

# A struggle for land and survival in Kenya's restive highlands

February 3 2017, by Tristan McConnell

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A young herder from the Samburu pastoral community grazes his family cattle on the dwindling pasture of the Loisaba wildlife conservancy, Kenya

The broad plains of Mugie, a huge estate on a high plateau northwest of Mount Kenya, are crisscrossed with cattle trails and the wildlife is mostly gone.

The knee-high grass remains, but not for long, reckons manager Josh

Perrett.

Tensions between semi-nomadic pastoralists and settled landowners are nothing new, nor is competition between livestock and wildlife, but in Kenya's central Laikipia highlands they are taking a destructive, sometimes violent turn.

Last month perhaps 30,000 livestock arrived on Mugie, displacing wildlife. The illegal herders—some armed with spears, others with AK47s—cut through fences, making off with wire and posts. The shooting, looting, poaching and rustling that accompanied them left Perrett despondent.

"Twenty years of time, effort, sweat, money... it's fallen apart in two weeks, destroyed," says the 35-year-old.

"Before, you would see elephant, a few hundred head of buffalo, Jackson's hartebeest, oryx, Grant's gazelle, impala. Now you see thousands of head of cattle, a lot of sheep and goats."

At the 44,000-acre (17,600-hectare) Suyian ranch, south of Mugie, thatched huts for tourists were burned down and shots fired this week as herders swept in. Black and white landowners alike speak of invasions, fear and siege.

## **Too many people, too much livestock**

The dangerous situation in Laikipia is an acute expression of a chronic and complex tangle of [population growth](#), livestock increases, overgrazing, erratic rainfall, climate change, weapons, money and politics.

A recently published four-decade study by the International Livestock

Research Institute in Nairobi uncovered "catastrophic... widespread" declines in Kenyan wildlife as herds of livestock displace wild animals.

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