



A fine balance

Amboseli has long divided opinion, perhaps more so than any other park in East Africa. Here, **Anthony Ham** visits Kenya's second most popular park to examine its past, present and much debated future.

amboseli is dead. Long live Amboseli. Few national parks in East Africa have the power to divide opinion quite like Amboseli. Perhaps this is because the park is an island of wildlife surrounded by a sea of humanity, a place that seems in danger of suffocating to death: some 1500 elephants and approximately 35 lions live within the park, while 35,000 Maasai and their two million head of livestock live just outside it. Or it could be that Amboseli owes its penchant for controversy to its familiarity? This is a park that we think we know well, not least because the BBC filmed *Echo of the Elephants* and parts of the recent *Africa* series here. Then again, perhaps Amboseli has become a battleground for the future of Kenyan conservation for altogether simpler reasons: Amboseli is a thing of great beauty and the very fact of its survival can seem miraculous.

Whatever the cause, Amboseli is, and always has been, both a miracle of abundance and a park in perpetual peril.

I remember well my first visit to Amboseli. It was during October and the rains were late. Great cloudbanks would build in the east, drawn to Kilimanjaro, only to evaporate in soaring columns somewhere over Tanzania. In bright sunshine, Amboseli sweltered in the rain shadow of Africa's highest mountain.

Amboseli is famous for its droughts. Its name actually comes from the Maa word *empusal*, which means 'salty dust', 'open plain' or 'barren place', depending on the context. However, at the time of my visit Amboseli was, at its core, lush and prolific, a symbol of plenty. Not far from the cluster of lodges that inhabit the park's heart, a group of five sub-adult male

lions, their bellies so bloated that I at first mistook one for a pregnant female, slept off the night's exertions. They rose from time to time to cast lazy glances towards a herd of skittish zebra and wildebeest. Nearby, two lioness sisters watched over a crèche of cubs, oblivious to the minivans that crowded them on all sides. Elephants wallowed in healthy family groups in the two swamps – Enkongo Narok and Olokenya – that sustain Amboseli's wildlife, while not far away two bull elephants battled for the right to rule this green kingdom.

The fact that the families were able to wallow in peace, and that the bulls saw Amboseli as a prize worth fighting for, owed much to the good rains of the year before. Water had also come from beneath the earth, channelled here by the aquifers that drain water from snow melt and rain run-off, high on Kilimanjaro. So although the park receives barely more rain than a desert it has the aspect of an oasis.

Despite this, I had been warned by conservationists not to be misled. Amboseli had, they told me, already turned the corner into desert status. The park's elephant numbers, they said, were almost twice its carrying capacity, an abundance that, combined with unregulated tourism, was causing the park's soils to unravel.

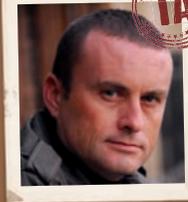
I could see what they meant. During my visit, not far beyond the perimeter of the swamps, dust devils gathered up the loose soils of sand and salt, sweeping them away in mini tornados. Within sight of the lodges, where signs forbid visitors from taking photos of the Maasai, a Maasai herder – ochre pigtailed, a posture of unspoken challenge – led his cows to water, stirring up the dust well inside the park's boundaries. Draped in red and carrying a stick, he walked boldly and with no suggestion that his presence here was pushing ▷

A close-up photograph of an elephant's head, heavily coated in dark, wet mud. The elephant's eye is visible, partially obscured by the mud. The background is a bright, hazy orange-brown, suggesting a dusty or smoky environment. The word "Kenya" is printed in the top right corner.

Kenya

An Amboseli elephant
bathing in dust

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Anthony Ham is a regular contributor to *Travel Africa*. Although once again based in his native Australia, he spends much of his time travelling in Africa. He recently authored the latest edition of Lonely Planet's *Kenya* guidebook.

the boundaries of legality. The Maasai may enter the park with their cattle only at times of drought and in ill-defined cases of necessity. Surrounded by such marginal lands, such necessity is frequently invoked. And from the swamps to Eremito Gate, I crossed an empty plain of patchy grasslands and poor soils that were less arid than degraded. It was a wasteland, an emptiness that weighed heavily upon the land.

In 1883 Joseph Thomson passed through what he called the Nyiri Desert, a site north of where Amboseli National Park now sits. As he did so, he framed the question that puzzles many visitors to Amboseli:

"In spite of the desolate and barren aspect of the country, game was to be seen in marvellous abundance... The inquiry that naturally rises to one's mind is, how can such enormous numbers of large game live in this extraordinary desert?"

The story begins, like so many stories in East Africa, with the Maasai and the errors of a colonial past.

It is often said that the Maasai were natural conservationists, living in harmony with the land and its wildlife. The historical Maasai did indeed maintain a rough equilibrium, although, some historians argue, this was only because their low numbers enabled them to do so. Young warriors, or *moran*, proved their manhood by hunting lions without ever seriously affecting overall lion numbers.

That relationship with the land and its wildlife deteriorated with each passing decade of colonial rule: the authorities repeatedly corralled the Maasai into ever-smaller parcels of land, even as Maasai numbers, and the numbers of their livestock, grew and grew rapidly. When Amboseli National Park was carved out of Maasailand in 1974, it was a small but significant attempt to protect the last healthy land in what was fast becoming an overgrazed and overpopulated ecosystem. At the same time, the creation of the park took from the Maasai some of their finest grazing lands and their dry-season waterholes of last resort.



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Maasai resentment finally spilled over in the four years to 1993 when their warriors all but wiped out Amboseli's entire lion population. The park was closed. Its reopening coincided with a surge in tourism, set against a backdrop of the cyclical droughts to which the Amboseli Basin is vulnerable.

In the aftermath of one such drought, in 2003, George Monbiot wrote: "No one was sure what was wrong with Amboseli, but the basin which had once displayed one of the world's most spectacular concentrations of wildlife was now, in places, as bleak and dreary as an empty playing field. The long grass, the scrub and acacia woods in some parts of the park had died: all that remained was mud with a dusting of green shoots. In the mirrored wilderness of grey land and grey sky, even the elephants were dwarfed."

The droughts passed and Amboseli's cycle of regeneration began again. Lions returned, and the elephant population recovered. But there would be more

droughts, more degradation of the park. In 2011, Kenya's then-Tourism Minister Najib Balala threatened to close Amboseli to allow it to recover.

And yet, ill conceived and inadequate as Amboseli is, and as unjust as the park's presence is among the Maasai, its very survival is itself a kind of miracle. More than that, Amboseli continues, for all its faults, to function true to its original purpose – as a refuge.

While in Amboseli I was able to drive to within touching distance of its elephants. Such proximity is inconceivable in nearby Tsavo, where poachers massacred tens of thousands of elephants in the 1970s and 1980s.

From that period, the elephants of Amboseli emerged largely and miraculously unscathed because, some have said, of the high-profile presence of Dr Cynthia Moss and her Amboseli Research Project in the centre of the park. It is also because of their work that we know so much about elephants. ▷

Wildebeest crossing Amboseli after a rare rain storm

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of large game live in this extraordinary desert?

Plan your trip

Getting there

British Airways (www.ba.com), KLM (www.klm.com), Emirates (www.emirates.com), South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) and the national carrier Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) all connect London to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. From Nairobi's Wilson Airport, daily scheduled flights to the park are operated by Safarilink (www.flysafarilink.com). By road, it's a 2.5-hour (228km) drive from Nairobi to Amboseli's Meshanani Gate.

When to visit

January and February are great months to visit Amboseli, as is the period between June and September. The rains in April and May are to be avoided. The shorter rains in November and December can also make some roads impassable.

Visas

Visas, though required by most nationalities, can be bought upon arrival at all land borders and international airports. A single-entry visa can be acquired upon entry to Kenya for US\$50 or before travel from the Kenya UK High Commission in London for £30.



More information is available at www.kenyahighcommission.net/visas.html

Books

Bradt's *Kenya Highlights* by Philip Briggs (1st ed, 2010) is a great guide for people on organised safaris, while *The Rough Guide to Kenya* by Richard Trillo (10th ed, 2013) and Lonely Planet's *Kenya* (8th ed, 2012) are great for independent travellers. Bradt's *East African Wildlife* is a handy one-stop handbook to the region's fauna.

Find out more

Kenya Tourism (www.magicalkenya.com)
Kenya Wildlife Service (www.kws.org)

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Even today, beyond the park in the broader ecosystem, one of the most exciting projects in carnivore conservation, the Lion Guardians, is unfolding with stunning success. The project, the brainchild of Egyptian-American conservationist Dr Leela Hazzah, takes former lion killers from among the Maasai and makes them responsible for the future survival of the species. In the five years to 2012, three lions were killed in areas where Lion Guardians were operating. During the same period, in surrounding areas where the programme was not in operation, the Maasai killed ninety lions.

"Lion Guardians is one of the most important answers to lion conservation that I've seen," Dr Luke Hunter, president of cat-conservation NGO Panthera, told me recently. "There's no doubt it has turned the tide for the Amboseli lions, and it has potential to do the same for lions in large parts of savannah Africa."

None of this would have been possible without Amboseli. And so it was that I fell in love with Amboseli. Here was a place where, from the very first time that I laid eyes on her, the stories of death and rebirth seemed to reverberate across the savannah. This was the Africa that I craved, a touchstone of the continent's cycles of feast and famine, a place where the stories echoed far beyond the boundaries of the park. And at the heart of those stories lay Amboseli's flaws, the very same flaws that run like wounds through all wild places in Africa. ✂



Top: Two Maasai moran (warriors) with Kilimanjaro looming in the background

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Above: The Maasai may enter the park with their cattle only at times of drought and in ill-defined cases of necessity
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Right: Despite lush pockets, many in conservation circles say Amboseli has turned the corner into desert status
© ANTHONY HAM

