

From poaching to avocados, Kenya's elephants face new threat

March 18 2021, by Nick Perry



Tolstoy the bull elephant has survived many threats. But can he survive Europe's craving for avocados?

Just after dawn, Tolstoy lumbers into view. A wandering giant, with tusks almost scraping the earth, this great elephant has roamed beneath

Mount Kilimanjaro for nearly 50 years.

He has survived ivory poachers, spear attacks and terrible drought, but the mighty bull could be confronting a new threat to his natural realm: surging demand for avocados.

A turf war has erupted over a 180-acre (73-hectare) avocado farm near Amboseli, one of Kenya's premier national parks, where elephants and other wildlife graze against the striking backdrop of Africa's highest peak.

Opponents of the farm say it obstructs the free movement of iconic tuskers like Tolstoy—putting their very existence at risk—and clashes with traditional ways of using the land.

The farm's backers refute this, saying their development poses no threat to wildlife and generates much-needed jobs on idle land.

The rift underscores a broader struggle for dwindling resources that echoes beyond Kenya, as wilderness is constricted by expanding farmland to feed a growing population.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) warned Thursday that poaching and habitat destruction, particularly due to land conversion for agriculture, was devastating elephant numbers across Africa.



Haven of the wild: Snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro looks down on the sanctuary

The population of African savanna elephants, like those around Amboseli, decreased by at least 60 percent in the last half century, prompting their reclassification as "endangered" in the latest update to the IUCN's "Red List" of threatened species.

A sub-species of forest elephant found in Central and Western Africa, meanwhile, were listed as "critically endangered"—just a step away from extinction.

Green gold

Kenya is a major avocado grower and exports have soared as the green superfood has become a hipster staple on café menus around the globe.

Already the sixth-largest supplier to Europe, Kenya's avocado exports rose 33 percent to \$127 million (107 million euros) in the year to October 2020, according to the Fresh Produce Exporters Association of Kenya.

In the middle of that bumper year, Kenyan agribusiness KiliAvo Fresh Ltd received approval from the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) to start its own avocado farm on land it purchased from local Masai owners.

The acreage was razed of shrubbery and fenced off, alarming neighbouring title holders and conservation groups.



The farm has been a saviour for tourist workers who lost their jobs because of the pandemic, argues manager Jeremiah Shuaka Saalash

They argued that large-scale agriculture was prohibited in that location under management plans governing land use in the area.

In September, under pressure to revoke KiliAvo's license, NEMA ordered them to stop work while it reviewed the case.

The company challenged that decision in Kenya's environmental tribunal, which this week instructed KiliAvo to halt activity at the farm until the next hearing on March 31. KiliAvo's lawyers did not respond to requests for comment.

The farm has progressed at a clip since that first stop-work order was issued six months ago.

On a morning earlier this month, beneath a snow-capped Kilimanjaro, farmhands laid irrigation lines to water rows of avocado saplings. The property has water tanks, a shaded nursery, and boreholes.

Jeremiah Shuaka Saalash, a KiliAvo shareholder and farm manager, said the farm had "rescued" many tourist workers left jobless when nearby safari lodges closed during the coronavirus pandemic.

He said there was room for both industries to thrive, pointing out that a bigger farm was already harvesting vegetables nearby.

"I am championing for the co-existence of wildlife, and for us to have

another source of income," Saalash told AFP, as tractors tilled the red soil.



Barrier: The electric fence at the KiliAvo Fresh Ltd avocado farm in Kimana

Avocados or elephants?

Adjacent landowners and wildlife experts are adamant the two cannot exist side by side.

They say elephants have already collided with KiliAvo's electric fence—proof that it impedes migratory routes used by an estimated

2,000 tuskers as they depart Amboseli into surrounding lands to breed and find water and pasture.

"Can you imagine if elephants in Amboseli died of starvation so that people in Europe can eat avocados?" Kenyan conservationist Paula Kahumbu, who heads the campaign group Wildlife Direct, told AFP.

The revenue from Kenya's booming avocado business is a blip compared to tourism, which reaped \$1.6 billion in 2019.

Critics warn allowing KiliAvo to proceed would set a dangerous precedent for an already stressed ecosystem being keenly eyed by other farming prospectors.

Billboards advertising land in Kimana, a fast-growing township near Amboseli, hint at the development afoot.



Destroying the habitat through farming will destroy tourism, says Daniel Ole Sambu from the Big Life Foundation, a local wildlife group

Tolstoy, and other wildlife big and small, already compete with cars to cross into Kimana Sanctuary, a crucial linkage between Amboseli, surrounding rangelands, and habitats further beyond in Tsavo and Chyulu Hills parks.

"If we continue like this, Amboseli National Park will be dead," said Daniel Ole Sambu from the Big Life Foundation, a local conservation group.

"These elephants... will go, and the park will be finished. And that would mean tourism in this area would collapse."

Way of life

Traditional landowners say they were inadequately consulted about the proposal and warn industrial irrigation, especially for notoriously thirsty crops like avocados, would further strain the drought-prone ecosystem.

The majority of Masai around KiliAvo agreed to keep their land open so that wildlife but also cattle—the lifeblood of their herding community—could roam free.

Farms and fences threatened the unencumbered movement enjoyed by the Masai for generations, said Samuel Kaanki, the head of an association of 342 title holders whose land surrounds KiliAvo.



Fenced farming threatens the timeless lifestyle of Masai herders, say local landowners

"The Masai culture will be totally lost. We will lose our way of life," he told AFP.

Kahumbu said commercial farming in Kenya had become "far more dangerous for animals than poaching" and urged supermarkets overseas to know what they were buying.

She pointed to UK grocery giant Tesco, which in October cut ties with a major Kenyan avocado plantation accused of workplace abuses.

"You can't call avocado farming in a wilderness area like this sustainable," Kahumbu said.

© 2021 AFP

Citation: From poaching to avocados, Kenya's elephants face new threat (2021, March 18) retrieved 5 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2021-03-poaching-avocados-kenya-elephants-threat.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.