenge over the discrimination in the utilisation of wildlife resources. In 1929 for example, ten people were convicted of violation of game and forest ordinances in the district.⁷

Logging by licensed saw millers started in the district in the 1920s. In 1924 for instance, Messrs Young and Ayre Company was granted a concession to cut timber within a large area of forests in native land reserve. A broad grass strip which was to be patrolled by forest guards was made around the whole concession area in order to prevent encroachment on the forest by the “natives”. The inhabitants of the areas that were brought under concession were not allowed to live within them or graze their livestock there without permission from the Forestry Department. This not only barred the residents from their source of income but also contributed to intensified conflicts between them and the conservators. The residents were unanimously against such concessions which they felt were part of their problems. They felt cheated in the utilisation of resources that were formally theirs. In 1925 therefore, arsonists started a fire that destroyed olive and cedar trees in areas under the Young and Ayre concession.⁸ In 1927, another forest fire was lit by residents who protested against what they called “stealing of our resources” by the government in the at Kithangari area.⁹

Such sabotage was as a result of the bitterness the Meru had towards conservation authorities and the timber-sawing companies. Residents often felt oppressed by the authorities as they were

⁵ R. Matheka, “The Political Ecology”: 72.

⁶ KNA/DC/MRU/1/1, Meru District, Annual Report, 1919: 3.

⁷ KNA/DC/MRU/1/3, Meru District, Annual Report, 1929: 2.

⁸ KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1925: 7.

⁹ KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1927: 1.

forced to participate in work that they believed was aimed at benefiting other people rather than their community. In 1925 for instance, under the supervision of the Assistant Conservator of Forests, the residents of Nthimbiri Location were ordered carry out demarcation of the Young and Ayre's concession area by placing beacons and cutting a line around the whole area in lieu of a fine under the Collective Punishment Ordinance.¹⁰

Forests such as Kuura and the Lower Imenti have been the breeding areas for elephant for centuries. Logging by licensed saw millers in these forests which started in the 1920s, is believed to have been the immediate cause of HWC that prevailed in the surrounding areas for the rest of the century. During dry seasons for instance, elephant often migrated from the NFD to the Mount Kenya Forest. On their way, they caused immense damage on farms. In 1929 for example, the situation was worsened by drought in the NFD. Hundreds of elephants migrated from the area to the greener areas of Mount Kenya Forest. By the time crops in Meru District were beginning to mature, the bushes in the NFD were mostly dry. Similarly, undergrowth skirting Mount Kenya Forest was often dry. Thus, the elephant from the NFD would stay in the forest's impenetrable cover by day and at night they would raid surrounding farms. In 1929, the Meru DC commented that, "A herd of [a] hundred elephants ... can reap and destroy many acres in a night."¹¹

When crops that escaped elephant destruction in the first round were harvested at the lower attitude areas, the elephants would move up into the Mount Kenya Forests. From there, they would do immense damage to crops which matured late in the higher altitudes. The elephant would eventually move back to the NFD at the onset of the rain season and the cycle would be repeated the following year.

Human encroachment into conservation areas in the 1920s was another factor that contributed to the escalation of HWC in the district. To deal with the problem, the government was forced to create boundaries between the 'native' reserves and the forests. In an attempt to control further encroachment into the forest in both 1924 and 1929 for instance, a line of black wattle trees was planted along the edges of various forests in the district. The 'natives' were also allowed to cultivate on the farms they had created in the forest on condition that they would replant trees on them. Further, the Forestry Department during the October to December rains in 1930, planted a line of *Eucalyptus globules* trees along the portion of the native forest reserve boundary. The "natives" caught cultivating in the forest always gave excuses that they did not know where the boundary was. However, that served as a source of conflicts between the Forestry Department officers and the residents as the areas where they lived experienced serious shortages of firewood and building poles.

In the mid-1920s, the Game Department was faced with an acute shortage of manpower. The officers sent to Meru never took their work seriously since they were not employed permanently. As a result, property destruction by elephant increased. In 1926 for example, five residents were

¹⁰ KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1925: 3.

¹¹ KNA/DC/MRU/1/3, Meru District, Annual Report, 1929: 2.

reported to have been killed by elephant in the same year.¹² To deal with the conflicts, the residents were granted permission by the Game Department to kill elephant found destroying crops. However, this did not help as the residents were poorly armed. Elephants were hardly affected by the arrows which the residents used. During September 1926, Wandorobo living in the veterinary quarantine area of Isiolo were moved back into the Meru reserve. There was a problem accommodating them in the densely populated “native” reserves because an area estimated at between 80,000 and 100,000 acres had been reserved for the King’s African Rifles (KAR) for grazing.¹³ The area constituted a buffer zone between the Meru reserve and the Nanyuki white farms and deprived the Meru of Imenti and Tigania of considerable grazing land as well as access to water in the Isiolo River. The addition of the Wandorobo livestock to those already in the constricted area between the KAR Grazing Reserve and Jombeni ranges created a lot of tension between the residents and the conservationists. Due to shortage of grazing areas for their livestock, the residents became more determined to regain the land lost to the government through various conservation programmes. As a result of pressure from the residents, the land reserved for the KAR was reverted to the “native” reserve except for some 6000 acres.¹⁴ In 1929, the forest stretching from the Isiolo Road up to the Upper Tigania areas was reportedly destroyed by the residents to create land for cultivation. The process of forest destruction had gone on unnoticed for many years because conservators mainly patrolled from the highway.

The *athi* groups remained a major threat to wild animals in Meru District during the colonial period. The *athi*, whose senior grade was called *mbuju*, were found in both the Tigania and Igembe clans and were meat-eaters. They originally lived on game meat from animals which they shot with poisoned arrows or trapped. They would demarcate certain areas of the forest for hunting purposes. In order to do this, certain sticks, known as *ndidi*, were planted at intervals round the area to be reserved. Those sticks were pointed at one end with a feather fixed on the other end. They were carved in a peculiar way and were said to contain magical powers. Any one cultivating an area demarcated with *ndidi* could be affected by the *athi* magic. That was by placing hollowed sticks about two inches in length, curved like a claw and engraved with the *athi* markings called *nguchua* under the ground near the offenders hut or under the path on which he walked. Another and more serious magic involved a wizard circling the village shouting incantations. The inhabitants of the village invariably died. The *Athi* were so dangerous that the local leaders feared them and were unwilling to interfere with their operations. They indiscriminately killed wild animals without being questioned by anybody.¹⁵ In 1929 however, the government tightened game rules thereby regulating their activities.

From as early as the 1920s, Meru people had developed irrigation schemes. However, such endeavours were hampered by elephant as they regularly destroyed water intake points. In 1928 for example, elephant were reported to have destroyed the Morania furrow near its intake in the

¹² KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1926: 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1926: 6.

Uaso Naro River. This greatly hampered various irrigation schemes started in the district. It also cost the residents extra expenses in repairs.¹⁶

Human-wildlife relations in Meru District changed as the government became more serious about the conservation of wild animals. The prohibition against killing of wild animals enabled their population to grow. This coincided with increased clearance of land to pave way for cash crop cultivation which had started in the 1930s. The process significantly reduced wild animal habitats. Many of the displaced wild animals started straying into people's farms. The Forestry Department, which was ill equipped to deal with the resultant conflicts, placed the burden of keeping wild animals out of farms on residents whose control methods were mostly unsuccessful.

In the 1930s, people were only able to access wildlife resources through poaching. For instance, people could still graze their livestock in the forest and take them to Kiria to drink saline water. However, this was only possible in the absence of the conservationists. Those who were caught were at times punished seriously. By then, the *athi* had made a road deep into the forest, separating the forest reserve and settled areas. The road ran from Kirangi areas of Embu District up to Mutindwa wa Mbogori area of Meru District. The road, commonly referred to as *Laini ya Kairi*,¹⁷ is about twenty miles inside of what is today the Mount Kenya National Reserve.

In the early 1930s, Ngaine, who was the clerk of the Local Native Council, facilitated the inclusion of the twenty mile strip of land into the Mount Kenya Forest Reserve against the wishes of the residents.¹⁸ Despite the fact that Meru residents needed wood for firewood and building posts, the government prohibited them from cutting trees in the Crown Forest. The government often accused the Meru of lacking aesthetic value despite having protected forest resource for many decades before the arrival of the colonialists. For instance, Leakey, a conservator in the district lamented:

The problem is how to induce an aesthetic sense in the African. Most of our efforts so far seem rather to produce an aesthetic sense (the "escape through alcohol") and we cannot persuade ourselves that the African has yet acquired his share of the artistic thrill of "helping God create" by conserving beautiful things.¹⁹

In 1930, the DC similarly lamented:

"Gardener and his predecessors in office were Bogey men whose main delight were to ruin, which according to most of the Meru, was to make intelligent use of the forest God gave them in a more enlightened opinion, by destroying the same forests as quickly as possible."²⁰

Many forest concessions were issued to private saw millers by the government in the 1930s. The natives who were living in areas that were brought under concessions or those taken by the

¹⁶ KNA/DC/MRU/1/3, Meru District, Annual Report, 1929: 3.

¹⁷ *Laini ya kairi* denotes second line.

¹⁸ E. Njeru, 2008.

¹⁹ KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1930: 1.

²⁰ Ibid.

government like the Uringu and Thura Forests were no longer allowed to live or graze their livestock in the areas without a special permission from the Forestry Department. This seriously affected the livelihoods of those people who depended on them for grazing their livestock.

Logging by licensed saw millers was a major cause of land degradation in many parts of the district. Driven by the need of revenue, the government continued to license private saw millers. In 1930 for instance, Monchouguy was given permission to set up a saw mill within the elephant grass zone in the Mbeyu Forest. This led to displacement of wild animals in the region. As a result, elephant and buffalo invaded settled areas in search for food. In 1931, the government granted a logging concession to Monchouguy in Thura and Uringu Forests.²¹ The residents strongly resented the concession as it was bound to destroy their traditional grazing areas. Besides, the residents relied on wildlife resources for survival during famines. In protest, the residents poached wood from the forests and drove their livestock into the forests to graze, causing conflicts with the Forestry Department. As a result, thirty people were arrested and convicted in 1931 of violation of the forest ordinance prohibiting such acts.²²

The 1930s also witnessed increased cases of crop destruction by monkey and other vermin. In 1930 for instance, poor germination of grains in Igamba Ng'ombe and Tharaka was attributed to a plague of rats. This unusual state of affairs was due to the 1920s famines that drove rats out of homesteads because of starvation.²³ As in 1919 and the 1920s, residents turned to protected areas for their survival and that of their livestock.

In some cases, climatic conditions in neighbouring areas largely contributed to an increase in HWC in Meru District. In the 1930s for example, the Akamba and Tharaka peoples having destroyed nearly all game in their territories, were the greatest threat to game in the Kinna area. Akamba poachers were dangerous as they used their poisoned arrows to avoid capture by game officials. Much Kamba and Tharaka poaching was motivated by lack of food in their areas as a result of frequent droughts.²⁴ In 1934, a drought in the NFD forced many elephants to move southwards to the areas around Meru Game Park where they caused immense damage to the ripening crops.²⁵

In 1937, due to rampant crop destruction by monkey, local people were supplied with sweet potato vines and cassava cuttings for planting as a precaution against famine. This was viewed as an effective safeguard since cassava and sweet potatoes are tubers. Unfortunately a lot of the cassava was destroyed by vermin such as pig and porcupine. This led to an increase in poaching in the areas adjacent to the Meru Game Park that year and the subsequent period as people turned to wildlife for food. The intensity of the poaching is captured in J.A. Hunter's report which

²¹ KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1931: 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1930: 4.

²⁴ KNA/KW/5/4/1, Game and Vermin Control Report, Meru District, 1937: 6.

²⁵ KNA/DC/MRU/2/4/54, Meru District, Annual Report, 1934: 5.

stated: "In 1939, numerous Kamba and Tharaka groups appeared to be living on diets of elephant meat and *Mukoma* palm wine."²⁶

In 1938 parts of Tharaka and lower Mwimbi areas suffered from tick-borne diseases and rinderpest. Many areas were also infested with tsetse fly. Majority of those diseases were transmitted to domestic animals by wild animals coming from the southern areas of Meru Game Park. In the same year, many acres of land north of Tharaka and Igamba Ng'ombe were cleared of vegetation to create land for shifting cultivation. This led to the removal of the original forest cover in the affected areas, leading to displacement of monkey, baboon and pig that lived there. The displaced animals moved to the southern parts of the Meru Game Park and other areas in the south that were less cultivated.²⁷ As a consequence, intense pressure was put on resources in the region as competition for food between the original inhabitants of the region and the immigrants intensified. This made animals to move beyond their borders as they searched for food. In the process, they ended up causing damage to crops and other property in the region.

In an attempt to curb the destruction of the forests in the district, the Forestry Department put up measures aimed at regulating the utilisation of forest resources by the residents. However, many people objected to the conservation policies introduced by the Department. The residents' displeasure is best illustrated in the following extract from the DC's Annual Report of 1937:

There is little doubt that the Meru have in the past divided their country of forest to at least as great an extent as any other Kenyan tribe. It is also undoubted that the tribe in general has little sympathy for the Forestry Department which to them is little more than a power which prevents them collecting fuel and building timber in the forests.²⁸

As a result of such negative feelings, the residents defied wildlife conservation regulations in various ways. For instance, fifty one people were reportedly convicted of violation of game laws in 1934.²⁹ With regard to the Ngaya Forest, a letter from the Game Department pointed out the following in connection to poaching in 1938: "I have seen at least a dozen rhino skeletons, four in one day. This is a great number to actually see while hunting elephant and surely proves that rhino poaching is very heavy."³⁰ In 1938, poaching was so rampant in the region that revenue from ivory and confiscated trophies totaled to shs186.53, an amount that was quite high at the time.³¹ Owing to a decrease in the number of ungulates as a result of poaching, there was an increase in conflicts caused by carnivores in the district in the 1930s. For example, Captain T.R.P. Salmon, a Game Control Officer in the district, shot and killed a man eating lion that had killed six people in Chief Inoti's location in the same year.³²

²⁶ KNA/KW/5/4/1, Game and Vermin Control Report, Meru District, 1939, p.5. J.A. Hunter was then an Animal Control Officer.

²⁷ KNA/KW/5/4, Meru District, Game Report, 1938: 2.

²⁸ KNA/DC/MRU/1/4, Meru District, Annual Report, 1937: 1.

²⁹ KNA/DC/MRU/2/4/54, Meru District, Annual Report, 1934: 7.

³⁰ KNA/KW/5/4/1, Game and Vermin Control Report, Meru District, 1938: 2.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

In other areas, especially those bordering Mount Kenya Forest, elephants were causing damage on crops. Although the conservators were aware of the situation, the government did not commit enough resources to curb the problem. No new game control officers were posted to the region to deal with the problem. Worse still, the officers already contracted often saw their contracts terminated prematurely as the Game Department did not have enough resources to maintain them. In 1937 for instance, Carr Hartley, an elephant control officer, was hired by the Game Department for four months but his appointment was suddenly terminated without any replacement.³³ As a result of increased HWC in the district, the residents urged the government to relocate wild animals to the game reserves. Nevertheless, the game officials never considered such a move to be warranted as they considered the “natives” to be less developed to warrant such a move. For instance, the DC in his annual report of 1937 pointed out the following:

It is generally accepted today that the proper place for game is in game reserves, not in the native reserves or settled areas where they interfere with industry and people. On the other hand, old ideas die hard - particularly those bound up with sentiment - and I fear it will be some time before the development of the native and his land will genuinely be considered more important than the protection of game in native reserves.³⁴

In 1939, many incidents of logging were reported in the district. The most affected were the Upper and Lower Imenti Forests. Kikuyu squatters who had moved into the district in the early part of the decade were the biggest menace. Concerning forest destruction, the DC in his report observed that:

...the Kikuyu colonist, who relying on the European's apparent inability to budge him from anywhere he cares to settle, proceeds to do what he has represented as so reprehensible on the part of the protector - take land apparently unoccupied and appropriate it to his own use. The Kikuyu have a get-rich-quick mentality, who care nothing for the preservation of [nature] for posterity.³⁵

During their stay in Meru District, Kikuyu squatters caused immense damage on the region's forests. The Meru indigenous authorities were aware of the Kikuyu problem but could do little to arrest the situation as their original authority as the custodians of their land had largely been taken over by the Local Native Council. The Kikuyu in the district who were either *Aciarwa*³⁶ or *Arombi*³⁷ were believed to be followers of the *Watu wa Mungu* sect which was founded by Musa Muchai in 1931. In 1931, the Kikuyu attacked a police post at the Ndaragu Forest. As a result,

³³ KNA/KW/5/4/1, Game and Vermin Control Report, Meru District, 1937: 3.

³⁴ KNA/DC/MRU/1/4, Meru District, Annual Report, 1937: 5.

³⁵ KNA/DC/MRU/1/4, Meru District, Annual Report, 1939: 1.

³⁶ *Aciarwa* is a Meru term that referred to people who are born in certain place, thereby becoming the original inhabitants of the place. In this context it was used to refer to the Kikuyu immigrants who were absorbed into the Chuka society, thereby acquiring the same status as their host through a specific ceremony.

³⁷ *Arombi* is a Meru term used to refer to beggars or landless people who are accommodated by others in exchange for their labour. Thus, the Kikuyu in the region were the opposite of *Aciarwa* since they were tenants at will.

some moved to the Fort Hall District while others penetrated into Chuka and settled first in Muthambi, south of Chogoria and north of Chuka (Mwimbi Division) areas.³⁸ In order to create land for cultivation, the Kikuyu immigrants cleared large parts of the forests in the region. In the process they displaced many wild animals leading to conflicts between animals and people as the animals habitats shrunk. In 1934 for example, damage to crops was so heavy in areas around Chuka that the DC lamented: "The soil in most parts of the district is good and rainfall is generally adequate but destruction by vermin is usually heavy. Elephants can undo a season's work in a single night. Pig and baboon do tremendous damage...."³⁹

In 1939, Kikuyu immigrants were reported to have caused a lot of destruction to the forests around Mwimbi and Muthambi areas. The destruction was said to be out of their entrepreneurship spirit as they aimed at maximizing the use of natural resources in the area. In his annual report of 1939, the Meru DC noted the following concerning Kikuyu immigrants:

Unfortunately there are parts of the district (particularly upper Mwimbi and Muthambi) where Kikuyu influence; directly or indirectly, has encouraged a spirit of individualism which tries to override tribal control for purely selfish ends. It is this spirit of animals which describes the man who hacks down tribal forest for immediate gains... It might be said with truth that there is to all intents and purposes a Kikuyu colonist association in Meru whose objects are to grab as much Meru land as they can and to alienate all land to their own tribesmen, and to squeeze all exploitable wealth out of the Meru forests and put it into Kikuyu pockets as fast as possible. There are numerous Kikuyu living in the Meru native reserve. The two principal settlements are at Naari and Chuka, but there are other families scattered here and there in all divisions. As a rule, they get on well with the Meru and apart from their inclination to the indiscriminate cutting of trees, cause little troubles. But at Naari some of the settlements have ploughed up large portions of Meru grazing land and in Chuka, their destruction of forest has gone beyond all bounds.⁴⁰

Forest destruction in the district had increased tremendously by 1940. Table 1 for instance, provides an illustration of the quantities of timber cut by the Thai Saw Millers in the Upper Imenti Forest from 1934 to 1940.⁴¹

Table 1: Thai Saw Millers Timber Production in the Upper Imenti Forest, 1934-40

Year	Quantity (Cubic feet)
1934	12,165
1935	13,435
1936	14,351
1937	16,832
1938	32,037
1939	46,044
1940	54,170

³⁸ KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1931: 8.

³⁹ KNA/DC/MRU/2/4/54, Meru District, Annual Report, 1934: 3.

⁴⁰ KNA/DC/Meru/2/4/55, Meru District, Annual Report, 1939: 4.

⁴¹ KNA/DC/Meru/2/4/55, Meru District, Annual Report, 1940: 2

Due to increased crop destruction by elephant owing to little help from the Game Department, the residents resorted to killing the animals themselves. In 1937 for example, elephant caused immense damage to food crops in Igembe North.⁴² This forced the residents to resort to poaching for food as the sweet potato and banana provided by the government were insufficient. As a result, twenty two people were charged for violation of game laws that year. In 1939, elephant caused severe damage to crops in Igembe. The damage was occasioned by residents' invasion of wildlife areas with their livestock, causing to a decrease to the amount of *machicho*⁴³ available for elephant.

From 1938, a lot of livestock died as a result of diseases spread by wild animals. For example, around the Ngaya areas there was an outbreak of a mysterious disease that caused immense losses to livestock. The spread of the disease was blamed on wild animals as noted in the following extract from a game report, "Eland are the most common and I have found many carcasses and skeletons of eland recently dead, and as far as one can tell, they have died of a disease."⁴⁴

In 1939, locusts caused severe damage to the grazing lands and cultivated fields. This forced Meru residents to move into the forests with their livestock as much of their livestock had already died of starvation. Lack of grass for the livestock added suffering to the residents because the conservators could not allow them to graze their animals in the protected areas. Despite the fact that the residents had traditionally appropriated and conserved forest resources, the government often accused them of lacking aesthetic value for the same.

Owing to a ban on hunting by the residents, wild animal populations rose to soaring levels by the 1930s. This led to an increase in HWC in the region owing to an acute shortage of game control personnel in the district. To deal with the conflicts, the Game Department used all sorts of methods ranging from traditional ones to indiscriminate killing of animals regardless of whether they were destructive or not. In regard to traditional methods, an assistant game warden in Meru District in 1937, reported on how he dealt with cases of elephant destruction of banana plantations: "... on Sunday morning I went with a gang of some fifty boys, and we put empty kerosene cans tied together and hanging from trees along their paths."⁴⁵

The traditional method was unsuccessful in controlling elephant. Thus, the most preferred method by the Game Department was that of indiscriminate killing since the Department did not have sufficient human resource to kill specific animals that were destructive. Nevertheless, the method had its shortcomings. For example, majority of the animals killed were often not the problematic ones. The real culprits often survived the slaughter, thus getting another chance to

⁴² KNA/DC/MRU/1/4, Meru District, Annual Report, 1937: 12.

⁴³ *Machicho* is a wild plant that grows in wet areas or places sheltered by a canopy of trees. It is slippery in texture and forms an appropriate meal for elephant as it eases the digestion of the rough grass elephant consume.

⁴⁴ KNA/KW/5/4, Meru District, Game Report, 1938: 3.

⁴⁵ KNA/KW/5/4, Meru District, Annual Report, 1937: 3.

continue harassing residents. Such concerns were voiced by the game warden in Meru District in 1938:

In my opinion, events have proved that the killing of large numbers of elephants as has been done in the Meru District during the last five years, has little or no real effect in putting a stop the shamba [farm] raiding. I recommend strongly that in future one or possibly two experienced hunters should be engaged for control work at Meru each year at the commencement of the rains; and that the work should be so organised that every case of raiding is followed by punishment of the herd concerned, whilst no other animals than shambas [farm] raiders are shot.⁴⁶

Despite such concerns, the killing of wild animals in large numbers continued in the 1940s. Between July 1942 and June 1943 for instance, fifty seven rhino had been shot dead on control work by game wardens.⁴⁷ Such destruction of wild animals was responsible for the extinction of some game species in the district. In the 1960s for instance, the white rhino numbers had decreased to a point where it was decided to import white rhino from Zululand in South Africa. Moreover, the destruction of wild animals by game officials motivated the residents to engage in poaching activities. In regard to this, Captain T. Salmon, a game control officer, observed: "The rhino seem to have suffered badly from wholesale slaughter by native gunmen. In one small locality, a native told me he had shot eight since game officers do not care any more about wild animals."⁴⁸

Conclusion

The 1920s and 1930s marked a period of transition in the district when people were forcibly made to abandon their traditions of wildlife utilisation. New wildlife conservation areas modelled after the West conservancies were introduced in the district as in other parts of the country. Such policies, together with the need by the residents to sustain their cultural way of life, were responsible for the conflicts that emerged over the period.

The period also marked the start of logging in the district. The most affected was the Mount Kenya Forest and Imenti Forests. Much of the logging in the aforementioned forests was by companies that had been licensed by the government. At the same time, Meru residents frustrated by attempts to lock them out in the utilisation of wildlife resources resulted to all sorts of anti-conservation activities such as poaching. This created conflicts between them and wildlife conservation agencies.

⁴⁶ KNA/KW/5/4, Game and Vermin control Report, Meru District, 1938: 7.

⁴⁷ KNA/KW/5/4, Game and Vermin control Report, Meru District, 1943: 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

References

Oral Informants

Name	Occupation	Date of Birth	Date of Interview	Location
Cianjoka, Faith Njeru	Farmer	1924	9 January 2009	Kirege, Chuka
Gitari, Benson	Retired KTDA worker	c1960	10 January 2009	Kirege, Chuka
Kinyua, Muthee	Farmer	1968	10 February 2009	Kamuguongo
Kirigua, Veronica	farmer	1962	20 January 2009	Kirachene
Kirimi, John	Chief	1974	15 February 2009	Igamba Ng'ombe
Kirito, Ann	Teacher	1973	28 January 2009	Murera
Maria, Naeserio	Farmer	c1950	4 February 2009	Nguyuyu
Murucha Aphaxard Kathuraku,	Retired KTDA Officer/ Farmer	1930	9 January 2009	Kiereni, Chuka
Muga, Kanga	Farmer	1930	10 January 2009	Kirege, Chuka
Mutegi, Justin	Retired Civil Servant	c1950	14 January 2009	Kiereni, Chuka
Muthoni, Virginia	Teacher	1957	9 January 2009	Kiereni, Chuka
Njeru, Eustace Kamiriri	Retired Village Headman/ Teacher	1920	15 January 2009	Kirege, Chuka

Archival Sources

- KNA/DC/MRU/2/4/54, Meru District, Annual Report, 1934.
 KNA/DC/MRU/2/4/55, Meru District, Annual Report, 1939.
 KNA/DC/MRU/2/4/55, Meru District, Annual Report, 1940.
 KNA/KW/5/4/1, Game and Vermin Control Report, Meru District, 1937.
 KNA/KW/5/4/1, Game and Vermin Control Report, Meru District, 1938.
 KNA/KW/5/4/1, Game and Vermin Control Report, Meru District, 1939.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/1, Meru District, Annual Reports, 1912.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/1, Meru District, Annual Reports, 1919.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1925.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1927.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1926.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/3, Meru District, Annual Report, 1929.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1930.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District, Annual Report, 1931.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/4, Meru District, Annual Report, 1937.
 KNA/^{KW}/5/4, Meru District, Annual Report, 1937.
 KNA/KW/5/4, Meru District, Game Report, 1938.
 KNA/KW/5/4, Game and Vermin control Report, Meru District, 1938.
 KNA/DC/MRU/1/4, Meru District, Annual Report, 1939.
 KNA/KW/5/4, Game and Vermin control Report, Meru District, 1943.

Books and Articles

Akama, J. S. (1998). "Evolution of Wildlife Conservation Policies in Kenya," *The Journal of Third World Studies*, 2 (8), 1998.

Beachey, R. W. (1967). 'The East African Ivory Trade in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of African History*, 8 (2), 1967: 271.