

Long-term research, conservation, and sustainability in protected areas

Jessica Hartel^{1,2} and Casper Andersen¹

¹Centre for Biocultural History, Aarhus University

²Kibale Chimpanzee Project, Kibale National Park, Uganda

In 2010, the Maasai Mara was placed on UNESCO's Tentative List for evaluating its candidacy for inclusion as a World Heritage Site. Its adjacent sister ecosystem, the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, was given World Heritage status in 1981. The World Heritage List has been in operation for 40 years providing abundant empirical material for measuring the long-term effects of World Heritage status to determine under what circumstances the status provides beneficial or detrimental outcomes. In terms of conservation and sustainability, achieving World Heritage Site status affords many benefits that generates international attention, ecotourism, research, funding, local pride, UN affiliation, governmental cooperation, NGO development, and Geneva Convention protection. Developing a long-term field site will provide both research and conservation initiatives that will further demonstrate the importance of the Maasai Mara and may help further promote its inclusion as a World Heritage Site. To analyse the effects of World Heritage Status of the Mara, we need to investigate systematically the process and negotiations in the UNESCO heritage system pertaining to the status of the Mara. A research station can also contribute to long-term capacity building that can help to make World Heritage status a beneficial factor in the promotion sustainable natural and cultural heritage management in the Mara.

Along these lines, World Heritage status can also serve as a buffer to the ongoing human-wildlife conflict in the Mara, which is currently the biggest threat to the reserves longevity. As the human population continues to grow, so does the rate of species extinction. With a rapidly growing human population that presses hard at the reserves boundary, the human-wildlife conflict in the Maasai Mara has intensified as farms expand and reroute migrating wildlife. This conflict leads to local populations developing negative attitudes towards the wildlife and the reserve. While the Mara is home to rich biodiversity and the highly publicized 'largest terrestrial migration on earth', local populations are the ones often victimized by wildlife ranging outside of the reserve – entering into their gardens and killing their livestock. Scientists, conservationists, NGOs, tourists, and local populations must therefore find more effective modes of communication and collaboration in culturally appropriate/sensitive ways if the Maasai Mara – Serengeti ecosystem has a chance at long-term survival. Recently preliminary data from long-term great ape research sites have shown that long-term research investment promotes conservation of species and habitat, education, and local sustainability. We are interested in investigating this relationship from a biocultural perspective and how natural and cultural heritage affects research and conservation over time in the Maasai Mara. We propose a multi-level approach that incorporates an active research, conservation, and education program modeled after the Kibale Chimpanzee Project, Kibale Snare Removal Program, and the Kasiisi Project, respectively.