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## 2. THE MACHAKOS WILDLIFE FORUM: THE STORY FROM A WOMAN ON THE LAND

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**Key Words:** Machakos Wildlife Forum, conservation, wildlife utilization, migration, quota setting, game cropping, hunting, poaching, sub-division of land, industrial development, wildlife policy development

### SUMMARY

In 1991 a group of ranchers in the Machakos District of Kenya launched an initiative to make “*the management of wildlife a happier alternative to its extermination*” with a special objective of how “*plains game can be accommodated and gainfully managed on ranch lands*”. This Chapter tells the story of that initiative, the Machakos Wildlife Forum, beginning with the early descriptions of the area as an idyllic natural environment, teeming with wildlife, through the early colonial days, the expansion of settlement and smallholder farming to the new threat of industrial development and the strangling of the migration routes from the Nairobi National Park into Machakos, its remaining natural dispersal area. The introduction of game cropping and the management and utilization of the wildlife population based on a quota system has halted the decline in numbers and provided some income for the ranches. The recovery of some species populations has been extraordinary, warthog increasing five times, buffalo almost doubling while all the other antelope species have increased. Only ostrich have declined. The re-introduction of hunting and the utilization of hides and trophies would greatly expand the income while continuing to conserve the wildlife. Despite these successes the Machakos District is under increasing threat from the growing human population, sub-

division of land, industrial development and the slow development of clear policies that could ensure the full utilisation and conservation of wildlife.

## INTRODUCTION

Machakos District once stretched south-east from the outskirts of Nairobi almost to the Tsavo National Park until new boundaries were drawn in the 1990s separating it from Makueni District. In days gone by it was a wildlife paradise, rivalling the Mara game reserve.

Land hunger for fifty years has put relentless pressure on the fauna and environment. Some can remember when Makueni opened up for Kamba settlement during the 1940s. At first, no one could be persuaded to settle there for fear of rhinoceros and tsetse fly. More than one thousand rhino were shot to make way for humans. Makueni was regarded as the greatest rhinoceros country in Africa and the hunt that preceded human settlement was dubbed the biggest rhino hunt in history. To this day we wonder, could there not have been a better way of handling the situation? The Chief Game Warden of the time agonised for seven years over the awful decision he was required to take. He tried every device he knew to avoid the slaughter of the rhinoceros but the political pressure was just too great, and the slaughter was done. (Caldwell, 1947 and Hunter, 1952).

Machakos District encompasses the Athi and Kapiti plains (see Gichohi, Chapter 8). Travellers on the Nairobi-bound train once could see teeming herds of plains game soon after daybreak at Ulu and, by the time it was fully light, they would have been somewhere near Athi River. The place was alive with hartebeest, zebra, wildebeest, giraffe, eland and ostrich. What a sight to greet a newcomer to Kenya!

Between the Kamba trust lands to the North and the Mombasa railway to the South lie some 1,100 km<sup>2</sup> of private ranch land. Over the best part of ninety years these lands have been managed with wildlife as partners whilst the game suffered elsewhere in the District as settlement and rangeland fragmentation spread. The landowners have maintained a tolerant attitude to the game herds in spite of economic pressure to exterminate wildlife competing with domestic stock. Even with the shilly-shallying by Government on wildlife policies, they have still more or less conserved the game.

Before the ban on hunting in 1977, plains game provided a useful source of meat for labour and the skins were saleable. Offtake was sensibly done with the future herd in mind. The private landowners' licence was the legal instrument issued by the Game Department and a few ranchers kept a full record in their "*Game Registers*", covering over fifty years. In fact, the law required that registers be kept. So what's new! If these books were available now they would give priceless information about numbers and sustainable offtake. Today, such questions are being asked as if they had never been thought of before. It might be asked, how did the hunting ban affect the private rancher? The years between 1977 and 1991 saw an initial increase in plains game, but when permission to utilise it was refused, apathy set in