More Cattle, Less Bull

Introduction

The United Republic of Tanzania is home to some of the most breathtaking scenes of natural phenomena remaining on Earth. The nation’s unique combination of stunning landscapes and charismatic wildlife has made Tanzania a top destination for safari tourism worldwide—so much so that tourism has come to make up a sizeable segment of the young nation’s rapidly growing economy. In 2016, tourism accounted for 13.3% of the country’s GDP and 11.6% of total employment, which translates to roughly US$2.1 billion and 1.4 million jobs (World Travel & Tourism Council 2017, pg. 1). The Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) alone hosts between 250,000-300,000 tourists annually, bringing in upwards of US$10 million in revenue for the state-run venture (Renton 2009, pg. 4). Still, 70% of the 70,000 Maasai pastoralists living in the NCA continue to live in poverty, and 15% of Maasai children do not survive to celebrate their fifth birthdays (4).

It is apparent profit generated from ecotourism is not being dispersed equitably among local pastoralist communities. This is, however, one snowflake of the giant glacier representing the injustices Maasai people have endured in the name of safari tourism. Though it is well-known that exclusionary models of conservation are rooted in colonial ideals of white supremacy and socioeconomic elitism, there is little awareness of the ways in which contemporary national parks continue to perpetuate these problematic notions. By indexing a Western framework in which conservation and pastoralism are considered categorically and mutually exclusive, modern conservation models have resulted in the forced eviction of thousands of Maasai people.
Contrary to popular belief, the displacement and assault of pastoralist people at the hands of state authorities and/or foreign investors is far from a bygone colonial history.

Even today, park authorities continue to terrorize Maasai communities for occupying the same lands that have sustained their pastoralist predecessors for centuries. In mid-August—less than three weeks before the beginning of this course—the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs received reports that nearly 200 Maasai bomas in Loliondo were burned down by state and local forces, destroying the homes and other properties of almost 7,000 people (Lang 2017). Still, this brutal ongoing abuse against defenseless pastoralists communities is seldom, if ever, mentioned in the mainstream global dialogue surrounding ecotourism.

**Background**

Situated between Serengeti National Park and Ngorongoro Conservation Area, the Loliondo division has been a subject of much contention for quite some time. Populated primarily by Maasai pastoralists, “the area has served as a critical site for the state to claim territory in the name of global conservation and national development” (Gardner 2012, pg. 382). Following independence in 1961, the central government seized control of virtually all natural resources, essentially allowing state-run national parks to operate as the sole proprietors of safari tourism (383). The nation’s shift towards an increasingly liberalized economy in the last few decades of the twentieth century led to the emergence of several new neoliberal conservation initiatives. Recognizing Loliondo’s potential for commodification, some international investors have sought to include previously marginalized pastoralists by providing locals with the opportunity to capitalize on the rising international market for tourism and trophy hunting (Gardner 2016).
At the outset, community based conservation was intended to make local people stakeholders in the ripe industry of safari tourism. Such arrangements quickly became notorious for failing to bring to fruition the promises they initially proposed to the communities at hand. The Loliondo Maasai in particular have a long history of being taken advantage of by both government agencies and private foreign investors. The relationship between the people of Loliondo and the Dubai-based Othello Business Corporation (OBC) is one such instance: despite having coexisted in relative harmony with OBC’s game hunters for nearly twenty years, on July 4, 2009, Maasai pastoralists awoke to a violent and forced evacuation by state police (77). In another instance, a failed state-run barley farming company, Tanzanian Breweries Limited (TBL), leased thousands of acres in the heart of Loliondo to the Boston-based tourism company Thomson Safaris in 2009. Within months, Thomson Safaris’ project manager “ordered the destruction and burning of all structures on the property and prevented the Maasai from grazing and watering their livestock anywhere inside the [Thomson] boundaries” (108). These episodes are characteristic of the fundamentally exploitative dynamic that results from the collusion between state authorities and private capital to profit optimally from ecotourism, a phenomenon that continues to be abundantly present.

The forcible displacement of local pastoralists by stakeholders within the ecotourism industry is still rampant; as mentioned earlier, 7,000 local people were violently evicted from their homes just this past August. Even so, private ecotourism companies have managed to construct a dominant narrative of safari tourism as a sustainable and ethical enterprise. Broadly, the ecotourism sector has done a sound job of marketing itself as being generally advantageous to local communities. While other implicitly exploitative ventures such as service-based trips to developing countries have been debunked at large as playgrounds for the rich, there has been
essentially zero mainstream coverage of the similarly detrimental effects of safari tourism (Wesby 2015).

Hypotheses

While studying the course texts over the summer, I was astonished by how ignorant I had been of the grave injustices Maasai pastoralists have been enduring due to tourism. Once embarking on the trip, I was admittedly disappointed to learn repeatedly that even adults who had been on East African safaris in the past knew little about the problematic roots of ecotourism and even less about the modern manifestations of those exclusionary ideals. I could not help but wonder how given the scope, gravity, and ongoing nature of these human rights violations, it would be normal for the average tourist to be clueless about them. This lead me to explore two hypotheses regarding the dominant perception of ecotourism among Western consumers. First, I hypothesized that private ecotourism companies were leveraging their disproportionate access to and influence of mainstream media outlets to mask the atrocities perpetuated by their ventures. Second, I hypothesized that the Tanzanian central government has largely been complicit in censoring attempts by both locals and visitors to communicate these ongoing violations with consumers on a mainstream platform.

Methods

Due to the course’s very limited window for research, I used as my primary source of data a case study of Thomson Safaris’ presence in Loliondo following the travel company’s acquisition of several thousand acres in the region. Because the story was initially presented to me in an academic framework through Selling the Serengeti, I got the idea to juxtapose Benjamin Gardner’s scholastic, ethnographic account of the dispute at Sukenya Farms with primary sources from Thomson Safaris recounting the same situation. Analyzing the rhetoric employed
by each party would allow me to identify any deliberate effort from Thomson Safaris to spin the facts of the case to reflect more favorably upon the company. I contextualized that case study by searching for other instances in Loliondo of similar exploitation by private tourism companies and/or government authorities, and I reviewed popular online travel forums in order to gauge the issues currently dominating the safari tourism dialogue. Finally, I spoke extensively with our tour guides throughout the trip about safari tourism in general as well as their personal experiences with the industry and with Hoopoe Safaris specifically. I did not use this information during my presentation as many of the guides requested to remain anonymous and I did not want to risk creating an uncomfortable and potentially unsafe environment for them.

Findings

In my case study of the dispute between Thomson Safaris and the Loliondo Maasai, I found glaring discrepancies between Gardner’s account of the events that transpired and Thomson Safaris’ blog posts on the matter. According to Gardner, the land in question was seized by the central government (as were all park lands and wildlife) following Tanzania’s independence in 1961. Then, between 1987 and 1989, the site served as an unsuccessful state-run barley farm known as Tanzania Breweries Limited (TBL). After TBL abandoned the region in 1989, the site became a key area for local Maasai groups to graze and water livestock. In 2006, Thomson Safaris signed a 96-year exclusive land lease with TBL for 12,617 acres in the heart of several Loliondo villages, shortly after which Thomson’s project manager ordered the burning and destruction of all local property (Gardner 2016, pg. 106-108). For years to come, Thomson Safaris would use local authorities to continue the terrorization of pastoralists all while simultaneously expanding their safari services.
Today, the company’s site boasts of Thomson’s unparalleled, intimate knowledge of Tanzania and longstanding investment in conservation issues as well as pastoralist communities. TS has accrued a laundry list of impressive international accolades that testify to the company’s adeptness at providing luxury safari experiences through a sustainable and ethical partnership with local communities. When Thomson got word that negative reviews of its project at Sukenya Farm had begun circulating, the company created an entire blog dedicated to spotlighting its own altruism throughout Tanzania. Their blog entry pertaining to Sukenya Farm neglects to mention any instance of even minimal discord between Thomson Safaris and local pastoralists. TS maintains an active presence on many of the most popular online safari forums, even going as far as to regularly respond to unfavorable comments made by single online users. The company has also in the past issued very lengthy statements delineating nearly every criticism one could find of Thomson online and debunking each of them, usually rather poorly. While positive public relations are certainly an integral aspect of any successful enterprise, the resources Thomson Safaris expends in addressing niche claims made by rogue individuals is compulsive at best and deceitful at worst.

The Tanzanian government, on the other hand, is frustratingly laconic in publicly addressing issues regarding ecotourism. There is basically no engagement from central government officials with journalists, academics, or really anyone seeking to disambiguate local reports of human rights violations. What it lacks in words, however, the central government more than makes up for in action. First of all, every instance of forced expulsion I found was facilitated by the mobilization of state or local armed forces, which can only be authorized by government means. This alone is demonstrative of the state’s allegiance, which may be to either profit or foreign investors, but definitely not to local communities.
Further, as demonstrated during our own trip, state authorities have made it cumbersome for visitors to access Maasai communities through independent or non-state channels. Our experience is not unique; there are numerous online accounts from journalists and other inquisitive visitors who report facing the distressing consequences for visiting villages not predetermined as state sanctioned tourism sites. In one entry on her online blog *Views from the Termite Mound*, Sweden-based tourist and blogger Susanna recounts the story of being labeled a “prohibited immigrant in Tanzania” by authorities in Arusha after someone discovered she had been inquiring about Thomson’s land grabbing in Loliondo, which she first read about in an online travel forum. In addition to having her passport confiscated, Susanna also reported she was arrested for two nights and denied all contact to outside parties (Susanna 2010, pg. 1). Upon her release, Susanna had both a stamp in her passport and an official document indicating her classification as a prohibited immigrant and was forced to spend the rest of her trip in Kenya, where she reported finding her computer had been tampered with severely. Susanna actually started her blog as a result of being effectively blacklisted from the travel forum community since her “information was no longer welcome” (Susanna, *About Me* section in margin of blog).

Perhaps most shocking is the case of New Zealand-born photojournalist Trent Keegan. According to Kenyan police, Keegan’s body was found dead in a trench next to a highway in Nairobi on May 28, 2008 (“Trent Keegan”). The legal proceedings following Keegan’s tragic death have been largely inconclusive, but there are a few salient circumstances of this case that are hard to ignore. The following excerpt from the Committee to Protect Journalists’ page on the late journalist provides a solid foundation for the ambiguities surrounding Keegan’s murder.

Prior to his death, Keegan had told friends via e-mail that he was investigating a land dispute in northern Tanzania between local Maasai and the Massachusetts-based Thomson Safaris Company. Keegan said that while he was reporting in Tanzania people representing themselves as police and employees of the safari company had visited him
and questioned him about his work. He said in the e-mails that he was concerned about his safety. A spokeswoman for Thomson Safaris told CPJ that the company was unaware that Keegan was working on a story about its operations (“Trent Keegan”).

Though his death was ultimately ruled a robbery, those close to Keegan are skeptical of this conclusion for a myriad of reasons, all of which cannot be sufficiently addressed within the constraints of this paper (Renton 2009, pg. 6). In essence, the most pressing evidence contradicting the robbery motive is that Keegan’s wallet—with its contents intact—was still on his person when police found his body (“Trent Keegan”). To make matters even more curious, the only items belonging to Keegan reported missing after his death were his camera, laptop, external hard drive, and discs—all of which he would have used for his work (“Trent Keegan”).

Conclusions

Thomson Safaris’ access to numerous media platforms has given the company a disproportionate advantage in shaping the mainstream global discourse surrounding ecotourism. TS has the means as well as the incentive to invest heavily in maintaining a manicured reputation. Given that the company’s success is primarily contingent on its notoriety among high net worth individuals as an ethical luxury travel company, it is logical that TS would allocate resources to protecting the (perceived) integrity of its brand. Thomson Safaris may be unique in the vigor the company exerts shutting down every ill mention of its name, but its very ability to do so is indicative of the monopoly companies like TS have in shaping the overall narrative around contemporary safari tourism. It is important to acknowledge that Thomson is only one of countless tour providers and thus it would be unfair to characterize every other company based on TS’s behavior. Nonetheless, this data supports my initial hypothesis that ecotourism companies are able to leverage their grossly disproportionate access to media to keep concealed the atrocities they continue to perpetuate against Maasai pastoralists.
Due to its general lack of public statements regarding the ethics of the tourism sector, it is difficult to precisely characterize the Tanzanian government’s sentiments towards pastoralism. Nonetheless, the central government has engaged in many acts that reinforce its fidelity to private tourism companies. For one, state agencies’ historical tendency to align with foreign private capital—as in the cases of OBC and Sukenya Farm—is a strong indicator that the state’s priorities lie in its development as a modern nation-state trying to strengthen its standing in a global neoliberal market. Further, the fact that all instances of violent expulsion and various other assaults on pastoralists have been made possible only, if not predominantly, through the mobilization of local and state military forces is strongly suggestive of the central government’s unfavorable attitude towards pastoralist people. The central government has repeatedly and violently stripped a very vulnerable demographic of their homes and property for the benefit of ventures backed by foreign capital; to characterize the state’s role as in these ongoing atrocities as “complicit,” per the language in my second hypothesis, would be a gross understatement.

Recommendations

It can be tempting to advocate for abolishing the exploitative industry of safari tourism altogether as the best available means of protecting vulnerable pastoralist communities from further violence and destabilization. However, it would be naïve not to foresee the avalanche of problems that would ensue if 13% of Tanzania’s GDP suddenly ceased to exist. The unfortunate reality is that the young state is operating within a much larger system of global capitalism favoring players who trade the most goods and services. Forfeiting an opportunity to capitalize on its natural assets would also be forfeiting one critical avenue by which Tanzania can better its international economic standing and ultimately provide a greater standard of living for each individual. As citizens of the West who have examined the damage ecotourism continues to
inflict on pastoralist communities within an academic framework and then had the privilege of traveling across the world to see it all for ourselves, we have a responsibility to be intentional in leveraging our various positions of privilege. One effortless way we can do this is by ensuring that we include pastoralist experiences of displacement and violence at the forefront of our conversations when gushing to friends and family about our Tanzanian safari experience. Between chronicling the charisma of baby elephants and the spectacular view from the top of the Ngorongoro Crater, we must ensure to also include descriptions of the Maasai clusters we saw on the outskirts of nearly every national park, comprised of those violently removed from their previous dwellings within the park boundaries. Further, as members of a grossly wealthy and influential institution, we have the unique advantage of building personal relationships with the very high net worth individuals that make up much of the ecotourism clientele. Though it may be exhausting at times, we have a responsibility to make sure those high net worth individuals within our networks are partnering with the most ethical safari companies available and asking the right questions of their tour providers. These high net worth individuals are also often stakeholders in foreign development efforts and other Western projects in vulnerable developing countries. Pushing a few influential stakeholders to earnestly prioritize the wellbeing of pastoralist communities could induce a fresh culture of genuine equity and transparency in international development work.
Works Cited


