CONSERVING THE CRADLE

The Olorgesailie, Kwenia and Koora Conservation Project

A SORALO initiative
INTRODUCTION

As SORALO continues to expand in both scope and application, one area stands out as the next in line for inclusion; the Olorgesailie, Kwenia and Koora region. With conservancies and projects already initiated to the North, South, East and West of this region, it only makes geographic and conservation sense to focus on developing conservation and education programs at this central gateway. This concept follows SORALO’s vision of linking natural resources across the South Rift for the benefit of the local communities and conservation in general. This region is a specific target as it holds special conservation value for some rather unique reasons.

Olorgesailie

Ruppels Vultures Nesting site in Kwenia
BACKGROUND

The southern rift valley lying between Amboseli National Park to the east and Maasai Mara National Reserve is among Africa’s most dramatic and biodiversity-rich landscapes (see map 1 below). Stretching from arid flats of Lake Natron to the montane forest of the Ngurman escarpment, the varied habitats support one of Africa’s richest concentrations of mammals and birds. The areas abundant wildlife includes elephant, buffalo, eland, zebra, wildebeest, lion, leopard, cheetah, wild dog and many small carnivores. Lake Natron is the only nesting site of the lesser flamingo and, with Lake Magadi, is the central flyway for water birds plying the string of soda lakes stretching from Ethiopia to Botswana. The southern rift is also home to Maasai herders whose traditional practices sustain a productive livestock economy and account for the abundant wildlife.

Map 1. Species richness across Africa (ILRI)
The South Rift Valley region spans an area of approximately 850,000 hectares (2,100,396 acres) (see Map 2 below) covering a range of topographic and ecological conditions and hosts one of the richest large mammal assemblages on earth. This includes both wildlife and livestock, and is enabled primarily by the traditional nomadic pastoralism form of land use, which encourages mobility to ensure survival. The productivity and survival of wildlife and livestock in this area depend on a common ecological strategy rooted in mobility and feeding efficiency. This has made it possible for wildlife and pastoral livestock to co-exist for over 3,000 years without significant degradation of the environment. This area comprises of mainly arid and semi-arid lands, and unfortunately has a history of long-term marginalization and neglect, particularly by governmental policies and departments. However due to its rich culture, wildlife, ecology and landscape the potential for diversification of land use and livelihood generation, particularly through tourism, is high.

Map 2. SORALO extent
In 2004 SORALO (the South Rift Association of Land Owners), a formally registered Trust, was created in order to provide the legitimate body to represent the needs of all land owners in the region and push for joint management of the 15 group ranches which form the bridge between the famous Amboseli and Maasai Mara National Reserves. It is a community based and community driven initiative whose primary role is to bring land owners together for effective management of resources in order to directly improve the livelihoods of the communities, create linkages and assist in resource mobilization for the development of the South Rift Valley region, all while taking into consideration the key threats and challenges in the area.

**SORALO’s Vision:**

An empowered community with a sustained resource base in the south rift region

**SORALO’s Mission:**

To sustainably utilize natural resources by integrating tourism, livestock development and other income generating activities to improve communities livelihoods.

**SORALO’s achievements to date:**

SORALO’s plan for a new tourism destination, The South Rift, was awarded a grant by the Tourism Trust Fund to inventorise natural resources and conduct a tourism feasibility study in the region. The first steps in making The South Rift a tourist hub was taken in July by the African Conservation Fund/ACC’s Overland Adventure Safari, which pioneered a route across the rift valley linking Amboseli and Mara.

SORALO’s collaboration on tourism is the first step towards wider collaboration among landowners. The next steps are to research, develop and manage the rich natural resources of the south rift for the benefit of its landowning communities. SORALO is also dedicated to improving livelihoods through ranching, farming water shed management, livelihood diversification and improved education, health and social services.

The association aims to develop its lands in a sustainable fashion, including the maintenance of ecosystem services,
biodiversity and landscape integrity as natural buffers against land degradation and climate change.

In a further development intended to raise livestock production, improve market access, raise sale prices and sustain land health, SORALO has launched a Cattlemens’ Association in collaboration with ACC and supported by the Dutch government.

Two of the SORALO pioneer group ranches, Shompole and Olkiramatian have, assisted by the different partners including the African Conservation Centre, the EU through BCP and TTF turned their wildlife and scenery to advantage by creating wildlife sanctuaries, deploying wildlife scouts, inviting in tour operators and hoteliers and marketing ecotourism. From the outset these two group ranches saw environmental, economic and social research as a tool for cataloging their natural resources and biodiversity, mapping human activity, documenting livelihoods, recording traditional knowledge and plotting changes in landuse. In March 2008, SORALO went a step further to commission a natural resource centre in the south rift. The centre will provide baseline information for the development and conservation of SORALO lands and resources, for monitoring the outcome and adapting management practices as needed.

Currently the various conservancies established within the SORALO region include:

- Suswa
- Mailua (also the location for the Cattleman’s association project)
- Shompole
- Olkiramatian
THE SPECIFIC AREA:  OLORGESAILIE, KWENIA AND KOORA

Situated just off the main Magadi Road, in the heart of the Southern Rift valley lies Mt. Olorgesailie. Surrounding this small, extinct volcanic mountain lie some of the secrets to unraveling the history of the South Rift, and indeed of the forces which have shaped the evolution of people and wildlife in the area for hundreds of thousands of years.

Olorgesailie has important evidence that concerns the habits and activities of early prehistoric peoples of the hand axe culture. The site has the highest concentration of
hand axes probably compared to any other place in the world. Olorgesailie has excellently preserved biological and cultural evidence about the evolution of man. Human tools are the most prominent of all fossils in the area and the accumulation of tool represents the actual camping places of early men. It shows the evidence of human activity consistently between 1.2 million years to 400,000 years before present. This is evidence that human species had a tropical origin and a higher primate group was confined to this part of the world thus, Olorgesailie gives evidence not only of local importance but also of international significance. Scientifically, the site also has much to do with archaeological, palaeontological and geological significance.

Several butchering localities have been discovered at Olorgesailie. They are marked by concentrations of bone fragments of extinct animals and hand axes and other stone tools deposited over about 100,000 years on the shifting shoreline of a now-extinct lake. Palaeo-anthropological and geological researches so far conducted at the site indicate Olorgesailie was located close to a large shallow lake that attracted wild animals like extinct forms of hippo, elephant, zebra, giraffe, and baboon (theropithecus). Subsequent investigations by the late Glynn Isaac resulted in the uncovering of the stone artifacts and fossils exhibited in situ at the site.

For the past 19 years Dr. Richard Potts the Director of the Human Origins Program at the Smithsonian Institute, has led excavations in the area, uncovering mainly artifacts but also a partial skull in the same stratigraphic level with two Acheulean hand axes and several flakes, and adjacent to dense deposits of hand axes. This skull represents an adult Homo erectus, although some how smaller than most others of that species.

Olorgesailie Prehistoric site is among the few places in the world with rich archaeological and paleontological evidence that offers opportunity for detailed scientific studies into the ecological changes during the middle Pleistocene period. It probably has the highest concentration of hand axes than any other place in the world. The artifacts further provide us with very useful clues about the economic and cultural behaviour of the ancestral hominids and Homo erectus consistently between 1.2 million years ago and 400,000 years ago.
Olorgesailie Prehistoric site is run and managed by the National Museums of Kenya. It was gazetted as a prehistoric site in 1970 and is in a good conservation state. It can also be compared to rich fossil World Heritage Listed sites such Peking Man Site at Zhoukoudian in China (listed in 1987), The Sangiran Early Man site in Java (listed in 1996) and Fossil hominid Sites of Sterkfontain, because of its excellent preserved biological and cultural evidence on the evolution of human kind. However, unlike the other fossil sites Olorgesailie has a massive accumulation of human tools found in situ within a locality.

Mt. Olorgesailie is also important to the surrounding community, the Maasai. Though no longer practiced, it was used by the Ilkeekonyokie Maasai to perform sacrifices to their God -Enkai.

A few kilometers South of Olorgesailie lies Lake Kwenia, a seasonally dry lake which is home to one of the largest known breeding colonies of Ruppell’s Griffon Vultures in East Africa. The Peregrine Fund has been supporting research into this colony for the past four years and has also located additional ‘satellite’ vulture colonies in adjacent areas. Their research has resulted in the species being officially upgraded from “least concern” to “near threatened” in the list of globally threatened species, thus increasing the conservation importance of Kwenia and prompting interested parties to call for increased protection of the area.

In addition to archeological and raptor interests, this Olorgesailie and Kwenia region and the areas to the South stretching towards the Tanzania border also holds enormous potential for wildlife conservation, with, giraffe, gerenuk, ostrich and eland sighted frequently, both elephants and wild dogs sighted occasionally. The overall space available for wildlife, with few people dependent on it, is vast – approximately 30,000 hectares.

**Project Justification**

A unique opportunity presents itself here to combine various interested parties in an effort to investigate and
conserve East African biodiversity and culture, past and present. Rarely will such an opportunity arise where we can take a look back over hundreds of thousands of years at a landscape so key to human and wildlife origins, while simultaneously investigating that same relationship and how it plays out on that same landscape today. In addition, the area is also vital to the conservation of large connecting landscapes, which host vulnerable populations of rare species such as the Ruppell’s Griffon vulture, elephants and wild dogs.

A vital spin-off from these conservation efforts will be to open up an opportunity for the community to improve their livelihoods through possible tourism investments in the region and better planning of this delicate ecosystem.

PROJECT GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

MAIN GOAL:

To establish conservation and education programs around the Olorgesailie and Kwenia region to preserve biodiversity and cultural heritage.

This can be achieved by the following:

- Developing a conservation area that covers Olorgesailie, Kwenia and parts of Kura as a wildlife and cultural heritage sanctuary, covering four group ranches including loordariak, Oldonyionyokie, Elangata Wuas and Kilonito.
- Establish a field study school, based at Olorgesailie, to channel attention and research efforts in the region, both for archeology, wildlife and people. This will be linked to its sister center, the South Rift Resource Centre, based in Olkiramatian Group Ranch.
- Establish the project base for operation at Olorgesailie, the gateway to the South Rift, which will also act as the central operational base for the SORALO game-scouts.
- Establishing eco-tourism ventures in the region, to support and compliment conservation efforts in both Kwenia and Olorgesailie.
- Development of a cultural museum.
PARTNERS

SORALO; the umbrella and lead agency for coordination of conservation, Tourism and community research

ACC; Conservation and research partner in the South Rift

National Museums of Kenya; preservation of the olorgesailie prehistoric site

Smithsonian Institute; Archeological research and excavations

Peregrine Fund; Raptor research

Local Communities and individual land owners; project owners

South Rift Resource Centre; Hub for research work in the South Rift

CHALLENGES

The Olorgesailie and Kwenia region spans across four group ranches, which is challenging in itself, given the variety of people involved. However this challenge is exacerbated by the fact that most of these group ranches are now for the most part sub-divided. This means that already many small plots of land have been sold and are under different land uses, such as agriculture. Defending the larger and necessary goal of landscape conservation in the face of land use fragmentation and change is indeed a challenge.

In addition, working with a variety of interested partners can be of enormous benefit, but can present its own challenges. Each party needs to be clear of their roles in order to prevent friction in implementing the project. Ongoing relationships and working arrangements need to be respected. Many partners have had long-standing presence in the area.
FIRST STEPS

1. Wider consultations with various partners and stakeholders including communities and land owners within the region.

2. Conduct a tourism and conservation feasibility study, expanding on and drawing from the original SORALO tourism feasibility study which was focused on the entire SORALO extent.

3. Develop a comprehensive conservation and tourism plan for the region encompassing Olorgesailie, Kwenia and Kura areas.

4. Engage appropriate partners and stakeholders for specific roles within the conservation and tourism plan both in the short and long term.

5. Design different projects that will enrich the conservation effort including a field study school, cultural museum and Project base.