

# Poachers or gamekeepers?

*Daniel Stiles argues the case for traditional hunters.*

**T**HERE HAS BEEN MUCH DISCUSSION recently in Kenya about reintroducing some form of legal hunting. The discussion so far, to my knowledge, has focused primarily on who will, or should, make the most money from it, how to manage it to prevent abuses and how to placate preservationists opposed to hunting under any circumstances. As usual, people for whom the question is of crucial importance but who have no economic or political clout are forgotten. These people are Kenya's traditional hunter-

gatherers who, since the colonial era, have more popularly been called poachers.

There are about twenty ethnic groups in Kenya who are remnant hunter-gatherers, and altogether I would estimate they number fewer than fifty thousand souls. The groups have been called by various names, the most common ones being Dorobo, Sanye, Boni and Liangulo, often with a 'Wa' prefix—a Bantu linguistic marker indicating the human plural. Without exception the common names are mis-

nomers, but hunter-gatherer classification is too complex to go into here.

They all used to live primarily by hunting game and gathering wild plant foods and honey. Most of them also engaged in exchanging produce of the wild with their farming and herding neighbours for things that they could not find in the forest: grain, cloth, iron tools, weapons and so on. Some of the export trade items became quite important, and drew traders from Arabia, Persia and India to East Africa's shores beginning at least two thousand years ago: ivory, rhino horn, skins, live animals, gums and resins, and other things. The coastal and hinterland hunter-gatherers then began trading with Swahili merchants and their middlemen,

contributing to the rise of the Swahili civilisation.

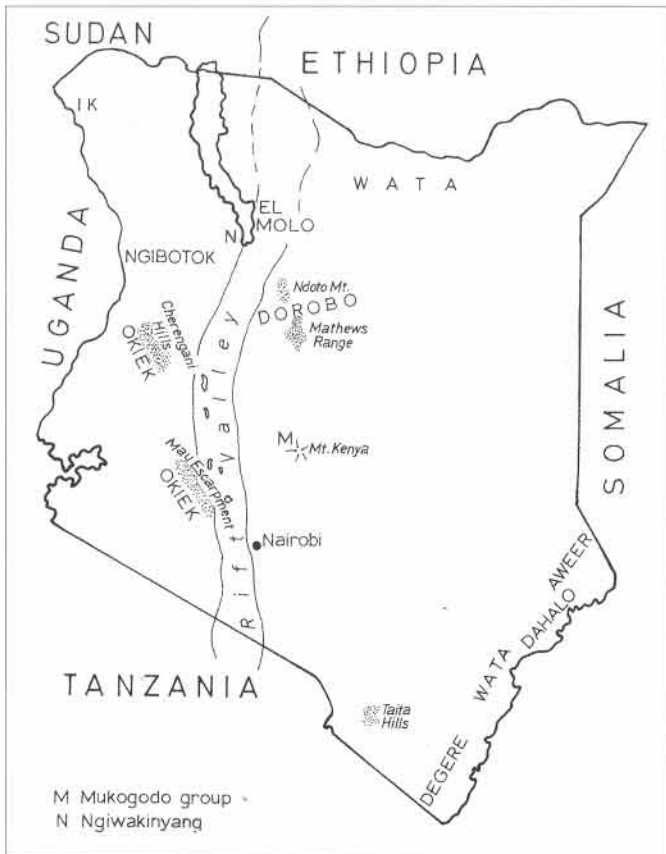
The economies and sociocultural life of the hunter-gatherers revolved around their ability to exploit their natural resources unhindered. They never seem to have overexploited these resources, even the elephant and rhinoceros. When the Kenya Rangeland Ecological Monitoring Unit (KREMU—today the Department of Resource Surveys and Remote Sensing) conducted a wildlife survey in the late 1960s and early 1970s they found the largest and densest concentrations of game, including elephants and rhinos, in the same areas where the hunter-gatherers lived. There is historical evidence that the game and the hunters had coexisted side-by-side for centuries.

In fact, in the past, hunters have acted as an ecological control for expanding elephant populations, much in the same way that predators control other game species populations. When the coastal and *nyika* hunters in Kenya were rounded up by the game department and put out of business in the late 1950s, elephant populations started growing, particularly in the Tsavo area. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a heated debate about whether to start culling elephant herds as they were now destroying the bush. Events overtook the debate in the mid-1970s when a severe drought hit Kenya and twenty-five thousand elephants starved to death, but not before they destroyed the vegetation of most of Tsavo East, which is still recovering today.

Subsistence hunting by traditional methods is not deleterious to wildlife. I conducted studies with some of the traditional Kenyan hunting groups in the late 1970s and early 1980s along the coast and in northern Kenya. Using human demographic statistics from the Kenyan Census of 1979 and my own surveys, and wildlife numbers provided by KREMU and hunting data

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**Distribution map of Kenyan hunter-gatherers**



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provided by various researchers, I calculated that subsistence hunting would in no way endanger any wildlife species. KREMU survey data showed that elephant and rhino numbers crashed following the hunting ban in 1977, caused by professional poachers using automatic weapons working within ivory and rhino horn smuggling rings. Some say the rings were politically well-connected. The traditional hunter-gatherers with their bows and arrows contributed little to the decimation.

What the hunting ban did, and the 1978 ban on trade in wildlife products which followed, was to shatter the way of life of the traditional hunters. The basis of their economy and culture was now illegal. The government put pressure on them to take up farming and herding, regardless of the fact that many of them lived in areas unsuitable for agriculture. Never rich to begin with, most now sunk into severe poverty, often eking out a living by labouring for others.

Ironically, one of the biggest impacts that the hunting ban had on wildlife was the destruction of the habitat the animals needed for survival. For example, the Aweer (also called the Boni) in Lamu District turned to slash-and-burn farming. Every year many new hectares of wildlife habitat are burned, to be replaced temporarily by scruffy fields of maize, then by a secondary growth of sodom apples and other weeds after the poor soil is exhausted. On the Mau Escarpment the Okiek (also called Dorobo) clear forest to establish farms so that they can obtain title deed to the land, fighting the outsiders who are grabbing their traditional territory—if land is left ‘undeveloped’ others can assert that it is uninhabited and claim it.

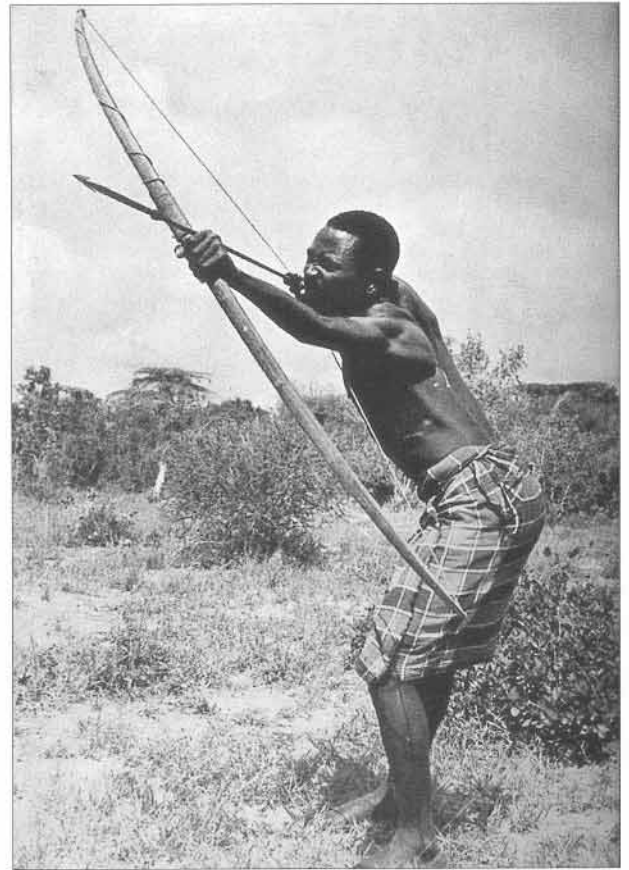
Both the Aweer and Okiek lived in balance with their natural resources prior to the colonial era and independence. Now, partly in the name of protecting wildlife, they are being forced to destroy their environment to survive. The policy is doing much more harm to the ecology and the wildlife than traditional hunting ever did, and the people suffer as well.

Should these former hunter-gatherers be allowed to participate in any new plan to reintroduce hunting in Kenya? I think in some cases they should, but obviously each case would have to be studied carefully. Some of the

former hunting groups are hardly coherent ethnic identities any longer, nor do they enjoy any defined territory. This probably applies to the cluster of Maa-speaking ‘Dorobo’ who live in the general vicinity of the Mukugodo Forest near Don Dol on the Laikipia Plateau and the scattered Dorobo who live around the northern Kenyan highlands of the Mathews-Ndoto-Maralal areas. I think it would apply as well to at least some of the Wata and Degere living in the coastal and hinterland Mijikenda areas.

Other Wata and Degere (who are related people), the Aweer, and the Okiek of the Mau, would have a much stronger case, as they do have territory that could be called their own, and in which wildlife lives. These people make up the vast majority of all of Kenya’s hunter-gatherers—especially the Okiek—so catering to their wishes would be satisfying the aspirations of most of this constituency. Research conducted by various people has shown that all of these former hunter-gatherers would like to go back, at least in part, to their former way of life.

It would be naïve to think that they would revert to any romantic notion of the nomadic hunter, living in harmony with nature, and equally naïve to think that *laissez-faire* hunting and gathering would or should resume anywhere. Any general policy favouring the legalisation of hunting by former hunting peoples would have to be backed up by well-designed management plans. Each plan would have to explicitly define exactly who would be allowed to hunt, clearly designate the area—the extractive reserve—where wildlife resources, including plant resources, would be exploited, indicate the species and numbers of each that could be taken within a given time period and set out how the plan would be managed and enforced. The primary



**“It was pathetic. Old tribesmen arrested and herded into reservations and branded as poachers—a menace to the ecology. It never occurred to anyone that they were the ecology.”**

*Peter Beard, author of End of the Game.*

*Liangulu elephant hunter reproduced from The Elephant People by Dennis Holman (Pub: John Murray 1967).*

objectives of such a policy would be to improve the lives of the people and promote the conservation of wildlife and its habitat. Such a policy would also advance social justice.

However, since no one, including the Kenyan government, will make money from this approach it is undoubtedly doomed to failure. Political expediency dictates that it is easier to let things continue as they are than to rock the boat by reversing the decades-old policy of discouraging hunter-gatherer and nomad lifestyles. So, for the foreseeable future, instead of protecting wildlife habitat as they used to, the former hunter-gatherers of East Africa will continue to destroy it. #