

CLIMATE CHANGE FEATURE:

By Mwangi Wajumbi

The experiences of December 2009 may leave memorable images of the challenges daunting Mother Nature, compared to those of 10 years before. Witnessing the decimation of the animal kingdom is particularly a humbling experience. Earlier, I had during the December holidays of year 2000, driven my family to Arusha, Tanzania. It was a joyous moment of spending time outside our national borders especially for our then young ones.

On the way back via Namanga, we thought of extending the fun through a visit to Amboseli National Park which is situated in the vast Rift valley. It was after all only 70 km or so from Namanga border town, so we thought. With two families and two vehicles it was not expected to be anything short of fun for all.

Unfortunately, we had not been made aware of the rough and sometimes almost impassible roads. The trip to Amboseli is apparently one of the most memorable parts of the sudden local tourism experience.

The route from Namanga up-to the Amboseli National Park gate, hardly qualified to be a road. It actually resembled a quarry with neatly arranged hardcore. We nevertheless conquered this road despite posing immense torture to the motor vehicles

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and drivers too. It didn't matter whether the vehicle was ordinary or off-road.

Upon completing the 70 Km stretch and immediately entering the park, we all felt greatly relieved. The roads were no longer as rough. Besides, the scenery was unbelievably pleasant to the eyes. The park was full of a wide range of the members of the animal kingdom. Both the carnivores and herbivores could be spotted with ease as they went about their routines in the then vast grassland. The zebras, giraffes, elephants, wildebeests, buffalos and other herbivorous species filled up most of the bushy sectors of the Amboseli Park. Naturally, the canines were within close range of their herbivorous prey. In fact, once settled in one of the lodges, we did not require long game drives to enjoy the wonders of nature, especially hunting expeditions of lions and hyenas.

During Christmas holidays of 2009, nine years down the line, it was not difficult to settle on Amboseli National Park as the destination of choice, especially given the

Witnessing the disintegration of the animal kingdom



Wild animals and domestic animals co-exist as they search for food and water (Pic by M.N. Kinyua).

earlier memories. The only difference is that this time we approached the park from the Nairobi Mombasa Highway. From Nairobi, we branched at Emali which is about 170 Km towards the coast. We then drove right towards Loitoktok. The route this time was an enjoyable experience. Besides, we had chosen to be driven to the park this time. The 80 or so Km stretch from Emali is tarmarked up-to the junction leading to the gate to Amboseli National Park. From the junction we only did 18 km of all weather road. While inside the park, we initially went through a worrying experience.

There were no herds of herbivorous animals to watch this time. There were no canines either. The former were to be seen in isolation along our route to our residence for the two nights in the park.

After lunch on 25th December, we ventured into the park for the evening game drive. It was a shocking experience compared to the last visit ten years before. The animals were hard to find. Of the canines, we only encountered a lioness and her lion mate. They were sleeping lazily somewhere along our route, perhaps after enjoying a heavy meal.

The herbivorous species were scattered here and there. We sighted a few elephants and buffalos, the only animals which appeared to dominate the park during the time. Apparently, we only sighted 4 giraffes and four zebras and small herds of antelopes, during our stay in the park. Even, the game drive for the second day did not yield any

different results. The only addition was sighting a large park of hyenas. There were no lions this time. There were no wildbeasts and other animal species that our eyes had feasted on in the past. Sadly, we encountered many carcasses of animals which had succumbed to the harsh weather conditions.

Out of concern, we interviewed a senior game warden who we coincidentally bumped into. "We have this time lost 70 per cent of our animals to adverse weather conditions. With the onset of the rains, the remaining animals have migrated to the upper ground like Mt. Kilimanjaro and Chyulu Hills. Down here in the park, we are at the moment having only about 3 per cent of the normal animal population," he explained.

Dissatisfied tourists may stop flowing in if the situation does not change for the better. The tourism infrastructure may therefore stop attracting inflows of foreign exchange which is beneficial to the national economy. Many employment opportunities may be lost in the process. But what can we do to remedy the situation? "We can only conserve the environment through planting trees in our surroundings. For the rest, we just leave nature to take its course," said an environmentalist after we shared the experience.

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