

# Giraffes bring peace to Kenyan communities once at odds

July 22 2024, by Dylan GAMBA

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The number of giraffes in Kenya has declined sharply due to illegal hunting and human encroachment on their habitat.

On a vast farm in Kenya's Rift Valley, a veterinarian carefully takes aim before shooting a tranquiliser dart and sending another giraffe sinking

slowly to the ground before it is roped and blindfolded.

It is the first stage of a delicate operation by the Kenya Wildlife Service to move a group of the endangered animals to a conservancy around 140 kilometers (90 miles) to the east.

The subdued [giraffe](#) is kept at the farm in Sergoit along with seven others for an acclimatization period of about 10 days, before being transported to their new home.

The Rothschild's giraffes, a distinct subspecies, are being resettled in the Ruko Conservancy in Baringo County as part of a long-running initiative to ease communal tensions there.

While the East African nation is renowned for its spectacular wildlife, its northern counties such as Baringo are more often in the news for banditry and ethnic clashes.

The rival Pokot and Ilchamus communities in Baringo had been at odds for decades, their feuds sometimes escalating into armed clashes.

In the mid-2000s, Pokot and Ilchamus elders took matters into their own hands, launching an initiative to resettle the Rothschild's, or Nubian, giraffes into the Ruko conservancy around 280 kilometers north of the capital Nairobi.



Kenya Wildlife Service vet Matthew Mutinda gets ready to shoot a tranquiliser dart at a giraffe.

The goal was twofold: reintroduce an [endangered species](#) to a region it had previously deserted, and restore peace to the two communities.

The elders hoped the world's tallest mammals would attract tourists and income, quelling tensions in the neglected region by providing employment in an area where many young people -- like elsewhere in Kenya -- struggle to find jobs.

And, said 34-year-old reserve manager Rebbly Sebei, it seems to have worked.

"Back 20 years before, Pokot and Ilchamus had a conflict that erupted because of livestock theft and resulted in loss of life, loss of livestock and pushing people to move away from their homeland," she told AFP.

"This place became deserted, where we are now today was a battleground for the bandits."

But now, she said, the gentle creatures are helping to "ensure that there is peace between the two communities".



The operation to subdue the animals takes place on a Rift Valley farm.

## 'One community'

Giraffes have seen a dramatic decline in numbers in Kenya in recent decades, as a result of poaching and human encroachment on their habitats.

As the Sergoit giraffes -- securely trussed in the back of trucks -- made their way slowly towards the reserve, people from the Pokot and Ilchamus communities held welcome celebrations.

Sixteen hours after their departure from Sergoit, having navigated hazardous bridges and low-hanging electrical wires, the giraffes finally arrived at their new home.

The group was to be acclimatized in a small pen before being released into the Ruko reserve, now home to nearly 20 giraffes, both Rothschild's and Masai.

As people sang and danced in celebration while awaiting the new arrivals, Douglas Longomo, a 27-year-old farmer, said he believed that his Pokot community had changed.



The giraffes are blindfolded before their transfer.



Members of the community gather to welcome the giraffes being relocated to the Ruko Conservancy.



The journey takes around 16 hours.





Women wear traditional attire as the community celebrates the arrival of the giraffes.

"It took time to understand that the conservancy is important to bring people together," Longomo said.

Many could not see the point of ending the clashes that have scarred the Rift Valley area for decades, he added.

"Now we are seeing we are living as one community, we can move freely without any fear."

Longomo's views were echoed by 28-year-old James Parkitore from the Ilchamus community.

"I think (the conflict) is over now because we are interacting," he said.

"I hope those giraffes will (create) great jobs for the communities," said Parkitore, a view shared by Longomo.

Sebei added a note of caution, however, saying that while an increase in tourism had helped, there were still some lingering disputes between the two ethnic groups.

But, she said, "there is peace, and we need to bring more giraffes".

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Citation: Giraffes bring peace to Kenyan communities once at odds (2024, July 22) retrieved 22 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-giraffes-peace-kenyan-communities-odds.html>

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