

Ngorongoro: A sparkling tourism jewel

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Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa ordered early this year that a fresh human population census and a cattle count be carried out in Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority (NCAA). The census will be carried out starting next month. The move aims at flushing out invaders. The initiative will see a meticulous registration of local residents and their livestock. The cattle will be branded clearly in a manner that will help identify their owners. Any invading livestock and their owners will be ordered out of the famous World Heritage Site.



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The upshot is to conserve the environment. Located in northern Tanzania, Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) shares part of the Serengeti plains to the northwest and with the city of Arusha, municipality of Moshi and Mount Kilimanjaro to the east. Ngorongoro also forms part of the Serengeti ecosystem and is home to about 2.5 million wild animals, a huge population, indeed. The area is one of the most favoured tourist spots not only in Tanzania, but also the entire world.

A major ecological survey of the Serengeti Reserve (which then included Ngorongoro) by Dr Bernhard Grzimek and his son in the late 1950s resulted in the establishment of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in 1959. The conservation area became a pioneering experiment in multiple land use where pastoralism, conservation, and tourism could co-exist. At the same time, Serengeti National Park was enlarged and extended northwards to the Kenyan border, where it borders the Maasai Mara Game Park in Kenya

Subsequently awarded World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve status, the NCA covers 8,292 square kilometres and ranges in altitude from 1,020 metres to 3,587 metres. The terrain embraces several distinct habitats from open grasslands to mountain forest and from scrub bushland to highland heath. An estimated 25,000 wild animals live in the Crater throughout the year, whilst in the NCA as a whole, the numbers can swell to more than 2.5m, depending on the season.

The NCA aims to maintain the historic balance of people and nature in a way which has not been possible in many parts of Africa. At stake are the rich biodiversity and ecology of the Serengeti plains and Ngorongoro highlands, the major archaeological sites and the vital water catchment areas.

Where man and wildlife have to live together

Within all this, man and wildlife have to live together without harming or destroying each other's habitats. Man and his ancestors have lived in the Ngorongoro ecosystem for more than three million years. Evidence of a regional hunter-gatherer culture dates back 17,000 years and it is clear that various tribes have migrated in and out of the area, just as they have done in relatively recent times.

Nine volcanoes in the Ngorongoro highlands were formed during the past four million years. One of the volcanoes, Ol Doinyo Lengai (Mountain of God) is still active. Over millennia the ash and dust from each eruption have been carried by the winds to form the fertile soils of the Serengeti Plains.

The earliest sign of mankind in the NCA is at Laetoli where hominid footprints are preserved in volcanic rock 3.6m years old. Further north, Oldupai Gorge has yielded a wealth of hominid and animal remains.

Ngorongoro's crown jewels

The jewel in Ngorongoro's crown is a deep volcanic crater - the largest unbroken caldera in the world - 19.2 kilometres in diameter; 610 metres deep and 304 square kilometers in area. This pasture and permanent water supports up to 25,000 predominantly grazing animals. These include wildebeests, zebras, gazelles, buffaloes, elands, kongoni (hartebeest), and warthogs.



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The swamps and forest provide additional resources for hippos, elephants, waterbucks, reedbucks, bushbucks, baboons and vervet monkeys. Cheetahs live in the crater. The steep inner slopes provide a habitat for dik-diks and the rare mountain reedbucks. Jackals thrive in the crater and bat-eared foxes live in the short grass areas. Predatory animals such as lions, leopards, cheetahs, and several species of lesser wild cats live off the abundant wildlife.

Large packs of hyenas roam the crater making their own kills and scavenging from the kills of other predators. The crater is a dynamic and constantly changing ecosystem and the numbers and proportion of some animals have fluctuated considerably over the past 30 years. Lions are abundant in the crater. There are five main crater prides of between 10 and 20 animals, each defending its own territory.

Only male elephants descend regularly to the Ngorongoro Crater floor. The large breeding herds wander throughout the forest rim where they find the most suitable food. Black rhinos in the Ngorongoro Crater are relatively safe to approach. Their population is relatively small - about 20 individuals. The crater is one of only a few places in East Africa where visitors can be certain of seeing rhinos.



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The Leraï Forest in the southwest of the crater is dominated by yellow-barked acacia trees. Here visitors find large herds of elands and elephants. Also present are vervet monkeys, bushbucks, tree hyraxes, francolins, saddle-billed storks, vultures, and eagles. A picnic site is located in the forest.

Lake Magadi is alkaline mainly due to deposits of volcanic ash. The depth, never more than three metres, varies during the year. During the dry season, it shrinks dramatically. The lake's edges are favourite stalking grounds for golden jackals, lions, and hyenas. Gorogor Swamp, which rises from Ngoitokitok Springs, is home to many waterbirds. Hippos lounge in the deeper parts of the swamp and grazing animals come to drink.

Further afield, Ol Doinyo Lengai is a volcano located outside the NCA, to the north-east near Lake Natron. This volcano has had a major influence on the development of the area. Its ash has blown westwards onto the plains and helped shape the landscape and ecology. It is the only active volcano in the area, having erupted in 1966 and 1983.



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The Northern Highland Forest Reserve extends in a wide band along the outer, southern and eastern slopes of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. It is a vital source of water for wildlife and people living in the conservation area. The southern area is used for farming. The forest is home to elephants, buffaloes, the elusive leopards and many species of birds. Visitors approaching Ngorongoro by the southern route pass through part of the forest before arriving at the Ngorongoro Crater rim where they see a wide view of the caldera.

Although smaller than the Ngorongoro Crater, Olmoti and Embakaai craters in the north of the NCA are noted for their beauty and solitude. The floors of both craters are easily accessible on foot, but the NCA advises visitors to be accompanied by local guides. The rim of Olmoti Crater stands at 3,700 metres but the crater itself is relatively shallow. The grassy caldera is home to elands, bushbucks and sometimes buffaloes, along with the Maasai and their livestock.

Water flows across the crater to the south side where it pours out through a cleft.

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