

Kenya should raise entry fee to iconic  
Maasai Mara park



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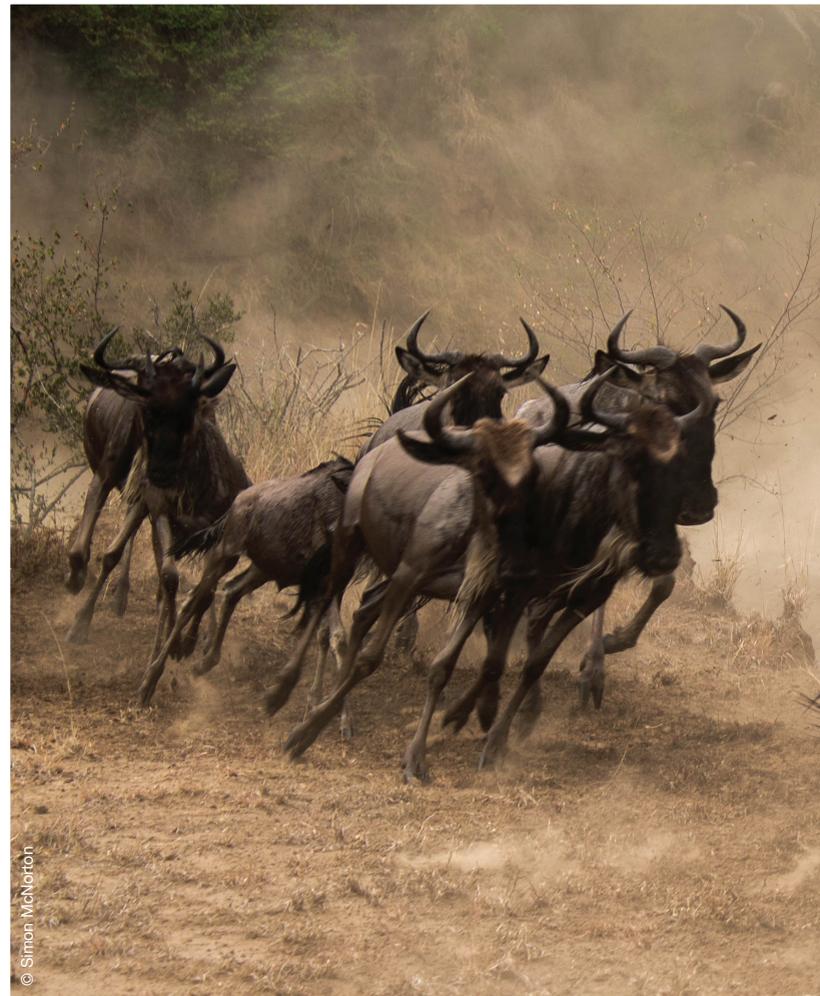
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**K**enya's conservation authorities should consider raising the entrance fees for foreign tourists to the iconic Maasai Mara National Park by US\$ 6.90 per person, per day spent in the park, in order to boost the park's coffers. Funds can then be invested in restoring some of the Maasai Mara's deteriorating infrastructure and natural assets, such as the crumbling entrance road to the park and the degraded Mara River. This will allow the river function to be restored and wildlife numbers to recover, making the park attractive to foreign visitors once more.

This is the recommendation of economists from the University of Nairobi's School of Economics, who recently did a review of the park's pricing structure in order to see how it could be more financially self-sustaining.

The annual wildebeest migration from the Serengeti in Tanzania, into the Maasai Mara in southwestern Kenya, has made this park a 'bucket list' tourist destination, placing it amongst world travellers' top four places to visit. But despite this, the East African country has seen a steady drop in tourism numbers in recent years, resulting in a loss of revenue through park entry fees and other tourism-related income sources in recent years. The entry fee includes a conservation fee that is calculated on a per-day rate for each tourist.

Encroaching agricultural activities by farmers living on the edge of the park, and particularly along the Mara River, have resulted in declining wildlife numbers that have decreased the tourism experience in the park. The lion population has dropped by half in just two decades, wildebeest numbers are down by 75% since the 1970s, and the greater kudu and roan antelope have been eradicated from the park entirely. This has resulted in reduced visitor numbers, which has in turn impacted negatively on the park's main income stream.



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*The annual wildebeest migration into the Maasai Mara park is a huge tourism drawcard for Kenya, but conservation authorities need to manage the park better.*

Following their analysis, the University of Nairobi economists estimate that the daily conservation fee for foreign tourists, paid upon entrance into the park, could be raised from its current rate of US\$ 80 per tourist per day, to US\$ 86.90 per person, per day. This would allow park management to re-invest in restoring the ecology and infrastructure of the park, with the goal of winning back tourists.

The Kenyan Wildlife Service (KWS) has relied heavily on different sources of income in order to fund the operation and management of the park. The various income streams

include funds raised from recreational activities inside the park, such as hot air ballooning, game drives, or visits to Maasai villages, but also from the park entry fees, which includes the daily conservation fees. Additional sources of revenue come from government grants, endowments, and support from development fund partners.

But the bulk of the income is derived from the park entry fee, and, since tourism numbers are down, this means the park's income is down.

Lead researcher on the analysis, Dr Richard Mulwa from the School of Economics at the University of Nairobi, notes that the KWS can increase its income stream in two ways: either by hiking its park entry fee as visitors arrive at the gates, or through increasing the value and pricing of other recreational activities that take place in the park. Targeting the park entry fee for an increase is easier to implement.

Once the park's coffers have been boosted, Mulwa and colleagues recommend that the KWS invest in restoring some of the park's infrastructure, such as repairing the main road leading into the park, as well as upgrading the vehicles used for ferrying tourists around. The equipment and amenities in the park's hotels need to be brought in line with international tourism standards, and the technological systems used to run the day-to-day activities of the park need upgrading.

Restoring the park's ecology needs to be prioritised, however, if the decline in wildlife numbers is to be reversed, and the natural value of the park restored, in order to win back tourists. This calls for a revised management plan for dealing with the expansion of farming activities into the park.

Increased agricultural activity inside the park has led to greater human-wildlife conflict, with farmers killing wild animals to protect themselves and their livestock. Increasing agricultural pressure on the Mara River is also putting farmers in conflict with the park, which relies on the river function for its ecology and wildlife to remain healthy.

Mulwa and colleagues did this research after KWS management requested a review of how the park could continue to remain profitable, while still offering quality services. The researchers, who are also part of the Environment for Development (EfD) initiative, a network of environmental economists based in Sweden, believe this recommended increase of US\$ 6.90 per person per day is the optimal entrance free adjustment that will be sustainable, while not discouraging domestic tourists from visiting the park. They also recommend that this study be used to reassess the pricing of Kenya's other parks.

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#### Researchers involved

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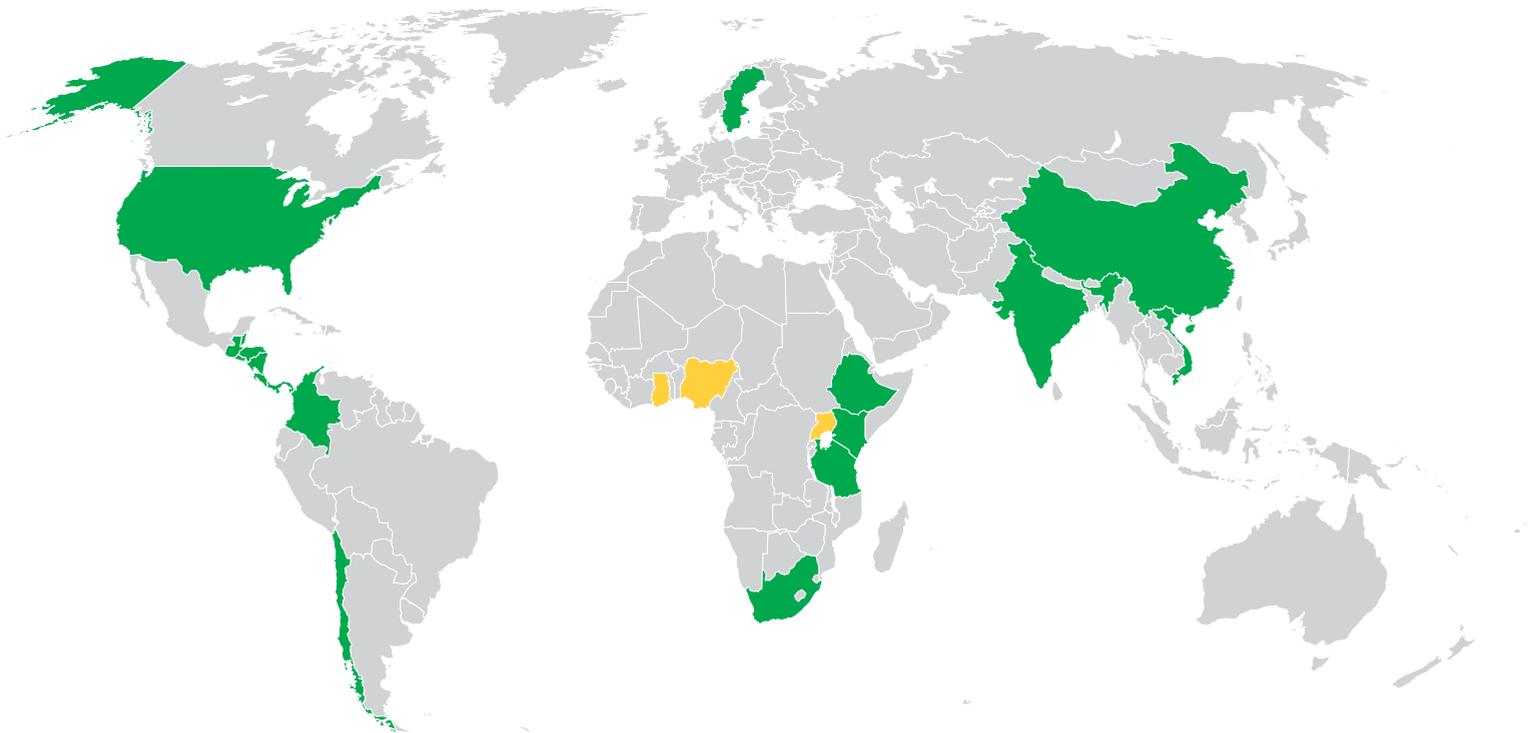
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