

## **Conservancy generates new income for the Maasai people**

**In southeast Kenya the cattle herding Maasai people have had to compete for land with migrating wildebeests and industrial farming. But now 3,500 families have together created a conservancy that provides them with a livelihood while protecting the wildlife.**

Late summer every year a unique spectacle takes place in the Masai Mara nature reserve in southwest Kenya. From Serengeti on the other side of the border with Tanzania, over a million wildebeests make their way north together with hundreds and thousands of zebras and antelopes. After a few months when the savannah has been grazed to the ground they head south again. In their proximity brood predators like lions, leopards and cheetahs. For centuries the animals have made the same journey following the sweet smell of rains to find lush feeding grounds. But the large numbers of animals require space and sometimes the rain leads them away from the nature reserve.

Outside Masai Mara live the Maasai, a stockbreeding people who are dependent on grazing lands for their survival. When the reserve opened in the 1960s it was a sparsely populated area, but the population has grown rapidly since then along with the number of tame animals. This has increased competition for grazing lands and created more conflicts between people and predators. Masai Mara's lifeblood, the vital Mara River, also attracts large-scale industrial farming to the area. All this has led to a drastic fall in the number of wild animals. Moses Sikona is 29 and lives in Siana just north of Masai Mara. He says that life as a stockbreeder has become much tougher.

"The land has become too small and cannot hold all of our livestock and we don't have alternative means of surviving or earning an income."

In the hunt for alternative revenues some families sold their land to investors who have since planted maize and wheat. That income only provided short-term respite and the large grazing lands have been fenced in, which hinders the migration of the wildebeests.

But the 3,500 families in Siana have found another way to support themselves and future generations. Inspired by similar projects that have been successful elsewhere in Kenya, the landowners have joined forces to create a 10,000 hectare conservancy together with local authorities and WWF.

"In order to survive as a community we've agreed to let our lands be used to protect the wildlife that attracts tourism, which will provide us with an income. The conservancy also prevents the land from being sold off," says Moses Sikona.

For a fee, Moses and the other landowners will allow responsible tourism companies to build eco-lodges in the area. The money earned is divided between all the families. A protective zone will also be laid out along the reserve to allow animals to continue on their migrations. The zone will be patrolled by local people. Previously, Maasai people who did not breed livestock usually made a living from hunting. Killing lions was also a way for young men to prove their manhood. But things have changed.

"The conservancy has created a close friendship between the community and animals because we benefit from them in ecotourism, a fast growing area that might boost our opportunities to find jobs."

When the Maasai villages and tourism companies began their partnership at a symbolic ceremony, it marked the first step in a collaboration that gives Moses Sikona and the other families a greater influence over their futures.

"In the future our children will be able to make a living from nature preservation while creating a better environment with an increase in wildlife."