Whose Park? Whose Animals?

A six-part essay into wildlife tourism, conservation and animal ethics at Nairobi National Park. Written by Winnie Cheche for The Eco Advocate, with support from the Culture & Animals Foundation.

About this report

This report brings together all six essays of *Whose Park? Whose Animals?* in their final, published form, complete. Each essay was first published on The Eco Advocate at chechewinnie.com. Here they appear in sequence, so the series can be read, cited and shared as one body of work.

The series asks a deceptively simple question about Nairobi National Park, the only national park on earth inside a capital city: who is this park for, and whose interests count in how its animals are managed, priced and presented? It was written primarily for African urban youth, the generation growing up beside the park and too often outside its gates.

The work was supported by a grant from the Culture & Animals Foundation (CAF) under its Creativity category.

The six essays at a glance

No.	Essay	The question it asks
1	The Cheapest Wilderness in the World	Who gets through the gate, and who is the pricing built for?
2	The Animals Who Are Never Just Watched	What does it cost an animal to be made visible, countable and safe?
3	Rangers, Guides, and the Labour Behind the Postcard	What are the people who make the encounter possible paid, and what do they risk?
4	South of the Fence	Who carries the cost of keeping the Kitengela wildlife corridor open?
5	What Nairobi's Youth Know About the Park Next Door	Why do so many young Nairobians know the park only secondhand, and what closes that gap?
6	After the Postcard	What does it mean to hold conservation triumph, commodity and consent together?

Each essay stands on its own. Read in order, they build towards Essay 6, which draws the five threads into a single argument.

How the research was done

The series combines desk research with original fieldwork carried out in and around Nairobi National Park between June and September 2026. Fieldwork began in June and ran into July, longer than

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planned. Part of the reason was the protests near the park and a wider climate of caution, which made some people wary of speaking on record.

Research strand	What it involved	Where it appears
Desk research	KWS fee schedules, press coverage of the 2023–2025 fee disputes, peer-reviewed studies, and government documents from the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, including KWS's Regulatory Impact Statement, the Black Rhino Recovery and Action Plan 2022–2026, and 2024/25 human-wildlife conflict compensation data	All six essays
Verbal interviews	Close to 30 conversations with KWS rangers, wardens and other staff, members of Friends of Nairobi National Park (FoNNaP), and households along the park's edges and the Kitengela corridor	Essay 6
Questionnaires	Written questionnaires for Nairobi residents and young Nairobians (14 youth respondents, aged 16 to over 25), and for KWS personnel	Essays 1, 3, 5 and 6
Children's game drive	A game drive on 27 September 2026 for children and parents from Pipeline estate and Kangundo, with on-the-day interviews with a parent and the tour guide	Essays 1 and 5
Written reflections	Compositions, drawing-book answers and parent reflections sent in by participating families after the game drive	Essay 5
Community outreach	Phone calls and written messages to households near the park and along the Kitengela corridor, in September 2026, using the format that suited each household	Essay 4
Partner responses	Written answers from Nev, an environmental and conservation journalist who helped plan the game drive	Essays 4, 5 and 6

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Confidentiality

Most interviewees, particularly KWS staff, landowners and community members, spoke on the understanding that they would not be identified. Their accounts are reported collectively, with no attribution to any individual, station or rank. People are named only where they agreed to be. Where

respondents asked to review their words before publication, those words are paraphrased rather than quoted.

Limits of the evidence

- **Pay data.** KWS does not publish a current salary schedule, and staff preferred not to discuss pay. The figures in Essay 3 come from secondary sources and one staff questionnaire response, and should be read as a range, not a confirmed scale.
- **Animal management.** Essay 2 rests on published research, press reports and official KWS documents, not on interviews with translocation teams.
- **Youth research.** The main academic study in Essay 5 was carried out near Amboseli, because no comparable study of Nairobi's own young people was found. The Nairobi questionnaires and the game drive supply the local evidence.
- **Timing.** Essays 1 to 5 report fieldwork as it stood when each was written. The interviews with long-settled Kitengela landowners and FoNNaP members came later in the project and are reported in Essay 6.
- **Fast-moving facts.** Court cases on park fees and construction inside the park were still open at the time of writing. Figures and rulings reflect the dates given in each essay.

Essay 1: The Cheapest Wilderness in the World

Have you ever lived seven kilometres from a lion?

Not a lion in a zoo enclosure. Not a lion on a screensaver. A real, wild, breathing lion, the kind that hunts at dawn and sleeps off a kill in the shade, the kind whose roar can carry across a valley on a still night. If you live in Nairobi, you have. Nairobi National Park sits closer to the Central Business District than some of the city's own suburbs. You could, on a clear day, watch a giraffe browse an acacia with the Nairobi skyline rising behind it like a painted backdrop. No other capital city on earth has this. It is, quite literally, one of a kind.

So why do so many Nairobians who have lived their whole lives beside this park never once walk through its gates?

That's the question this essay sits with. Not "is the park beautiful", everyone already knows that. Not "should we conserve it", anyone reading this probably already believes we should. The real question is sharper, and it's less comfortable: who actually gets to use this park, and who is the pricing built for? Because a park's fee structure isn't just an accounting decision. It's a statement. It tells you, in shillings and dollars, exactly whose access matters most.

Let's follow the money and find out.

A family priced out, seven kilometres from home

Picture a family in Ongata Rongai, or in Imara Daima, or Langata itself, close enough to Nairobi National Park that they can sometimes hear it. Two parents, two kids. They've talked for months about finally taking the children to see the rhinos and lions everyone keeps posting about online. It's not an exotic trip. It's not even a trip, really, it's a Saturday morning fifteen minutes from home.

Then they sit down to actually price it out.

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Under the fee schedule currently in force, a Kenyan citizen adult pays KES 1,000 to enter, and a child pays KES 500. For two adults and two children, that's KES 3,000 in personal entry fees alone, before a vehicle charge, before fuel, before anything else. A family that wants to self-drive adds another KES 600 for a small car. A family that wants a guided safari, because they don't own a 4x4 suited to the park's tracks, is looking at a private tour price on top of that.

Suddenly a "trip down the road" costs more than a family outing to a mall, a filling day of activities in town, or a month of data bundles. And this is the citizen rate, the cheapest tier that exists. It is not that this family can never afford it. It's that a park seven kilometres away has become something you save up for, plan around, and maybe visit once a year if the school holidays line up. That is not what "urban" and "accessible" are supposed to mean.

Four tiers, one message

Here is where the pricing logic gets interesting, and where it starts to answer the "Whose Park?" question before anyone else gets to.

Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) doesn't just charge one fee. It charges by nationality and residency, and what used to be a simple two-tier system, citizens/residents on one side, foreigners on the other, has become a four-tier one. The current bands at Nairobi National Park are:

- East African Citizen (Kenyan and other EAC nationals): KES 1,000 per adult, KES 500 per child.
- Kenya Resident (non-citizens with valid residence documentation): KES 1,350 per adult, KES 675 per child.
- African Citizen (nationals of African countries outside the EAC): USD 40 per adult, USD 20 per child.
- Non-Resident (everyone else, the standard international tourist band): USD 80 per adult, USD 40 per child.

Do the math on that spread. A non-resident adult pays roughly ten times what an East African citizen pays for the exact same gate, the exact same lions, the exact same Saturday morning. There's a defensible logic buried in that. Foreign visitors can absorb more, and channelling their spending into conservation funding is not, on its face, unreasonable. But look at what the structure also does. It builds a park whose everyday operating model depends on international demand being strong, predictable, and growing.

And that citizen rate hasn't stayed still either. Until October 2025, Nairobi National Park had been sitting at KES 430 for a citizen adult, a figure that had barely moved in nearly two decades, according to the park's own published fee history. The jump to KES 1,000 more than doubled it overnight. For the family from Rongai, that is the difference between "we can just about manage this" and "let's push it to next year."

Chasing the revenue

So where does all this money actually go, and how much has KWS actually been collecting?

Follow the trail and a clear shape emerges: park fees have become the engine, not a side income. KWS now draws around 90 percent of its internal revenue from tourism and conservation fees. By late 2025, the agency was framing this as a turnaround story: visitor numbers up from 2.36 million in 2022 to 3.38

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million in 2025, a 43 percent rise, with domestic tourism now accounting for almost 70 percent of all visitors, and annual revenue "nearly doubled," in the agency's own words, from about Sh4 billion to Sh7.98 billion.

Where is that money supposed to go? On paper, into exactly the things a park needs to survive: anti-poaching patrols, ranger recruitment, habitat restoration, wildlife translocation, and infrastructure. Those are not cosmetic line items, this is real conservation work, and it costs real money. But the agency has also been blunt about the scale of the gap it's trying to close, citing an annual shortfall in the order of Sh12 billion against what it says it actually needs to fully meet its mandate. The fee overhaul that briefly took effect in October 2025 was explicitly built to try to close that gap.

KWS's own Regulatory Impact Statement for the fee overhaul puts a more precise figure on that gap: a modelled annual shortfall of roughly KES 10 billion, calculated separately from the roughly Sh12 billion figure the agency has cited in press statements, which suggests the exact size of “the gap” moves depending on which KWS document is doing the citing. The same statement breaks the projected revenue down park by park, and Nairobi National Park is not a minor line item: it is projected to generate roughly 16 percent of total park-fee revenue nationally, second only to Amboseli's 25 percent, across a system of more than 30 gazetted parks and reserves. A 117 square kilometre park wedged against a capital city, generating close to one shilling in every six KWS expects to collect nationwide, is not a rounding error in this story. It is close to the second largest single revenue line in the entire system.

That is the real tension sitting underneath every number here. The conservation need is not manufactured, Kenya's parks genuinely are underfunded relative to what they're being asked to protect. But the instrument being used to close that gap is a fee wall that citizens feel first, hardest, and closest to home.

The fight over who decides the price

None of this happened quietly. If you've followed Kenyan news over the past two years, you've probably seen some version of this story: KWS proposes a fee hike, and the courts step in.

It started in November 2023, when tourism operators along the Kenyan coast filed a constitutional petition against a new conservation fee schedule, arguing KWS hadn't properly consulted the public before setting it. The High Court in Malindi granted three separate injunctions in the space of a month that December, each time halting KWS's attempt to push the new rates through. A proposal that would have pushed the Nairobi National Park citizen rate as high as KES 2,000 during that period never survived that legal gauntlet.

Then, in September 2025, KWS came back with a bigger, more comprehensive overhaul, the first full review of its fee structure in roughly eighteen years, and it took effect on 1 October 2025. It lasted one day. On 2 October, the Kenya Tourism Federation went to the Milimani High Court and won a conservatory order suspending the new fees, arguing KWS had given the industry only two days' notice despite stakeholders having asked for a January 2026 start date to protect already-booked tour packages. The court restrained KWS from enforcing the new fees "until proper public participation, stakeholder consultation, and fair administrative process is conducted." Business Daily reported the

ruling as a direct financial blow to an agency that had built a Sh16.58-billion 2028 revenue target around exactly this fee schedule.

Notice something about who was in that courtroom. It wasn't citizens' groups. It wasn't a coalition of Nairobi residents from Rongai, Kitengela, or Kibera arguing that KES 1,000 makes the park unreachable for ordinary families. It was the tourism industry, defending the predictability of its booking pipeline for foreign clients. The most visible, court-tested resistance to KWS's pricing power has come from the businesses that profit from selling this park to the world, not from the people who live beside it.

Whose success is this, exactly?

Step back, and a pattern comes into focus that the raw numbers can't quite say out loud on their own.

Every framing KWS uses to describe its own progress is a tourism-industry framing: visitor arrivals up, revenue up, Kenya positioned against Tanzania's Serengeti and South Africa's Kruger. Nairobi National Park is marketed abroad, repeatedly, deliberately, as "the world's only wildlife capital," an "urban safari" product built for exactly the kind of visitor who wants big-five wildlife squeezed into a layover between flights or a half-day break from a conference downtown. That branding isn't accidental. It's strategy.

None of that is inherently wrong. Tourism revenue funds real conservation. A park that earns its keep is, in some sense, a park more likely to survive the next funding crisis. But "success," in this framing, is measured almost entirely in foreign visitor dollars and arrival numbers, not in how many Nairobi families walked through the gate last year, not in how many young people from Kayole or Dandora have ever seen a wild lion, not in whether the park still feels like it belongs to the city around it rather than to the travel industry that sells it.

Research on Kenya's parks has long pointed to a colonial-era exclusion logic baked into how these spaces were originally set up: local communities marginalised from decision-making around the very land their lives were shaped by. This pricing structure isn't a new problem. It's an old one wearing new tiers.

This essay has been circling an honest tension the whole time: conservation genuinely needs the money. Rangers need salaries. Anti-poaching units need equipment. Habitat corridors need protecting from the same urban sprawl that makes this park so remarkable in the first place. None of that is free, and pretending otherwise helps no one, least of all the wildlife.

The same Regulatory Impact Statement also models how different categories of visitor are expected to respond to the new prices, and the assumptions built into that model are themselves a kind of confession. KWS's own elasticity estimates treat non-resident foreign tourists as relatively price-inelastic, at around -0.1, meaning a large increase in the non-resident rate is modelled to barely dent demand. Citizens and residents are modelled very differently, at an elasticity closer to -0.5, meaning Kenyan visitors are expected to be roughly five times more sensitive to the same kind of price increase. In plain terms, the agency that designed this fee structure built it on the explicit, modelled expectation that foreign visitors will absorb a price hike without much change in behaviour, while Kenyan citizens will visit less. That is not a hidden side effect of the pricing tiers. It is the plan working as modelled.

But the way a park raises that money is never neutral. A four-tier fee wall that separates citizen from resident from African visitor from international tourist is also, quietly, answering a much bigger question

before any of us gets a say in it: whose relationship with this park is treated as central, and whose is treated as a rounding error in a revenue model built for someone else's itinerary.

What Nairobi residents themselves say

None of the numbers above needed to stay abstract for long. A short questionnaire circulated to Nairobi residents ahead of this essay's final edit asked, plainly, what stands between them and the gate. The answers lined up with the fee schedule laid out above almost exactly.

"It feels more geared towards tourists than Nairobi residents," one fully anonymous respondent wrote, and a second, separate respondent used almost the identical phrase, answering the same question. Entry fees and transport costs were, by a wide margin, the two reasons respondents gave most often for not returning, or not visiting at all, exactly the two costs this essay has spent several sections adding up.

Some had concrete fixes in mind rather than just complaints. "Creation of more awareness for Nairobi residents to know. Breakdown of costs and clear instructions on how to get tickets. Discount fees for school children and other adults," one respondent suggested. Nearly every respondent who answered said free or subsidised entry would make them more likely to visit, several of them "definitely" so.

None of this contradicts the essay's numbers. It confirms them, in the words of the people the fee schedule is actually pricing out.

A family that finally went, and a guide's view from the gate

Some of this abstraction resolved into a single Saturday in September 2026, when this project organised a community game drive for children from Pipeline estate and Kangundo. One of the parents who joined, Dennis, told us he had last set foot in Nairobi National Park in 1993, as a boy, brought by his own father, and had never once brought his own children before this trip. He noticed how much the park's infrastructure had changed since then, particularly the signage, and said the best moment of the day was watching zebras cross a river while a crocodile nearly caught one. He left planning a return visit before December, and talking, half-joking, about becoming a kind of park ambassador among the parents he knows. His story is not a statistic. It is what this essay's numbers actually look like from inside one household: not indifference to the park, but a gap between wanting to go and getting around to affording it, closed, in his case, only because someone else organised and funded the trip.

The same day, one of the park's own tour guides, John, offered a different diagnosis of the same gap. Asked about pricing, he called KWS's current fee structure basically reasonable, and argued the fix isn't a lower citizen rate across the board but free entry for children specifically, on the theory that a family can realistically save toward a visit over a few months if it wants to. That push is worth putting next to what KWS already does: children aged 5 to 17 already pay half the adult rate in every visitor category, KES 500 rather than KES 1,000 for an East African citizen, and children under 5 are exempt entirely. John's suggestion, in other words, is not asking KWS to invent a children's rate from nothing. It is asking the agency to go from a 50 percent discount to a full waiver for everyone under eighteen, specifically to pull more domestic families through the gate. He also estimated that roughly 70 percent of the park's visitors on any given day come from Europe or elsewhere in the West, against 30 percent local, though he was quick to add that the local share has been growing. Both things can be true at once: a park whose day-to-day economics still run on a majority-foreign visitor base, and a guide who genuinely

believes the barrier for locals is more about savings habits than sticker price. Neither view cancels the other. Both belong in the record.

So what do we actually do with that?

This isn't a call to scrap park fees, or to pretend Kenya's conservation agency can run on goodwill alone. It's a call to notice what "success" is currently being measured by, and to start asking, loudly and often, for a different scoreboard. If you want to be part of that:

- Visit the park yourself, even if it takes planning. Every citizen visit is a small but real vote for domestic access mattering in KWS's own visitor statistics.
- Ask where NNP's own revenue goes, not just KWS's national total. A park generating over a billion shillings a year deserves a transparent, published account of what stays local.
- Follow the court case. The Kenya Tourism Federation's petition is still shaping whether the 2025 fee structure survives in its current form, and its outcome will set the template for the next hike, and the one after that.
- Push for a citizens'/residents' seat at the table, not just industry stakeholders, whenever KWS runs its next public participation process on fees.
- Talk about this with people who've never visited, especially if they live nearby. A lot of the barrier here is quiet and assumed, not loudly stated. Naming it out loud is the first step to challenging it.

Nairobi National Park is not going anywhere, not yet, anyway, and that's exactly why this matters now, while the pricing logic is still being actively fought over in a Milimani courtroom rather than settled for another two decades. Whose park is it? Right now, the fee schedule is answering that question for us, one gate receipt at a time. It's worth deciding, together, whether we agree with the answer it's giving.

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8. Questionnaires and Interviews

Essay 2: The Animals Who Are Never Just Watched

Picture this. It is just after dawn inside Nairobi National Park. A helicopter is circling low over Rhino Valley, and on the ground below, a team of Kenya Wildlife Service veterinarians and rangers is waiting, dart guns ready, for a signal. Somewhere in the grass ahead of them is a black rhino, one of three being prepared that morning for a journey north to Loisaba Conservancy, a wild place her species has not called home in fifty years.

The dart finds its mark. The drug takes hold. And then something goes wrong that nobody planned for: the rhino, disoriented and stumbling under sedation, staggers into a river inside the park.

It takes more than five KWS vets to pull her out.

That single image, a sedated rhino half submerged in water while a team of professionals fights to save her, is as honest a place as any to start this essay. Because everything that makes Nairobi National Park work as a conservation success story also makes it a place where wild animals are handled, moved, drugged, and redirected with a frequency and intimacy that would be unthinkable in a place like the Serengeti or Tsavo. This is not incidental to the park's identity. It is the park's identity. Nairobi National Park does not just contain wildlife. It manages it, continuously, by hand.

So this essay asks a harder question than "is this cruel" or "is this necessary." It asks: what does it actually cost an animal to be made visible, countable, and safe, in a landscape built for exactly that purpose?

A park too small to leave anything to chance

To understand why Nairobi National Park's animals get this much hands on attention, you have to understand what a strange piece of geography this park actually is.

It covers just 117 square kilometres, a little more than a tenth the size of the Maasai Mara. It is fenced on three sides. The fourth side, the southern boundary, opens onto the Kitengela plains, a wildlife dispersal corridor that has been steadily swallowed by fences, farms, and new housing developments as Nairobi's population has grown. In other words, this is a park with almost nowhere for its animals to go when things get crowded, and less room every year for the corridor that used to relieve that pressure.

Rhinos illustrate the problem most clearly. Nairobi National Park had zero rhinos until 1996, when KWS declared it a sanctuary and began introducing animals as part of a nationwide strategy to rebuild a population that had collapsed from roughly 20,000 individuals nationally in the 1970s to under 400 by the mid 1980s, almost entirely due to poaching. The introduction worked, perhaps too well. By mid 2025, KWS Director General Erustus Kanga put the population at around 175 rhinos, well above what he says the park can ecologically support. Black rhinos are solitary and fiercely territorial. Crowd them, and males fight, sometimes fatally. Crowd them further, and their birth rates fall, because the animals

themselves respond physiologically to overcrowding by suppressing reproduction. "We are suffering because of our success," Kanga has said.

This is not just a field director's impression. Kenya's Black Rhino Recovery and Action Plan 2022-2026, the national strategy document governing how KWS manages the species, formally lists Nairobi National Park among six black rhino areas nationally that sit above their ecological carrying capacity, the technical designation that triggers exactly the kind of translocation programme described below. The plan treats this as a success condition requiring active management, not a crisis: Kenya's black rhino population has grown for three decades straight, and overcrowding at the top end of that growth curve is the kind of problem a species that nearly went extinct is fortunate to have. But it still has to be managed, animal by animal, at real risk, as the next translocation shows.

Lions face a related but different version of the same trap. The park's lion population roams a territory a fraction of the size a wild lion pride would naturally claim, lions can range across more than 400 square kilometres in an unfenced system; Nairobi National Park gives them 117, shared with rhinos, buffalo, and a fenceline pressed hard against one of Africa's fastest growing cities. Lions leave, drawn out by prey shortages or old migratory instincts that predate the city around them. When they leave, they meet livestock, and sometimes people, and the encounter rarely ends well for anyone involved, least of all the lion.

This is the honest starting point for everything that follows. Nairobi National Park's wildlife management is not an optional layer of intervention added on top of a naturally functioning ecosystem. It is what keeps a naturally undersized, overcrowded, edge dominated system from tearing itself apart.

What it actually takes to move a wild animal

So what does "management" mean in practice? It means darting, immobilising, crating, trucking, and releasing an animal that has no way of understanding why any of this is happening to it.

The 2024 translocation of 21 black rhinos from Nairobi National Park and two conservancies to Loisaba, described by KWS as its most significant rhino relocation to date, gives a clear picture of what the procedure actually involves. A helicopter locates and herds the target animal. A veterinarian darts it from the air or the ground with an immobilising drug. Once sedated, the rhino is blindfolded and earplugged to reduce stress, then physically manoeuvred into a purpose built steel crate for the journey, sometimes days long, to its release site. The Loisaba operation took eighteen days from first capture to final release, executed under the IUCN's international translocation guidelines and Kenya's own 2019 immobilisation protocol, a protocol that exists precisely because this process has gone wrong before, and badly.

In June 2018, KWS moved eleven black rhinos, several of them from Nairobi National Park, to a newly fenced sanctuary at Tsavo East, in what was meant to be a routine, well resourced translocation. Within weeks, the operation had become, in the words of conservationist Paula Kahumbu, "a complete disaster." Ten of the eleven rhinos died from what an official inquiry called multiple stress syndrome, intensified by salt poisoning after the animals drank from a borehole whose water was far saltier than anything they were used to. The eleventh, weakened by the same ordeal, was attacked by lions that had never encountered a rhino in their lives and died soon after. Kenya's wildlife ministry called the death toll "unprecedented," noting that of 149 rhinos translocated nationally between 2005 and 2017, only

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eight had died in the process. In one operation, the country lost more black rhinos than poachers had killed in the two previous years combined.

That contrast, roughly five percent mortality across well over a decade of translocations, followed by a single catastrophic operation with over ninety percent mortality, is the clearest illustration available of the documented risk this essay's brief asks about. The underlying physiological danger even has a name: capture myopathy, in which the extreme stress of capture triggers a cascade of muscle breakdown, kidney failure, and death that can unfold anywhere from minutes to weeks after the animal was darted. With careful protocol, published research suggests the incidence of fatal capture myopathy can be pushed below two percent. Without that care, Tsavo shows exactly how catastrophic the alternative looks.

None of this is offered to suggest that translocation is reckless or that KWS's vets are careless. The opposite argument is at least as strong: without translocation and sedation as tools, Nairobi National Park's rhino population would still be at zero, not 175. But the mortality numbers are real, and an essay that only tells the triumphant version of this story is not being honest about what saving them has occasionally cost.

Collars, not cages, but still not a choice

Lion management looks gentler on paper, mostly because it rarely ends in death. But it raises its own, quieter version of the same ethical question.

Since 2017, KWS has fitted a rolling number of Nairobi National Park's lions with satellite GPS collars, work initially supported by the International Fund for Animal Welfare. The logic is straightforward and, on its own terms, humane. A collared lion's location updates in near real time. When that location starts drifting toward the park's edge, rangers can move to intercept before the lion reaches a boma full of livestock, rather than after, a real difference, given that two male lions had been shot dead by rangers in two days the previous year, before any early warning system existed.

A 2018 peer reviewed study in PLOS ONE, led by researcher Francis Lesilau with KWS and Leiden University, examined a decade of livestock predation records around the park's southern boundary and found that flashing LED lights installed on livestock enclosures, an idea that originated with an eleven-year-old Maasai boy named Richard Turere, defending his family's herd, reduced nighttime lion attacks by a wide margin. But the study found something less comfortable underneath its positive headline: once flashlights made a boma harder to raid at night, attacks did not stop. They shifted, both to daylight hours and toward bomas that had not yet installed lights. Every intervention here, from flashlights to collars, is solving one version of the conflict while quietly displacing another version of it somewhere else along the fence line.

Collaring itself is not risk free either, even if the risk is smaller and less visible than a botched rhino translocation. It still requires darting a fully grown lion, and it still means a wild predator spends the rest of its life carrying hardware it never asked to wear, feeding a data stream to an authority it has no way of understanding, let alone consenting to.

Whose consent does conservation actually assume

This is the crux the whole essay has been circling. Every rhino translocation, every lion collar, every dart fired from a helicopter rests on a decision made entirely on the animal's behalf, by people who are certain they know what is good for it.

In one sense, that is simply what conservation is, and always has been. Wild animals cannot consent to being managed any more than a coral reef can consent to being reseeded. If the alternative to intervention is a shrinking, inbred, locally extinct population, then the absence of consent starts to look less like an ethical violation and more like an unavoidable feature of trying to save something at all. Take away the chain of unconsented interventions and there is very likely no rhino population in this park to protect at all.

But naming that trade off honestly still matters, because it is a trade off, not a neutral fact of nature. A collared lion is being tracked for reasons that serve human safety and human livestock every bit as much as they serve the lion's own survival. A translocated rhino is being moved because a population that KWS itself helped engineer into existence has now outgrown the fence line that same agency built around it. The rhino did not create the overcrowding problem. Humans did. The animal bears the physical risk, the sedation, the crate, the journey, for a crisis that was never of its own making.

Held side by side, both of those things are true at once. This management keeps the population alive. And it is still, every single time, an imposition on an animal that never asked to be part of anyone's conservation strategy.

Whose sighting is this, really

There's one more layer worth being honest about: how much of this intensive, expensive, physically risky management is really about the animal's survival, and how much of it is about keeping the sightings reliable for the people paying to see them.

The two goals overlap so thoroughly at Nairobi National Park that they are almost impossible to fully separate, and that overlap is itself worth sitting with rather than resolving too quickly. A healthy, growing, well monitored rhino population is good for the rhino. It is also, unmistakably, the park's single strongest tourism asset, the reason KWS markets Nairobi National Park internationally as one of Africa's most reliable rhino sighting destinations, the reason a half day urban safari can promise visitors an encounter that would take days of searching in a larger, wilder park. Lions collared and steered away from conflict zones are lions less likely to be shot by a ranger protecting a homestead. They are also lions more likely to still be alive, findable, and photogenic for the next morning's game drive.

None of that makes the conservation effort insincere. Rangers who spend eighteen days in the field moving eleven rhinos are not doing it for a tourism brochure. But the funding models behind that work sit inside a system where a park that stops delivering reliable, marketable sightings is a park that struggles to fund the very protection its animals depend on. The management exists for the animal. The animal's visibility funds the management. It is a closed loop, and pretending it is not would be its own kind of dishonesty.

So where does that leave us? Maybe here: the next time you see a photograph of a rhino grazing against Nairobi's skyline, or a lion collar catching the light in a safari video, it is worth remembering what is

actually underneath that image. A helicopter. A dart gun. A team of vets who have, more than once, pulled a sedated animal out of a river with their bare hands because the alternative was letting it drown. A protocol rewritten in blood after eleven rhinos were killed by our best intentions in 2018. None of that cancels out the real, measurable success this park represents. It just means the success was never free, and the ones who paid for it most directly were never asked.

What this means for how we watch

This isn't a call to stop visiting the park, or to treat every collar and translocation as an act of cruelty. It's a call to watch with fuller eyes.

- Ask what "protected" actually costs, not just what it delivers. A thriving rhino population and a translocation with a real mortality risk are not contradictory facts. They are the same fact, told honestly.
- Look past the sighting to the system that produced it. A collared lion or a notched rhino ear is not a flaw in the photograph. It is the photograph's true subject, if you know how to read it.
- Support the protocols, not just the outcomes. Holding KWS to the standards written after Tsavo, and asking questions when translocations happen quickly or quietly, is part of what keeps the next operation from becoming the next disaster.
- Talk about the 2018 disaster, not just the recovery story. Conservation narratives tend to keep the triumphant chapters and quietly drop the disastrous ones. A fuller, more honest story serves the animals better than a flattering one.
- Notice the loop between funding and visibility, and ask what happens to the animals who are hardest to see, and therefore hardest to fund.

Nairobi National Park's rhinos and lions are among the most intensively managed wild animals on the continent. That is not an accusation. It is simply what it takes to keep a population like this alive inside a fence this small, beside a city this big. But intensively managed is not the same as freely living, and this series has never been interested in pretending those two things are the same thing wearing different names. The animals in this park are never just watched. They are tracked, sedated, and moved, over and over, by people who love them and are trying, imperfectly, to keep them here at all.

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Essay 3: Rangers, Guides, and the Labour Behind the Postcard

It is 4am inside the KWS Law Enforcement Academy at Manyani, and a group of recruits is already running. Ninety minutes of it, in the dark, before the day's real training even starts. By the time the sun is up they will have moved through drills in bush craft, unarmed combat, weapons handling, and ecosystem management, and by midnight they will finally be allowed to sleep, for roughly three hours, before it begins again. One former trainee described the whole experience simply as being "changed from a civilian to a ranger." Another instructor at the academy put it more plainly still: this, he said, is one of the toughest training grounds in the country.

That is the beginning of the story this essay wants to tell. Not the lion. Not the tourist. The person standing between them, on a wage most tourists paying for the encounter will never think to ask about.

Nairobi National Park, and the wider "urban safari" economy built around it, runs on labour that almost never appears in the photograph. Somebody drove the sedation team to the darted rhino. Somebody scanned the QR code at the gate at six in the morning. Somebody has been walking this park on foot since before dawn, in 25 separate patrol blocks, checking that every one of Nairobi's rhinos is alive and accounted for. This essay is about them: what they are paid, what they risk, what they are trained to do, and how thin a line separates their working conditions from the polished, high value tourism product their labour makes possible.

What the job actually looks like

Start with the ranger, because the ranger is the clearest case.

A Kenya Wildlife Service ranger's basic mandate is security. Patrols, day and night, on foot and by vehicle, inside a park that borders one of Africa's fastest growing cities on one side and open wilderness on the other. At Nairobi National Park specifically, that means a dedicated Rhino Monitoring and Protection Unit, roughly 79 rangers by KWS's own count, distributed across 25 monitoring blocks, tasked with locating and physically verifying the condition of every rhino in the park every day, rain or shine. As one KWS profile of the unit put it, a ranger waking up in the morning does not know where the rhinos currently are. They are simply expected to go and find them anyway.

Beyond routine patrol, rangers are also the people who show up when something goes wrong: a lion that has wandered past the fence line into Karen or Rongai, a buffalo that has broken through into community land, a poacher's snare discovered mid patrol. This is not passive observation. It is active, physical, occasionally armed intervention, carried out by a workforce trained explicitly for it.

That training is not a formality. Since 1990, KWS has run its Law Enforcement Academy at Manyani, inside Tsavo West National Park. New KWS cadets go through nine months of paramilitary training

there. Rangers and community conservancy scouts go through a shorter but still demanding three month course covering paramilitary procedure, ecosystem management, human wildlife conflict response, capture technique, and weapons handling. The academy trained a record 1,274 rangers in a single cohort as recently as December 2024, and continues to draw trainees from as far as Somalia and South Sudan. This is, by any reasonable definition, paramilitary labour. The people doing it are asked to think and act like soldiers protecting a border, because in a very real sense, that is what the park's edge has become.

What that labour is actually worth on paper

So what does a job like that pay?

Here the picture gets murkier, and it is worth saying so plainly rather than pretending otherwise. KWS does not publish an easily accessible, current salary schedule for public review, and the secondary sources available online disagree with each other by a wide margin. What follows should be read as a range drawn from imperfect sources, not a confirmed figure, and any ranger, union representative, or KWS officer able to correct or sharpen it would be doing this series a real service.

With that caveat: multiple secondary sources converge loosely around a starting range of roughly KES 25,000 to 50,000 a month for a rank and file park ranger, with cadet officers, who enter as university graduates, starting somewhat higher. For scale, Kenya's own legally mandated minimum wage for a general domestic worker in a major city stood at roughly KES 16,114 a month as of early 2026. A KWS ranger's starting salary, on the low end of the ranges reported here, sits only modestly above that floor, for a job that requires nine months of paramilitary training and routinely involves darted animals, armed poachers, and wild predators at close range.

That range now has at least one direct confirmation from inside KWS itself. In a questionnaire answered as part of this series' fieldwork, Peter (not their real name), who works in a support role at Nairobi National Park and has been with the agency for one to five years, reported a monthly pay bracket of KES 25,000 to 50,000, exactly the low end of the range this essay had pieced together from secondary sources alone. Asked what would most improve his working conditions, his answer was specific rather than abstract: monthly stipends, on top of base pay. Asked whether he had personally experienced significant risk or threat in the course of his work, he said no, a reminder that not every KWS role carries the same exposure a Rhino Monitoring and Protection Unit ranger does, even inside the same institution and the same pay bracket. Asked where Nairobi National Park's revenue actually goes, he pointed to habitat management, wildlife translocation, community programmes, and administrative costs, the same categories KWS cites publicly, and said he was not aware of any internal discussion of reduced or subsidised access for Nairobi residents, the exact gap Essay 1 raises.

The risk side of that equation is easier to document, because it tends to make the news in a way payslips do not. KWS's own 2013 annual report recorded three rangers killed in the line of duty that year alone. Kenya has continued to lose officers since: KWS Assistant Warden Bajila Obed Kofa was shot dead in his car in 2021 after dropping his daughter at school, one of two senior KWS officers killed that year in what conservation groups described as targeted attacks tied to rhino poaching syndicates. Continent wide, the Game Rangers' Association of Africa recorded at least 384 ranger deaths across the continent between 2012 and 2020. This is not only a story of external threat, either, in January 2026, a KWS ranger in Kwale shot and killed a police officer and then himself, in a dispute that began over two goats, a

reminder that a workforce carrying military grade weapons under sustained stress needs institutional support this series found little visible evidence of.

What the tourism side of the same encounter pays and charges

Now put the ranger's pay slip next to the price of the experience their labour makes possible.

A private half day Nairobi National Park safari, the kind sold to international visitors as a quick, convenient wildlife fix squeezed between flights or meetings, typically runs from around 200 US dollars total for a single guest down to roughly 50 to 65 dollars per person once a group of six to eight is sharing the vehicle, before park entry fees are even added. An Airbnb Experience listing for a Nairobi National Park safari tour, hosted independently rather than through a large agency, was priced starting from 100 US dollars per guest at the time of research.

Where does that money actually land? A meaningful share goes to vehicle costs, fuel, and the operator's margin, but a real portion is meant to compensate the guide directly, and here the numbers, again drawn from imperfect secondary sourcing, suggest a workforce doing considerably better than a KWS ranger, though still leaning heavily on tips to close the gap. One long running Kenya tourism forum thread put a salaried top tier driver guide's monthly base pay at around KES 35,000, with tips from clients, often suggested at 10 to 30 US dollars per client per day on a private safari, making up what can be a very large share of actual annual earnings. Freelance and informally employed guides working outside any agency structure, along with the informal photographers who work Nairobi's gate areas offering instant printed souvenir photos to visitors, sit further down that ladder still, entirely dependent on daily footfall and tips, with no salary floor beneath them at all.

Gate and ticketing staff sit in a similarly under documented position. Since KWS moved its ticketing fully onto the eCitizen digital platform, much of the transactional work that used to require a person physically handling cash at a gate booth has shifted toward the KWSPay portal itself. What remains, human staff scanning QR codes, verifying identification documents, managing the flow of vehicles, is real, ongoing labour, but it is largely invisible in every account of what makes the "urban safari" work, including, it must be said, this series so far. This essay found no reliable published figure for what a KWS gate or ticketing clerk specifically earns, which is itself a small data point about whose labour tends to get counted and whose does not.

The missing character in every wildlife tourism story

Step back, and a pattern becomes visible that runs through nearly every popular account of a place like Nairobi National Park, including glossy magazine features, KWS's own promotional material, and, if this series is honest with itself, the first two essays in it.

The animal is the subject. The tourist is the audience. Almost every narrative structure available for talking about wildlife tourism puts those two figures at the centre and leaves everyone else as scenery: a uniformed extra standing at the edge of the frame, present but unnamed, there to make the encounter feel safe and authentic rather than to be understood as a person with a wage, a training history, and a level of occupational risk worth asking about.

That omission is not neutral. It has a direct effect on how the labour gets valued, because a workforce nobody is asked to think about is a workforce nobody is pressured to pay better. The ranger doing the

physically dangerous, professionally demanding work of finding and protecting a rhino population earns, by the most consistent estimates available, somewhere in the range of a junior clerk's salary. The guide translating that protected animal into a marketable half day experience for a paying foreign visitor can, at the upper end of the trade, earn several times that. Both of them are doing something real and skilled. Only one of them is standing directly between a poacher and an endangered species for a wage that barely clears the country's own minimum threshold for domestic labour.

None of this is to suggest that guides are overpaid, many of them are themselves scraping by on inconsistent, tip dependent income with no safety net between bookings. It is to say that the entire chain, ranger, capture team vet, guide, gate clerk, informal photographer, is unevenly compensated relative to both its risk and its role in producing the experience visitors are paying for, and that unevenness is very hard to see if you never ask the question in the first place.

What fair labour would actually require

This series has spent two essays asking who a park is for and what conservation costs an animal. This one closes by asking what it would take to make the labour underneath both of those questions fair, not as a vague aspiration, but as something concrete enough to actually push for.

- Publish the pay scale. KWS operates as a state corporation whose fee revenue is public knowledge in granular detail. Its ranger salary structure should be equally public, verifiable, and easy for a journalist, researcher, or ranger's family member to find without relying on scattered, contradictory secondary sources the way this essay had to.
- Fund hazard pay that matches documented risk. A workforce trained for nine months in paramilitary procedure, armed, and statistically exposed to homicide risk on the job deserves compensation structured around that reality, not around a generic civil service grade.
- Build real mental health support into the ranger pipeline. Recent, disturbing cases inside KWS itself point to a workforce absorbing sustained psychological strain with little visible institutional response. That gap is a labour issue as much as a security one.
- Ask tour operators to disclose what guides actually take home. A visitor paying 100 or 200 US dollars for a half day safari has no easy way to know what share of that reaches the guide beside them versus the agency or the platform.
- Stop leaving gate staff, drivers, and informal photographers out of the story. Any account of "who manages this encounter" that stops at rangers and guides is still an incomplete one.

The rhino in the photograph was found, tracked, and kept alive by someone earning a fraction of what the photograph itself is worth to sell. The lion collared to keep it safe from a Nairobi suburb was darted by a team whose own safety net is thinner than most of the tourists paying to see the result. An ethical wildlife tourism frame, the kind this series keeps reaching for, cannot only ask what we owe the animals. It has to ask, with the same seriousness, what we owe the people standing quietly at the edge of every good photograph, doing the work that makes the postcard possible.

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Essay 4: South of the Fence

Drive south from Nairobi National Park's open boundary and, within a few kilometres, you will start to see it. Not wilderness. Fences. Rolls of new wire strung between wooden posts, cutting a plain that used to run open all the way to the horizon into a checkerboard of quarter-acre and half-acre plots. Some plots already have a house on them, with a corrugated iron roof catching the light. Others just have a for-sale sign, hand-painted, leaning at an angle in the grass. Somewhere between the two, on land that still remembers what it was, a herd of wildebeest picks its way along what used to be a migration route and is now a gap between two properties.

This is Kitengela. And what is happening here, quietly, plot by plot, is arguably the single biggest threat to Nairobi National Park's long-term survival, bigger than any fee dispute, bigger than any single translocation. It is also a story this series has to tell honestly, because the people paying the highest price for keeping this corridor open are not the tourists who fly in for a half-day safari, and they are not the KWS rangers either. They are the Kaputiei Maasai families who have lived on this land for generations, and who are now being asked, implicitly and often without being asked at all, to keep subsidising a national park's ecology with their own land, for free.

A park that cannot survive on its own footprint

Start with a fact that sounds almost absurd until you sit with it: Nairobi National Park, at 117 square kilometres, is too small to sustain its own wildlife.

The park is fenced on its northern, eastern, and western boundaries, the sides that face Nairobi's built-up city. But its southern boundary, along the Mbagathi and Empakasi rivers, has always been left open, deliberately, because the ecology only works if it stays that way. During the wet season, the park's grazing herbivores move south out of the park entirely, into the Kitengela plains and the wider Athi-Kaputiei ecosystem, an area roughly twenty times the size of the park itself. At any given time, researchers at the International Livestock Research Institute have estimated that 70 to 80 percent of the animals associated with Nairobi National Park are actually outside its boundary, on private Maasai land, not park land at all.

This is not a design flaw. It is how the ecosystem was always meant to function, going back long before the park existed in its current fenced form. Nairobi National Park was gazetted in 1946, but the

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Kitengela plains to its south were never formally protected alongside it, because in 1946 nobody needed to protect them. The Kaputiei Maasai had lived there for generations as pastoralists, and their cattle, sheep, and goats shared the same open grassland with the same wildlife, in a rough, working balance that asked nothing of anyone in writing. The land did not need a legal designation to keep functioning as a wildlife dispersal area. It just needed to stay open.

It is not staying open, and the reasons why are worth sitting with slowly, because they are not the reasons a casual retelling usually offers. This is not a story about wildlife versus people, or tradition versus modernity. It is a story about what happens when a fifty-year ecological arrangement runs headlong into a completely different, much faster-moving economic logic, and nobody built a bridge between the two before the second one arrived.

Why the land is being sold, fence by fence

The story of why traces back to a single administrative decision. In 1988, the Kitengela Group Ranch, held collectively by 215 Maasai members since the 1970s, was formally subdivided into individual plots of about 215 acres each. On paper, that gave families clear, legally defensible ownership of their own land for the first time. In practice, it also gave them something else: the ability to sell.

And sell they have, for reasons that have very little to do with wildlife and everything to do with the economics of living next to one of Africa's fastest-growing cities. Nairobi's population boom has driven land prices in Kitengela into a different universe from where they sat even twenty years ago. Families facing school fees, medical bills, or the aftermath of a bad drought have a genuinely rational reason to sell a portion of land whose market value has soared past its value as grazing. Every new arrival brings a house, a plot boundary, and, more often than not, a fence.

Fences are the part that actually breaks the ecosystem. A subdivided plot with no fence still lets wildlife pass. A subdivided plot with a fence does not, and fencing has become close to automatic as land changes hands, both to clearly mark new ownership and, quite explicitly in many cases, to keep wildlife out, since a herd of zebra or a pride of lions moving through a smallholding is now a liability to whoever owns it, not a shared resource the way it was under communal tenure. The consequences, tracked by researchers over more than two decades now, are stark: wildlife populations in the Kitengela ecosystem have dropped by more than 70 percent over roughly 25 years, according to research led by the International Livestock Research Institute's Reto-o-Reto policy programme. Household-level surveys conducted through 2024 and 2025 continue to document the same underlying drivers: human population growth, infrastructure expansion, and land subdivision, disrupting the seasonal movement of wildebeest and zebra between the park and the plains.

Infrastructure has compounded the pressure rather than relieved it. The Standard Gauge Railway was originally proposed to cut directly across Nairobi National Park; civil society legal challenges forced a rerouting onto an elevated bridge engineered specifically with wildlife movement in mind. Kenya Railways and the line's operator point to that engineering, sound-absorption panels, an average bridge height well above ground level, as evidence the railway has had minimal ecological impact. Independent researchers studying land cover change along the corridor have found something less reassuring than the operator's own account: measurable declines in migratory wildlife populations correlated with the settlement and infrastructure growth the railway has helped accelerate along its route, with more than

half of surveyed residents in affected areas reporting the loss of migration routes and dispersal land as a direct consequence.

An attempt at a fix, and its limits

None of this went unnoticed by the people living through it, and by the year 2000, a genuinely inventive attempt at a solution was already underway. Friends of Nairobi National Park, together with the Kenya Wildlife Service, launched the Wildlife Conservation Lease Programme, sometimes called the Kitengela land lease programme.

The idea was straightforward: if Maasai landowners were bearing the ecological cost of keeping their land open for wildlife, they should be paid for that service directly, the same way any other landholder providing a resource might expect to be. The original rate, set in 2000, was KES 300 per acre per year, small, but for households managing land in fragments of a few hundred acres, it added up to real, dependable cash in a region where income had otherwise become almost entirely tied to unpredictable livestock markets and rainfall. The programme grew quickly by demand, expanding from an initial pilot to roughly 2,708 acres by January 2001, with over 8,000 additional acres already on a waiting list by that April, evidence that landowners themselves saw real value in the trade. Funding came from an unusually broad coalition, including the Global Environment Facility, the World Bank, The Nature Conservancy, and KWS itself, which began contributing an annual sum from 2007 onward.

The results, where documented, are genuinely encouraging: wildebeest numbers in leased areas rose from roughly 10,000 in 2012 to approximately 38,000 in more recent counts, alongside real benefits for participating families, cash income that buffered households against drought-driven poverty, contributions toward school fees, and a meaningful boost, participants reported, to the financial standing of women in enrolled households, since lease payments were sometimes the most direct and reliable income many of them controlled.

But look closely at the numbers, and the limits of this solution become just as clear as its promise. Four US dollars an acre a year, the rate the programme reached in its more mature phase, is not, and was never going to be, competitive with what that same acre is worth sold outright as urbanising Nairobi presses south. Academic analysis of the scheme has confirmed the underlying imbalance directly: private landholders in Kitengela incur most of the real cost of keeping the dispersal corridor open, while receiving essentially none of the tourism revenue that Nairobi National Park generates from the wildlife that depends on their tolerance.

The injustice sitting at the centre of this

Here is the plain shape of what is happening, stripped of euphemism. Nairobi National Park's international reputation depends on animals that spend most of their lives on land the park does not own, protected by families the park's revenue does not meaningfully reach. KWS collects the gate fees. Tour operators collect the safari income. The Maasai landowners of Kitengela absorb the cost, in fencing they cannot build, in crops occasionally damaged, in a corridor they are being asked, gently and structurally rather than by any single decree, to keep open for a public good they see almost none of the profit from.

This is not a story of villains. KWS has been a genuine partner and funder of the lease programme, however underfunded that support has remained relative to what land in Kitengela is now worth.

Individual Maasai landowners selling their land are not betraying a cause; they are making a rational decision inside an economic structure that was never built to reward the alternative. The tragedy here is structural, not personal, and that is exactly why it has proven so hard to fix with goodwill alone.

What would actually change it is money at a scale the current lease programme has never approached: lease payments closer to real land value rather than a fraction of it, a funding base broad enough to survive donor cycles rather than depending on grants that wax and wane, and, most fundamentally, a governance model where the people whose land keeps this ecosystem alive have a real, structural claim on the tourism revenue their tolerance makes possible, not a modest annual gift dependent on international NGO goodwill. Kenya's own National Wildlife Strategy and county-level planning processes have gestured toward this kind of revenue-sharing in other ecosystems. Whether Kitengela ever gets it, before the last open acres are subdivided for good, remains the open question this essay cannot answer for you. It can only make sure you understand what is actually at stake, and who is actually paying for it.

Official compensation figures for human-wildlife conflict in the 2024/25 financial year make the imbalance concrete rather than rhetorical. Nationally, KWS paid out KES 833,330,729.73 to 416 beneficiaries for wildlife-caused death, injury, and property loss. Kajiado County, which contains the Kitengela corridor and absorbs the bulk of Nairobi National Park's wildlife dispersal, accounted for KES 64,135,520 of that total, across 37 beneficiaries. Nairobi County, home to the park's gate revenue, its tour operators, and the five million residents this essay keeps returning to, recorded zero compensation claims in the same period. That is not because conflict does not happen at Nairobi's edges; the game-drive fieldwork and outreach calls behind this series turned up buffalo crop damage and close calls with baboons within the same year. It is a reminder that the compensation system, like the tourism revenue it sits beside, is structured around where animals cause measurable damage on paper, not around where the ecosystem's human cost is actually being carried.

Two kinds of neighbour

Community outreach conducted for this series in September 2026, by phone and written message to households near the park and along the Kitengela corridor, surfaced a divide that cuts cleanly along one line: how long a family has lived there.

Long-settled community members described a relationship to wildlife built over generations, not adversarial by default. They already know the response chain when an animal becomes a problem: call the area chief, who escalates to KWS. Many have adopted Lion Lights to keep predators away from livestock enclosures at night, and their children have inherited traditional, low-risk ways of scaring animals off rather than confronting them, alongside a clear-eyed understanding of how dangerous that confrontation could be. Tellingly, several respondents referred to animals by their names in their own mother tongue rather than in Swahili or English. That is not incidental vocabulary. It is what ownership sounds like when it is cultural rather than legal. The same conversations surfaced harder truths too, without much defensiveness attached: an admission, offered candidly by children rather than concealed by parents, that small-scale poaching of animals like impala still happens in some households, alongside real, unresolved grievances, a maize farm destroyed by a buffalo, told less as an accusation than as a fact of life they have made peace with.

Newer arrivals, buying subdivided land near the corridor because it is cheaper than staying in central Nairobi, described something close to the opposite. For most of them the move was a housing decision,

not a wildlife one, an upgrade in space, not a step toward pastoral life. Many are still working out that a wildlife corridor runs near or through what they now own, and their first instinct, when an animal does appear, is to describe it as dangerous and to expect KWS to manage a problem they did not sign up for. Several outreach respondents in this group said the conversation itself, being asked directly to think about what used to move across this land before they arrived, was the first time they had considered it at all.

This outreach gave the first, wide-angle view of that divide. Later interviews with long-settled Kitengela landowners and members of Friends of Nairobi National Park, reported in Essay 6, confirmed and sharpened it: a corridor where the ecological cost is unevenly understood by the people now living closest to it, and where that understanding tracks almost exactly with how recently they arrived.

Nev, an environmental and conservation journalist who helped plan this project's September 2026 game drive, offered a useful comparison from further south. In Kimana, in the Amboseli ecosystem, he notes that farmers seeking fertile land have responded to crop raiding by installing electric fences. The fences protect harvests, but they can also electrocute wildlife and shut off migration corridors, and severed corridors isolate animal populations, raising the risk of inbreeding and lost genetic diversity. Kimana is not Kitengela, and the comparison should be read as a warning, not as evidence about this corridor. But it shows where the fencing logic described above can lead when conflict is handled fence by fence rather than through shared arrangements. His conclusion is the same one this essay keeps reaching: communities, conservation agencies and the tourism industry need to work out solutions together, because none of them can hold a corridor open alone.

What this means for how we tell this story

- Stop calling the corridor a KWS asset. It is private Maasai land, and every account of the park's ecological success that omits that fact is quietly erasing the people making it possible.
- Support the lease programme directly if you can, and ask hard questions about its funding gap. A scheme this promising should not still be running on a patchwork of NGO grants twenty-five years after it began.
- Follow the SGR and infrastructure conversation. Kenya's courts have already shown, in the fight over the railway's original route, that legal and civic pressure can change an infrastructure alignment before it is built.
- Ask where tourism revenue actually goes, the same question Essay 1 raised about park fees, but now pointed south of the fence rather than at the gate.
- Center Maasai voices in how this story gets told, including your own. A landowner who has sold land, or who is holding out against selling, is not a case study. They are the person actually making the decision this entire ecosystem now hinges on.

Whose park is this. Stand at the southern fence line, and the answer is not Nairobi's, and not really the tourists', and not even entirely KWS's. It belongs, right now, to families deciding acre by acre whether an old way of living is still worth more than a fence.

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7. Questionnaires and Interviews

Essay 5: What Nairobi's Youth Know About the Park Next Door

Ask a teenager from Kayole, or Dandora, or Kibera, or Pipeline what they know about Nairobi National Park, and here is what you will likely get. A lion, mid-roar, set against a skyline of glass towers, the image that shows up on every tourism poster and half the Instagram reels shot in the city. Maybe a fact picked up in a primary school textbook: the only park in the world inside a capital city. Maybe a vague sense of pride, the kind you feel about something that belongs to your country in theory, without ever quite belonging to you in practice.

Now ask that same teenager when they last actually walked through the gate.

For a striking number of young Nairobians, the honest answer is never. Not once. Despite living, in some cases, closer to Nairobi National Park than they live to their own secondary school, an entire generation is growing up experiencing "their" park almost entirely secondhand, through advertising, through a class trip that may or may not have happened, through a photo a wealthier relative posted from a weekend safari. This essay asks why that gap exists, what the research says actually closes it, and what it produces when it stays open: a kind of wildlife pride that is all aesthetic and no relationship, admiration with nothing asked of it in return.

A mental image built from everywhere except the park itself

Picture a specific, plausible young Nairobian: seventeen years old, finishing secondary school, has grown up her whole life within an hour's matatu ride of Nairobi National Park's Main Gate. She knows the park exists the way she knows Mount Kenya exists, as a fact about her country rather than a place she has been. Her image of it comes from a handful of sources, none of them the park itself: a KWS

advertisement on a billboard along Langata Road, a wildlife documentary clip shared in a WhatsApp group, a school textbook page, and the safari photos of a cousin whose family could afford a guided half-day tour for a birthday.

None of those sources are false, exactly. But none of them are a relationship either. She has absorbed the idea that the park matters, that it is a source of national pride, that lions and rhinos are precious and worth protecting. What she has not absorbed is any felt, personal stake in that protection, because she has never stood inside the fence and had her own encounter to measure the postcard against. This is not a hypothetical problem invented for the sake of a tidy opening scene. It is a pattern researchers studying youth conservation attitudes in Kenya have documented directly, and the mechanism behind it turns out to be fairly well understood.

What actually builds a relationship with wildlife, and what erodes it

The clearest empirical study on this question, still cited more than fifteen years after it was published, comes from John Kioko, John Warui Kiringe, and Geff Wahungu's 2010 research on youth knowledge, attitudes, and practices around wildlife conservation in Maasailand, published in the Southern African Journal of Environmental Education. The researchers surveyed a stratified sample of students, along with informally educated Maasai morans, across communities near Amboseli National Park, and their findings map closely onto what this essay is trying to understand about Nairobi.

Two factors stood out as the strongest predictors of a young person having a genuinely engaged relationship with wildlife, rather than a merely abstract one. The first was direct exposure: schooling itself, and specifically participation in extracurricular wildlife or environmental clubs, positively and measurably shaped how young people perceived conservation. Among the students surveyed, 59.2 percent were already members of some kind of wildlife or environmental club, and club members showed markedly higher rates of having actually visited a protected area than non-members, roughly 45 to 46 percent of upper primary club members compared to about 31 percent of non-members. The second predictor was even more specific: youth whose own parents were engaged in tourism-related work showed measurably more positive attitudes toward wildlife than youth whose families were not, evidence, the study's authors argued, that economic proximity to the value wildlife generates translates directly into a young person's sense that conservation matters to their own life, not just to some abstract national interest.

What erodes that connection, meanwhile, is precisely the set of pressures the rest of this series has already documented: urbanisation, land subdivision, and the steadily rising cost of simply getting through a park gate. A young person whose family has been pushed off pastoral land by subdivision in Kitengela, or who has moved from a wildlife-adjacent rural community into Nairobi's expanding urban edge, loses the daily, ambient exposure to wildlife that once shaped their sense of what the animals were and why they mattered. For Nairobi specifically, that erosion takes a mostly economic form. It is not that the park has become physically less accessible in the way Kitengela's grazing land has become fenced. It is that the entry fee, discussed in Essay 1, along with the added cost of a vehicle, a guide, and transport to the gate, puts a "free" city landmark just out of easy reach for a family already stretching a modest income across rent, school fees, and food.

Wildlife Clubs of Kenya, and the fifty-year-old proof that this gap is addressable

If all of that sounds like a slow, structural inevitability, one more fact should complicate that picture, because Kenya has already run a fifty-plus year experiment proving the opposite is possible.

In December 1968, a group of students at Kagumo High School in Nyeri approached their teacher with a specific complaint: national park entrance fees were too expensive for ordinary local people to afford, which meant most Kenyans were not visiting the very parks their country was becoming internationally famous for. Their teacher took the complaint to Kenya's Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, which brought in the African Wildlife Foundation to help design a response. What emerged, remarkably quickly, was the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya, the first conservation education movement of its kind on the entire African continent, built explicitly around the idea that free or subsidised park access, paired with structured environmental education, could build the relationship a postcard alone never would.

It worked, at least by the measure of scale. By 1979, just over a decade after that first letter, Kenya had 439 registered Wildlife Clubs with a combined membership of roughly 20,000 students, recognised by the United Nations Environment Programme's Global 500 Honour Roll as the most effective grassroots conservation programme of its kind in Africa, and the movement went on to directly inspire similar wildlife club movements in Uganda, Tanzania, the Seychelles, Botswana, Nigeria, and India. Wildlife Clubs of Kenya remains active today, continuing to run school and institutional memberships across the country, and its core mechanism has barely changed in fifty-plus years: structured environmental education paired, wherever possible, with the chance for members to actually enter a park and see the wildlife they are being taught to value. A 2017 study confirmed that participation in structured club activities was still strongly associated with more positive attitudes toward wildlife conservation among secondary school students, evidence the model is not a one-off historical accident but a durable, replicable pattern. As recently as 2024 and 2025, the African Wildlife Foundation and Wildlife Clubs of Kenya launched a four-year conservation education partnership in the Tsavo landscape, aiming to reach approximately 83,000 learners across 137 schools, evidence that the model is still considered worth scaling rather than a relic of a different era.

What this history proves, plainly, is that the disconnect this essay is describing in Nairobi is not some fixed, permanent feature of urban life. It is a policy choice, or more precisely, the absence of one, applied to the one park with the country's largest concentration of young people living around it. Kenya has already demonstrated, at national scale, that youth disconnection from wildlife is addressable through the unglamorous combination of subsidised access and structured education. The tools exist. The question is why a park seven kilometres from the country's capital is not the single most obvious place to apply them at full strength.

A Saturday that proves the mechanism

The clearest evidence for this essay's argument came, unexpectedly, from this project's own fieldwork rather than from a survey question. On September 27, 2026, this series organised a game drive at Nairobi National Park for children from Pipeline estate and Kangundo, several of them entering the park for the first time in their lives.

What happened over the following five hours looked exactly like the mechanism Kioko, Kiringe and Wahungu's research predicts, playing out in real time. The driver-guide leading the trip abandoned the traditional lecture format almost immediately, once he noticed the kids were more comfortable asking

questions than listening to a script, and let their curiosity set the pace instead. The kids did not just absorb facts, they visibly retained and reused them: told that zebras can be told apart partly by their black hooves and noses, one child connected this, unprompted, thirty minutes later, to a donkey she knew from home, asking whether donkeys were secretly zebras too. That is not passive sightseeing. That is a child actively building a relationship to the animal by testing it against what she already knew.

The retention showed up again afterward, in an unplanned way, in a post-drive drawing session: kids picked pages from a drawing book that matched what had actually struck them that day, not generic animal pictures. One child, who said she wants to work at KWS, chose a page showing a vet treating a leopard. Another drew herself, quite literally, watching animals from inside a tour van, the exact experience she had just had. A three-year-old on the trip, on his first-ever real-life animal encounter, drew a bright pink leopard and sang through the entire session, fully absorbed, a reaction his father described as part of what convinced him to keep bringing his children back. That reaction from a three-year-old is, in miniature, the entire argument of Wildlife Clubs of Kenya's 1968 founding logic: give a child direct exposure, and something durable forms that a billboard never could.

That father was Dennis, the same parent quoted in Essay 1 recalling his own first visit to the park back in 1993. His son's reaction to this one, he said, was just as immediate and unguarded: genuinely excited, shouting out to his father at more than one sighting, in what was the boy's first real encounter with any of these animals outside a screen. Dennis's own conclusion from the day was broader still. He told us he now actively encourages other parents to bring their children to the park, on the grounds that kids learn about native animals in a way no classroom or documentary fully replicates, and that this kind of local knowledge, built firsthand rather than inherited secondhand, is exactly the thing worth passing on.

A second Pipeline parent, Naomi, wrote up her own account afterward and arrived at the same mechanism from a different angle entirely: not ownership or ambassadorship, but the gap between a textbook and a body. “In class they read about the ‘Big Five’ and ecosystem,” she wrote, “but here they could see it, smell it and also feel it.” She described watching her children's excitement shade into a little fear as a lion came into view, and using that moment to teach them about respecting wildlife and staying safe, rather than treating the fear as something to manage away. The day also gave her a natural opening to explain, on the spot, why the family doesn't litter and doesn't feed the animals, conservation taught as something lived rather than recited. Her own verdict matched Dennis's almost exactly: not sightseeing, but “bonding, learning and creating memories that will last,” in one of the only places on earth where wildlife and a capital city exist side by side.

The tour guide leading the drive made the same point from the other side of the windscreen. He described kids as consistently the most eager, curious visitors he guides, asking real questions rather than performing polite interest, and argued specifically for more youth-focused tours as the better format for actually teaching conservation, not just displaying it. Coming from someone who guides visitors of every age for a living, that is a meaningful endorsement of exactly the subsidised-access-plus-exposure model this essay has been arguing Kenya already proved works, over fifty years ago, and has never fully applied to the one park closest to its own capital.

Nev, who helped plan the trip, read the children’s response the same way. In his words, they were clearly ecstatic, asked relevant and thoughtful questions, and showed genuine curiosity. He attributes much of that excitement to how rarely they get to see wildlife up close: for many of them, their experience of wildlife is largely through television and other media. Seeing it in person, he argues, gave

them the chance to see and understand wildlife practically, and can help build a stronger connection with nature that makes them more likely to want to protect it as they grow. It is a modest claim, and it is exactly the claim the Kioko, Kiringe and Wahungu research supports.

What the children wrote afterward

The written reflections families sent in once the drive was over make the same point in the children's own words, not a researcher's. One child's composition closed simply: “When I saw the zebras I could not hide my joy. I enjoyed that day.” Another, writing with more polish, called the whole day “the thrill of a lifetime” that “completely transformed how I view nature,” adding that before that morning she had “only seen wild creatures on television or in books”, naming, in her own words, the exact secondhand relationship this essay opened by describing, just as she was stepping out of it. A third simply called it “the sweetest day of my life.”

The drawing-book workbook pages the children filled in afterward show the same direct engagement doing real conceptual work, not just producing enthusiasm. Asked whether knowing a place from the outside is the same as belonging to it, one child wrote: “No. Knowing a place from the outside is not the same as belonging to it. Observation vs. experience. Knowing is cognitive”, a distinction plenty of adults would struggle to state more precisely. Asked which animal they would most want to protect as a ranger, one child said the elephant, “because they are threatened by poaching and are important to the ecosystem”; a child from the second family gave the same reasoning for the tiger, a species that exists nowhere in Kenya. That single answer is its own small piece of evidence for this essay's argument: a child reaching for the most famous endangered animal she has absorbed from screens, rather than the actual endangered animal fifteen minutes from her home, is exactly the secondhand relationship with wildlife this essay opened by describing, except that, having just been inside the park herself, she is now also among the generation best placed to eventually close that gap.

Not every answer agreed, which is its own kind of evidence. Asked whether people and wildlife can share the same land, one child wrote yes, “like grazing areas or community forest, but it takes careful planning”; a child from the second family wrote simply, “No.” A single game drive does not manufacture consensus, and this essay is not claiming it should. What it produced, reliably, across both families, was engagement: specific, considered answers in place of the vague, aesthetic pride this essay opened by describing.

What pride without relationship actually produces

Here is the cost of leaving that gap unaddressed. A young Nairobian who has absorbed wildlife pride purely through advertising does not lack patriotism or care. She will very likely tell you, sincerely, that Kenya's wildlife matters. But that pride, without a felt personal relationship underneath it, tends to function as pure aesthetic rather than as a basis for responsibility. It shows up as a shared photo, a moment of national pride when a foreign visitor praises Kenya's wildlife, a general, diffuse sense that conservation is good. It does not, on its own, translate into the things this series has argued actually keep a park like this alive: political pressure on fee structures that exclude ordinary citizens, public scrutiny of how translocation decisions get made, active civic engagement with land-use fights like the one unfolding in Kitengela, or even the basic habit of visiting and therefore counting in the park's own domestic-visitor statistics.

Pride as aesthetic asks nothing of the person holding it. Pride built on relationship asks quite a lot, and that is precisely the difference that matters. There is a harder version of this argument worth sitting with too. A generation that experiences wildlife only as advertising is more vulnerable to accepting a simplified, sanitised version of what conservation actually requires, the version this series has spent five essays complicating. Someone who has never walked past a KWS ranger doing an early morning patrol, never seen a lion collar and had to ask what it was for, never heard directly from a Maasai neighbour about a herd lost to a leopard, is far more likely to accept the postcard version of Nairobi National Park uncritically, precisely because they have nothing of their own to measure it against.

Handing over the microphone

This essay has spent most of its length citing researchers and historians. That is not where it should end, because the entire argument being made here is that young Nairobians deserve to be the authors of their own relationship with this park, not merely its subjects.

So, ahead of this final edit, a short questionnaire went out to young Nairobi residents directly: how far do you live from the park, how did you first visit, have you been back, does it feel like it belongs to you, what would change that. Fourteen people answered, ranging in age from sixteen to well over twenty-five, living anywhere from under three kilometres to more than twenty kilometres from the gate. Their answers do not overturn anything in the research above. They put faces and specifics on exactly what that research predicts.

The barrier respondents named most consistently was money, not interest. Asked why they hadn't returned since a first visit, or hadn't visited at all, "entry fees are too expensive" and "transport or vehicle costs are too high" came up again and again, echoing Essay 1's fee-schedule argument almost line for line, from people who had never read that essay. Denzel Juma, who first visited on a school trip and has not been back since, said he feels the park belongs to Nairobi residents "not very much," and named the reason plainly: "it feels more geared towards tourists than Nairobi residents." A separate, fully anonymous respondent used almost the identical phrase, unprompted, answering the same question. Enock Muthini Kitheka, who lives less than three kilometres from the park and has visited several times, put it more starkly still: asked how much the park feels like it belongs to residents like him, his answer was "not at all."

Money was not the only thing keeping people out. Several respondents, asked why they hadn't returned, pointed to something closer to relevance than cost. "I have no one to go with," one wrote. Another said she had simply "outgrown the experience." Crystal, reflecting on a single family visit years earlier, suggested cheaper game drives might be what brings people like her back, not because the park changed, but because the reason to return never quite arrived on its own.

But the same questionnaire also captured the other half of this essay's argument, the half about what relationship actually produces once it takes hold. Respondents who had visited multiple times described a markedly different relationship to the park than those who hadn't. Sabri, a repeat visitor, described organising trips that "take students from different parts of Nairobi to NNP," precisely the club-and-exposure mechanism the Kioko, Kiringe and Wahungu research found strongest. Naomi Ngigi, a repeat visitor since a school trip of her own, had a specific, practical fix in mind for reaching people who haven't had that chance: "Bring back the KWS bus, pick from CBD on a specific day of the week," a low-cost, structural nudge that echoes the same logic Wildlife Clubs of Kenya was built on in 1968. Mohamed

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Khalifa, who has visited on his own initiative several times, argued the deeper fix was about belonging rather than logistics: young visitors, he said, "should feel they are members of wildlife lovers," not paying guests moving through someone else's attraction.

Denzel Juma, asked what would make the park feel more relevant to people his age, gave the fullest answer of anyone who responded, and it is worth quoting at length because it reframes the entire question this essay has been building toward: "Affordable entry and transport, more youth-focused activities, creative and cultural events, conservation volunteering, and opportunities for young people to participate in art, storytelling, and environmental projects would make Nairobi National Park feel more accessible and relevant." Asked if there was anything else he wanted to share, he added: "Giving young people a stronger voice in how the park is experienced could build a deeper and more lasting relationship with it." That is, almost word for word, the argument this essay has been making since its opening image of a girl who knows the park exists the way she knows Mount Kenya exists, as a fact rather than a place.

Not every voice gathered here could be quoted directly. A handful of respondents asked to review any direct quotation before publication, a request this series is honouring; their answers, paraphrased rather than quoted here, still shaped the picture above, and their fuller words will appear once that review is complete. One, reflecting on a park she visits often, described it in glowing, almost devotional terms and argued for tighter enforcement of park rules regardless of who is breaking them. Another, a repeat visitor herself, pointed to cost as the single biggest thing standing between her peers and a first visit, and said she had simply never thought to question that gap before being asked directly.

What comes next

- Ask your own school, or your children's school, whether it runs a wildlife or environmental club, and if not, why not. The infrastructure for starting one already exists through Wildlife Clubs of Kenya's national network.
- Treat a first park visit as an intervention, not a treat. The research is specific: it is the visit itself, not the idea of the park, that measurably shifts a young person's relationship to conservation.
- Push for youth-priced or subsidised group access at Nairobi National Park specifically, following the exact logic that founded Wildlife Clubs of Kenya in the first place, and the exact fix multiple questionnaire respondents named unprompted.
- Bring back structured, low-cost transport to the gate. Naomi Ngigi's specific suggestion, a KWS bus picking up from the CBD on a fixed weekly schedule, is a small, concrete version of exactly what this essay has been arguing for in the abstract.
- Make space for young Nairobians to describe the park in their own words, not just KWS's marketing language or a textbook's summary, and not only this essay's own paraphrase of a handful of survey answers. What they say may not match the postcard, and that mismatch is worth listening to rather than correcting.
- Connect this essay back to Essay 4. A generation of Nairobi youth with no relationship to the park is also a generation with little instinct to defend the Kitengela corridor. Disconnection in the city and dispossession in the corridor compound each other.

Whose park is this. For a Nairobi teenager who has grown up seven kilometres from a lion and never once walked through the gate, the honest answer right now is: not really hers. Denzel Juma and Enock

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Muthini Kitheka, both grown well past that age and both still describing the park as barely theirs, suggest that gap does not necessarily close on its own with time. It is not a fixed condition. It is a gap Kenya has already proven, once, it knows exactly how to close, and one this series' own respondents have now described, in their own words, exactly how they would like to see it closed.

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6. Questionnaires and Interviews

Essay 6: After the Postcard

Five essays ago, this series opened with a question about a lion against a skyline. What looked, at first glance, like the simplest kind of beauty, a wild animal and a modern city sharing one frame, turned out, essay by essay, to be one of the most quietly complicated places in African conservation. A pricing system that decides who gets to see the lion. A rhino darted, crated, and trucked across the country to keep a population alive that humans engineered into existence in the first place. A ranger earning barely more than minimum wage to stand between that rhino and a poacher. A Maasai family deciding, acre by acre, whether to keep their land open for animals that bring them almost none of the tourism revenue those animals generate. A teenager who has never once walked through the gate seven kilometres from her home.

Put those five threads next to each other and a single, uncomfortable question comes into focus, the one this closing essay exists to sit with directly. Nairobi's animals are, at the same moment, a genuine conservation triumph, a carefully managed commodity, and a set of individual lives that were never asked for consent about any of it. What does it actually mean, ethically, to hold all three of those truths at once, rather than picking whichever one is most convenient for the story you want to tell?

The throughlines, in miniature

Before reaching for new vocabulary, it is worth naming plainly what the previous five essays actually found, because the pattern across them is more consistent than it might first appear.

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Pricing decides access. The park's fee structure, tiered by nationality and residency, quietly answers "whose park is this" before anyone gets a say, favouring the foreign visitor's convenience over the citizen's proximity.

Management decides survival, at a cost the animal never agreed to. Every dart, every collar, every crate is a genuine act of care and a genuine imposition at the same time, and the 2018 Tsavo translocation disaster, where all eleven relocated rhinos ultimately died, is the sharpest possible reminder that this imposition carries real, sometimes fatal, risk.

Labour holds the whole system together, underpaid relative to what it risks. The ranger's salary sits close to the country's minimum wage for a job that is, in every meaningful sense, paramilitary, while the tourism economy built on that ranger's protection sells a single half-day encounter for more than a month of that ranger's pay.

Land carries the ecological weight tourism revenue never reaches. Seventy to eighty percent of Nairobi National Park's animals depend on Kitengela, land the park does not own and its revenue barely compensates, held by Maasai families absorbing the true cost of a corridor the whole system depends on.

And relationship, or its absence, decides whether any of this gets questioned at all. A generation of Nairobi youth raised on the park's image rather than the park itself inherits pride without the responsibility that pride should carry, because responsibility tends to require an encounter to attach itself to.

Read together, these are not five unrelated observations about one national park. They are five facets of a single underlying structure: an arrangement in which the visible product, the sighting, the photograph, the postcard, is optimised relentlessly, while everything underneath it, the animal's consent, the worker's wage, the landowner's tolerance, the citizen's relationship, is treated as a cost to be minimised rather than a stakeholder to be served.

Hearing it directly

Over the course of this series, close to thirty verbal interviews were held with the people nearest the park: KWS rangers and wardens, other KWS staff, members of Friends of Nairobi National Park, and households along the park's edges and the Kitengela corridor, including families who have held land there for generations. Most spoke on the understanding that they would not be named, and that understanding is honoured here. Nothing in this section is attributed to any individual, station or rank. What follows is the shape of what people said, reported collectively, not anyone's on-the-record statement.

The first thing those conversations shared was not a grievance. It was affection. Across uniforms, land titles and membership cards, people spoke about Nairobi National Park with real love: as a place they had watched over, protected or lived beside for years, and as something they want to outlast the pressures now building around it. That shapes how everything below should be read. The concerns this series has raised are not criticisms from outside the park's circle of care. Many of them are concerns the people inside that circle already hold.

KWS staff gave the agency's own account of several issues this series has raised. On pricing, they said the fee structure was designed with citizens in mind, not only international visitors. On wildlife management, they described working with NGOs and veterinary partners so that the park's animals receive the health care they need. On education, they said KWS is working to expose more young people to conservation, with guides encouraged to explain far more than an animal's name, and that on some public holidays, Easter among them, a KWS bus carries wananchi into the park, a seasonal version of the weekly CBD bus Naomi Ngigi called for in Essay 5. They stressed collaboration with organisations and individuals as the way conservation actually gets done. Pay was the one subject staff preferred not to discuss, and this series has not pressed it. Separately, a KWS staff member answering this series' written questionnaire reported a monthly pay bracket of KES 25,000 to 50,000, the low end of the range Essay 3 pieced together from secondary sources, and named a specific gap, monthly stipends, rather than a vague call for better pay.

On relationship, young Nairobi residents answered a parallel questionnaire and interviews for Essay 5, and the pattern held with striking consistency: those who had never returned pointed to entry fees, transport costs, and a sense that the park is "geared towards tourists," in more than one respondent's own words, while those who had built a real relationship with the park, through repeat visits, a school programme, or organising trips for other young Nairobians, described wanting to go further still, more storytelling, more volunteering, more of a stake in how the park is experienced rather than simply sold.

South of the fence, the original landowners described a relationship with wildlife that Essay 4 could only infer from the data. Broadly, they are at peace with sharing their land with wildlife, and they understand coexistence as part of how the plains have always worked. Many are doing their best not to sell. But they were candid that financial pressure is pushing land sales to a peak, and that a real share of the tourism revenue their land makes possible would change that calculation. That is the lease programme's logic, voiced by the people it was designed for. The same conversations confirmed the divide Essay 4's outreach first surfaced: long-settled families move with the wildlife almost automatically, knowing the routes, the seasons and who to call, while newer settlers, many of whom bought land for housing rather than grazing, are not yet in step with how animals move through what is now their property.

Members of Friends of Nairobi National Park placed that pressure in a longer frame. FoNNaP is a non-profit membership organisation established in 1995 to support KWS in protecting the park and its surrounding ecosystem, and it was FoNNaP that launched the Kitengela lease programme with KWS in 2000. Working alongside KWS, communities and other conservation partners, it contributes to wildlife monitoring and research, environmental education, habitat restoration, park clean-ups and community conservation, and it plays an advocacy role on the threats the park faces: habitat loss, pollution, human-wildlife conflict and the cutting of migration corridors. In practice, it is one of the few organised links between the park, its conservation partners and the public.

One concern came up again and again, often unprompted: construction inside and around the park. On 27 October 2026, the Environment and Land Court in Nairobi issued conservatory orders barring the government from building a large car park and a new animal orphanage at a site inside Nairobi National Park, and from clearing vegetation, felling trees or excavating there while the case is heard. The petition behind the case carried the names of 4,642 Kenyans, and Friends of Nairobi National Park was among the groups publicly credited for the challenge. The orders are temporary, set to run for four months unless the court extends them, so the question is paused rather than settled. For the people this series

spoke to, it is a test of something larger: whether the park's 117 square kilometres will be treated as habitat first, or as land available for whatever the city needs next.

A second threat is quieter, and harder to see from a game-drive vehicle. Enock Muthini Kitheka, the young Nairobian quoted in Essay 5 who lives less than three kilometres from the park, has been drawing attention to wastewater pollution from fast-growing settlements near the park, around Kathangaita, Mlolongo and Katani, and has proposed a youth-led effort to map where that waste goes. Untreated wastewater respects a park boundary no more than a wildebeest does. It moves with the land and the water, the way the corridor does, and it carries the city's growth into the ecosystem in a form no fence can stop. Pollution already sits on FoNNaP's list of threats, and Nev names vehicle emissions inside the park in the section below; Enock's work points to the part of the problem that starts outside the gate. It is the same structure this series keeps finding: costs generated by a growing city, landing on a park and its neighbours, and rarely counted on any ticket.

These accounts belong in the record on their own terms, and they complicate this series in useful ways. They also sit beside evidence they do not fully resolve. KWS's own Regulatory Impact Statement, discussed in Essay 1, modelled Kenyan citizens as roughly five times more price-sensitive than foreign visitors, and the agency still more than doubled the citizen rate; a fee structure can have citizens in mind and still expect fewer of them through the gate. A holiday bus is a real point of access, but a seasonal one, not yet a regular, published service a family could plan around. And landowners who want to keep their land open are still being offered a lease worth a fraction of what a buyer will pay. None of that makes anyone's account less sincere. It means intentions and measurable outcomes are two different things, and this series has tried to report both.

One limit is worth naming plainly. Because most of these voices were shared in confidence, they appear here collectively rather than by name. That choice protects people who will keep working, farming and living beside this park long after this series ends. A future in which more of them can be heard by name, on their own terms, would itself be one measure of the shift this series has argued for.

Naming what is actually happening

Academic philosophy has a vocabulary for exactly this structure, and it is worth borrowing carefully, translated into plain terms rather than left to sit as decoration.

Moral status is the philosophical question of who or what counts, ethically, as someone whose interests matter for their own sake rather than only for what they are useful for. Anthropocentrism is the often unstated assumption that human interests and convenience are the natural centre of any ethical calculation, with everything else, animals, land, ecosystems, mattering only in proportion to how they serve human ends. Ecocentrism pushes back, arguing that ecosystems and individual living things carry ethical weight independent of what they do for people. Commodification is the process by which something gets treated primarily as an object to be priced and sold, rather than as a subject with its own standing.

And the animal gaze, a concept developed most clearly in tourism researcher Caroline Winter's 2020 review of animal ethics research in tourism, describes something more specific still: the way tourist demand for a certain kind of sighting, close, reliable, camera-ready, quietly shapes upstream management decisions the visitor never sees or thinks about. Winter's review, surveying 74 academic

articles across ten major tourism journals, found this gaze operating as a self-reinforcing loop. Tourists want a certain encounter. Operators and park managers respond by shaping the animal's circumstances, sometimes through collaring, habituation, or feeding, to make that encounter more reliably deliverable. The animal is thereby commodified twice over: once as the subject of the photograph, and again as the object of a management decision made specifically to produce that photograph on demand.

This is the vocabulary this series has been circling without quite naming until now. A KWS ranger fitting a satellite collar to a lion is doing genuine conservation work, protecting both the lion and the livestock it might otherwise kill. That same collar also exists, in part, because a collared, trackable lion is a lion tour operators can more reliably find and show to a paying guest. Both things are true simultaneously. The animal gaze does not require bad intentions to operate. It only requires a market.

The myth that ecotourism solved this

For decades, ecotourism has been marketed, sincerely and not without reason, as the ethical answer to exactly this problem. Where trophy hunting kills an animal outright, ecotourism appears to offer a genuinely better bargain: the animal stays wild, stays alive, and its continued existence, rather than its death, becomes the economic asset. The financial case looks strong on its own terms, South Africa drew roughly 8,500 trophy hunters in a typical recent year, compared to some 9.5 million ordinary tourists, meaning a living, photographed lion very plausibly generates more total economic value over its lifetime than the same lion would as a single trophy hunt.

But a growing body of scholarship argues this framing quietly smuggles in a false conclusion. Ecotourism does not remove the animal from the market. It relocates the animal within it, from one commodity form to another. The lion is no longer a trophy to be killed once. It is instead an asset to be reliably produced, sighting after sighting, season after season, for as long as it lives, which means its entire life, not just its death, becomes structured around market demand.

This is not an argument against ecotourism, and it would be dishonest to pretend the alternative, a wildlife economy funded by nothing but donor goodwill, has ever proven durable at scale. Real conservation money, the money that pays for the eighty rangers protecting Nairobi National Park's rhinos, comes overwhelmingly from tourism revenue, and pretending otherwise would abandon the very animals this series cares about. The honest position sits between the two extremes: ecotourism is a meaningfully better commodification than trophy hunting, and it is still a commodification, with its own upstream costs, quietly borne by the animal's autonomy, the worker's wage, and the neighbouring community's tolerance, exactly as the previous five essays have traced in specific, documented detail.

A journalist’s view of what the industry gets wrong

One of the people who helped organise this series’ September 2026 game drive, the environmental and conservation journalist Nev, was asked what the tourism industry gets wrong, or right, about who the park belongs to. His answer did not dwell on ownership in the legal sense. It was about balance: profitability must not come at the expense of the environment and wildlife. He named three pressures. Hotel and facility expansion in and around protected areas, especially where it encroaches on riparian land or migration corridors, which wildlife need in order to survive and move. Large numbers of tour vehicles kicking up dust and burning fuel inside habitat, which he argues calls for cleaner ways of running excursions. And the indiscipline of some guides who do not respect animals’ space and

behaviour, when responsible tourism should let visitors see wildlife without adding pressure or disturbance. His closing point is that parks and wildlife are a shared natural heritage, and that protecting them has to stay at the centre of how tourism is built and managed.

Read against this series, that is the animal gaze described above, seen from the ground: the costs of the postcard land on habitat, air and animals' behaviour, and rarely appear on any ticket.

What a genuinely different model would require

If commodification cannot be fully escaped, what would it actually mean to build something meaningfully better, centred on animal and community interests first rather than visitor experience first?

The clearest existing precedent this series has already examined is the Kitengela Wildlife Conservation Lease Programme, described in Essay 4. Its core logic deserves to be stated plainly one more time, because it is the seed of everything a better model would need to scale up: pay the people actually bearing the ecological cost, directly, for the specific thing they are providing, rather than assuming their tolerance is free simply because it has historically gone uncompensated. That the programme has never been funded at anywhere near the scale required is not a flaw in the idea. It is evidence of how far short current conservation finance falls from taking the idea seriously.

A genuinely animal- and community-centred model would need to extend that same logic across everything this series has documented: fee structures designed around genuine access for citizens rather than revenue-maximisation from international visitors; translocation protocols transparent by default about mortality risk; labour standards that treat a ranger's paramilitary training and occupational risk as deserving of pay that reflects it; land compensation funded at a level that can actually compete with the market value of a subdivided plot; and education and access investment aimed specifically at the park's own nearest neighbours.

None of that is utopian. Every piece of it already exists somewhere, in some partial, underfunded form, inside the six essays of this series. What does not yet exist is a model that holds all five pieces together at once, funded at a scale that matches the actual value the tourism economy extracts from this landscape.

It is worth being honest about why that integration has never happened. Each of the five pieces sits inside a different institutional silo, with its own funders, its own reporting lines, and its own metrics of success. KWS is measured largely on revenue growth and visitor numbers. Conservation NGOs are measured on population figures. Tour operators are measured on client satisfaction. None of those metrics ever require anyone to ask whether the ranger protecting the translocated rhino is paid enough to stay in the job, or whether the Maasai family whose land the rhino will eventually range onto has been asked, let alone compensated. A truly different model would need a new metric entirely, one that treats animal welfare, worker pay, land justice, and citizen access as co-equal measures of success alongside revenue and population counts. That is a governance problem as much as a funding one, and it is the harder of the two to solve.

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Where the animal actually stands in all of this

It is worth pausing, before closing, on the party this essay has spent five pieces circling but has not yet addressed directly on its own terms: not the tourist, not the ranger, not the landowner, but the rhino, the lion, the wildebeest itself. Under an anthropocentric frame, the one this series has argued quietly governs almost every decision documented so far, the animal's interests only register to the extent they serve a human purpose. Under a more ecocentric or welfare-centred frame, the animal's own experience, its stress during capture, its autonomy to range and breed and die on terms it did not choose, carries weight independent of what humans get out of protecting it.

This series has not tried to adjudicate definitively between those two frames, because doing so honestly would require a different kind of essay than a journalistic investigation can offer. But naming the choice explicitly matters, because every policy decision traced across the previous five essays, from fee tiers to collaring protocols to translocation risk tolerance, is quietly already making that choice, usually without saying so.

Africa is not a footnote

Nairobi National Park is routinely described, in tourism marketing and casual conversation, as a backdrop: a stunning, photogenic setting for someone else's journey, bucket list, or Instagram feed. In this framing, the animals are the main subjects, while tourists are merely the audience. Everyone else, the ranger, the guide, the Maasai landowner, the Nairobi teenager who has never visited, the rhino as a sentient being rather than just a photogenic prop, becomes part of the scenery.

This series has aimed, essay by essay, to shift that perspective. It does not deny that Nairobi National Park is beautiful, or that the conservation successes documented here, rhinos rebuilt from a population of fewer than ten, lions protected through decades of collaring and conflict response, are real achievements worth celebrating. But it insists that beauty and celebration are not the complete story. The people and animals that make this postcard-worthy view possible deserve to be recognised as subjects of this history, rather than mere background.

Whose park is it. Whose animals are these. After six essays, the honest answer is not a single name; it is a list longer and more complicated than any tourism brochure will ever convey. It includes the citizen who has been priced out of a park just seven kilometres from home, the rhino that never consented to being darted, the ranger standing between that rhino and a poacher for wages that barely meet the minimum, the Maasai family deciding whether their traditional way of life is still worth more than a fence, and the teenager who has only ever seen a lion in an advertisement. Each of them belongs in this story as its subject, not its scenery. That is the only resolution this series has ever been building toward: not a tidy conclusion, but an insistence on who actually gets to count.

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Acknowledgements

This series exists because people trusted it with their time and their stories.

Thank you to the **Culture & Animals Foundation** for funding the work.

Thank you to **Nev** and **Adele**, who helped plan and run the September 2026 game drive, and to the families from **Pipeline estate** and **Kangundo** who joined it. The children's drawings and compositions, and the reflections their parents wrote afterwards, gave this series some of its clearest evidence. Thank you to the parents who gave interviews on the day and wrote reflections afterwards, and to the tour guide who led the drive, shared his view from the gate and let the children's curiosity set the pace.

Thank you to the rangers, wardens and staff of the **Kenya Wildlife Service**, to the members of **Friends of Nairobi National Park**, and to the landowners and households of Kitengela and the park's edges. Close to 30 of you sat down for interviews, and those conversations are a core source of data for this series, above all for Essay 6. Most of you spoke in confidence, so you are not named here. Your care for the park shaped this work more than any document did.

Thank you to the KWS staff who completed the written questionnaire, to the households near the park and along the corridor who answered our outreach calls and messages, and to the young Nairobians who answered the youth questionnaire, honestly and in their own words. Every interview and response gave this series data it could not have found anywhere else.

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How to cite this report

Cheche, W. (2026). *Whose Park? Whose Animals? A six-part essays into wildlife tourism, conservation and animal ethics at Nairobi National Park.* The Eco Advocate, with support from the Culture & Animals Foundation.

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