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CSRF Analysis: Conservation with the People

Considering local communities' perspectives in conservation with particular reference to the Kidepo Game Reserve

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Summary

Wildlife conservation and land management knowledge and practices are deeply enshrined in the socio-cultural and economic life of South Sudanese communities that live around wildlife areas. Some of these indigenous conservation practices have been eroded by crises, climatic hazards and small arms proliferation, which drive and enable greater reliance on wildlife as a source of food and livelihoods. Yet, communities still retain important knowledge, values and cultures around wildlife that could be crucial resources for conservation.

This analysis discusses the critical role that communities must play in the growth of the conservation sector in South Sudan, especially in Kidepo Game Reserve. It emphasises the need for consultation and dialogue with communities before and throughout any conservation initiatives. It advocates a conflict-sensitive approach to avoid causing or exacerbating conflicts in wildlife protected areas. The analysis suggests practical recommendations for government, aid actors and other private conservation investments to consider for greater participation by communities to ensure that conflict is reduced as the sector is being developed.

"Kidepo is that unique story. Despite the failures of our wildlife services, there are still animals there and that itself is a motivation, after years of fighting and killing in the areas since 1983."[1]

Introduction

South Sudan's Kidepo Game Reserve (KGR) is indeed a unique story. Currently the country's only protected area covering semi-arid habitat type, it encompasses a striking and varied landscape centring on the Kidepo river valley:

"The vegetation can best be described as open tree savannah which varies much in structure and composition - mosaic of savanna, grassland, and woodland habitats and dense thickets. Dry riverbeds zig zag across the reserve, with Kidepo Riverbanks covered by riverine vegetation of Borassus palm trees. Expansive grassy plains are dotted with big rocky outcrops and flanked by steep jagged mountains and inselbergs from which one can obtain stunning views in all directions. Low ranges of rocky hills are covered in scrub. The Dongotona Mountains and Didinga Hills are covered with montane forest and shrubland. This mosaic provides a diversity of resources for wildlife. The Kidepo game reserve also contains a relatively large human population, especially on the hills near the Ugandan border, and is important as a grazing area for all the pastoralists, cattle-owning people, living on either side of the valley. The reserve is a territory of a number of different agro-pastoralist ethnic groups, including the Lango, Logir, Didinga, Buya and Lotuko. Each of these peoples have distinct traditions, culture, and livelihood activities".[2]

Recent patterns of conflict and food insecurity in and around the KGR also have their specific dynamics, which need to be understood before and as part of any attempts to conserve these environments and wildlife.

[1] Interview with male wildlife officer, Ikwoto County, 19 April 2025.

[2] Antoninova M., Okieh J.O., Oler E., Kenyi S., Mungu M.K. and Debref K., *Wet season aerial survey of Kidepo Game Reserve, South Sudan*, Enjojo Foundation (2022), p. 5.

Yet, despite the unique features of the region, many of the challenges and tensions around conservation in the KGR raise issues and themes of importance to conflict-sensitive conservation in South Sudan more broadly. This analysis draws on preliminary research (rather than extensive fieldwork) in the KGR by Machot Amuom in April 2025, involving four key informant interviews and four focus group discussions with a total of 31 participants in four bomas in the payams of Ikwoto, Chorokol, Isohe and Losite. The fieldwork was limited by time and by the transport and weather challenges in the area, which made travel to Budi County impossible. This preliminary research nevertheless reveals several key issues which merit deeper research and consideration by any organisations or government departments seeking to engage in conservation work, both within and beyond the KGR. Our analysis also draws on wider studies and our own previous research.

To emphasise the importance of a conflict-sensitive approach to conservation, the analysis is structured around the main forms of real or potential conflict that need to be considered in any conservation initiatives: 1) conflict between people and wildlife; 2) conflict between conservation actors and local people; 3) conflicts within and between local communities; and 4) national, cross-border or other wider conflicts.

1. Human-wildlife conflict

1.1 Local-level mitigation of human-wildlife conflicts before the 1980s

Relations between people and many wild species have often been antagonistic: throughout human history in the region of what is now South Sudan, people have hunted animals for various reasons and to varying extents, as well as cutting trees and other plants for fuel, building materials and other uses. In turn, some animals have preyed on people's livestock or crops, from elephants and lions to birds and locusts. It is important not to romanticise 'indigenous' human relations with wild species or imagine a past time when people lived in harmony with nature: as humans, we have always preyed upon and destroyed other forms of life in order to make our own lives. Nevertheless, people in South Sudan invariably talk about their perception of change in these relations with wildlife over the past few decades from co-existence to greater destructiveness (see section 1.3).

There is certainly evidence that wild animals existed in large numbers in the region until the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005) – and still do exist in large numbers in some areas – suggesting that human-wildlife co-existence has been possible.[3] There could even be mutual benefits: for example, elephants opened up grasslands and made pathways through dense bush; they also dug water-holes and salt-licks, all of which were useful to people and livestock as well as other species.[4] In turn some wild animals benefit from human-made water sources or from mingling with livestock for protection, and people also relied on some species to warn them of dangers like lions.[5] Wider studies have shown that pastoralist livelihoods have been particularly compatible with – and valuable for – wildlife in the African savannahs, by creating and maintaining grazing

[3] J. H. Blower, *Wildlife Conservation and Management in Southern Sudan*. FAO Final Report; Project FO: DP/SUD/76/021. Rome: Food and Agricultural Organisation, 1977; Philip Winter, *Conflict and Conservation in South Sudan*, CSRF Blog, 2024.

[4] Isaac Waanzi Hillary, Machot Amuom and Cherry Leonardi, *Elephants Are Stories Now: Understanding the loss of elephants in South Sudan* (Rift Valley Institute, London, 2024).

[5] Ranga Gworo, personal communication and *How do local communities conserve wildlife in South Sudan? Conflict sensitive considerations for conservation agencies* CSRF Blog, 2024

for a wide range of wild species and usually conducting only a very limited amount of hunting.[6]

If human-wildlife relations were characterised by greater capacity for co-existence in the past, this was not simply a natural state of affairs but something that required institutions, laws and the will to make this work. At a local level, there were (usually hereditary) positions of authority and responsibility for particular aspects of relations between communities and their environments, including "powers to safely manage wildlife-human conflict".[7] The specific names and forms of these customary institutions vary across different languages, livelihoods and cultures in South Sudan, but often include a chief or king/queen[8] of the rain (including among Eastern Equatorian groups such as the Otuho (Latuka) and neighbouring groups to the west of the Kidepo river) and a chief of the land or soil, such as the *monye kak* in Bari languages, the Didinga *bang ti lotu* or the Nuer *kuar muon*. Their authority was exercised and legitimised through spiritual beliefs and ritual practices but also entailed practical and political aspects such as allocation of land and regulation of hunting and cultivation. Some societies have also had collective, generational forms of governance through 'age-sets', 'age-grades' and/or 'age-classes', including the communities in the Kidepo area: the most well-known are the *monyomiji* age-classes among Otuho-speaking and neighbouring communities. Again, they enforced rules such as hunting regulations through social and spiritual sanctions.[9]

Control mattered because people valued wild animals, plants and environments for their uses and benefits to people: women in particular would have considerable knowledge of wild foods and medicines as part of their roles in childcare and household nutrition. Wild species were also valued for their admirable attributes that made people revere certain trees and use sacred groves as burial sites for special leaders, or adopt particular animals as the totem of their clan, i.e. a species to which the clan are spiritually related. All the focus groups in Kidepo spoke at length about special totemic relationships held by each clan with a particular species, such as crocodiles, baboons, monkeys, gazelles, elephants and eagles, which the associated clan would avoid killing. But even animals that were hunted and killed were also respected, particularly if they were formidable opponents for hunters; Nuer hunters were reported to require special rituals after killing an elephant because elephants were considered to be related to and equivalent to humans.[10] Human-wildlife conflicts were mitigated through rituals performed by clan elders for their totem species or by particular spiritual leaders such as the Nuba elephant priest 'whose job was to protect crops from marauding elephants' and whose services were also sought by neighbouring Shilluk communities.[11]

Because wild species were valued in these ways, there were vested interests in controlling

[6] E.g. J. B. Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti: a history of landscape memory in Tanzania (*Athens, OH, 2007); F. Lankester and A. Davis, 'Pastoralism and wildlife: historical and current perspectives in the East African rangelands of Kenya and Tanzania', *Revue scientifique et technique* (International Office of Epizootics) 35:2 (2016), pp. 473-484, available at https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/133710/.

[7] Gworo. *How do local communities conserve wildlife*?

[8] The titles might also be translated as master, owner, priest, or lord, because there are no direct English equivalents.

[9] Simon Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan* (Fountain, Kampala, 2017 revised ed.), esp. Chapter 2: 'Ethnological connections between the Nile and the Kidepo'; M. H. Fetterman, 'Drought, cattle disease, colonialism and lokembe: One hundred years of change among the pastoralist Didinga, eastern Equatoria Province, Sudan' (Brown University PhD thesis, 1992.

[10] P. P. Howell, 'A Note on Elephants and Elephant Hunting among the Nuer', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 26 (1945): 95-103

[11] S. L. Kasfir, "Ivory from Zariba Country to the Land of Zinj" in D. Ross (ed.), *Elephant: The Animal and its Ivory in African Culture* (University of California, 1992), pp. 309-27, at p. 318; Gworo, *How do local communities conserve wildlife*?

how, when and by whom they could be killed and used. Customary rules around the division of spoils from individual or collective hunts often involved the recognition of territorial authority: hunters in Kajokeji, for example, had to give a portion of the animal to the 'owner' or chief of the territory on which it was killed.[12] Zande rulers in nineteenth-century Western Equatoria demanded all the ivory and their choice of meat from communal hunts organised using signals on huge drums.[13] Among communities between the Nile and the Kidepo, hunting was a more egalitarian activity requiring community organisation and cooperation, often led by the *monyomiji*.[14] Communities also had rules to ensure that resources would be available in future years and to the next generations, such as prohibitions on cutting down long-living fruit and nut trees in Central Equatoria.[15]

1.2 Government mitigation of human-wildlife conflicts

These more local forms of conservation often share much in common across different communities, though they also take specific forms that need to be researched more fully, especially in terms of whether practices have survived or evolved up to now. At the same time, there has been a long history of government efforts to control and manage human-wildlife conflicts in South Sudan. This has often provoked tensions with local communities, as discussed below, but some of the laws and government regulations have nevertheless become absorbed into local bodies of knowledge and understandings of what conservation is. In Kidepo, people associated conservation laws and enforcement primarily with the protection of big animals.

"I remember in 1981, there were many rangers around the villages. Bush meat was enjoyed only with high secrecy. There were no guns. The guns were for rangers and the police. I was a young man. Yes, we would go hunting and take down some few small animals with arrows and eat there before you come back home. It was a serious crime to go around with the bushmeat selling it. It was worse when it was an elephant tusk or leopard skin. Some people were arrested and taken to Torit because they killed a giraffe. The government is advising people to stop killing big animals: buffalos, elephants and giraffe."[16]

Perhaps the most important aspect of the history of state conservation in relation to human-wildlife conflict, however, is its emphasis on protecting people from dangerous or destructive wild animals (rather than protecting wildlife from people). The game department responsible for early wildlife conservation in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan was criticised for being the 'game destruction department' because of its willingness to give out lucrative hunting licenses.[17] But more significantly, the colonial government did see one of its roles as being the protection of people from wild animals, especially if the people were cultivating crops that the government wanted them to grow for export or food security. This role was a lasting one: in Zande-speaking communities in Western Equatoria, wildlife officers up until recently were termed 'shooters-of-elephants' because

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[12] Interviews in 2014 in Cherry Leonardi, 'Patchwork states: the localisation of state territoriality on the South Sudan-Uganda border, 1914-2014', *Past & Present* 248:1 (2020), 209-58, at pp. 229-30.

[13] Kasfir, 'Ivory from Zariba Country', p. 312.

[14] Simonse, *Kings of Disaster*, pp. 76-77.

[15] Bryan Adkins, Charcoal Production and Use in South Sudan: A Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) South Sudan Action Plan for Mitigating Environmental Impacts, Juba: United States Agency for International Development/WCS, 2018; Cherry Leonardi, Abraham Diing Akoi, Alimure Modi Waran, Jedeit J. Riek, Machot Amuom, Tabu Elder and Leben Nelson Moro, *Fuelling Poverty: The challenges of accessing energy among urban households in Juba, South Sudan* (Rift Valley Institute, London, 2020).

[16] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 17 April 2025.

[17] Jane Carruthers, 'Lessons from South Africa: War and Wildlife Protection in the Southern Sudan, 1917–1921', *Environmental History* 3 (1997): 299-321.

in the past they responded to community reports of crop-eating elephants by shooting one or more of the animals.[18]

This illustrates a kind of longstanding sense of contractual relations between people and governments in relation to wildlife. If people's own hunting practices were restricted by colonial governments, they at least expected the wildlife department to provide them with protection from the harmful effects of wild animals.

Such 'contractual' dimensions of conservation may be crucially important, particularly in the context of broader armed conflicts and limited state capacity discussed further below. A valuable study of the Garamba National Park in DR Congo, bordering South Sudan, argues that unwritten social contracts formed during the long history of the Park between various actors, including local people, have proven surprisingly lasting and resilient, even though periods of conflict and the collapse of park management:

Conservation, fundamentally, implies various forms of agreements or contracts, formal or informal, between two or several parties, which involves the regulation of the extraction, consumption and trade of natural resources.
Due to its limited capacity and resources, the park was historically unable to rely on violence alone, and instead also relied on recognition and obedience. As a result, both (the threat of) coercion and material compensation were at the heart of the social contract. The way in which the social contract is enacted throughout time is the product of accommodations between park authorities and local communities to find mutual benefit."[19]

We found limited evidence of such long-term social contracts in the Kidepo Game Reserve, which was only established in 1975 and has seen very little enforcement or management – or negotiations with local communities. But there is a contractual element to its designation under IUCN Management Category: VI = Protected area with sustainable use of natural resources, which recognises that people have usufruct rights within the reserve as well as requirements to protect and ensure sustainability.[20] This could provide a valuable basis for negotiating new kinds of social contract with communities around both rights and obligations (concepts which are integral to customary laws across South Sudan). There is a long history of contracting and bargaining with governments in this region, since chiefs first sought to negotiate protections and mitigations from colonial governments in return for paying taxes and following orders. The contractual dimensions of conservation should therefore be seen as a resource for negotiations rather than as an obstacle, though of course the terms of the 'contract' (and who it is negotiated with) may be thorny issues to resolve.

1.3 Reasons for increased human-wildlife conflicts

Both state-led and local-level forms of conservation are perceived to have been greatly eroded or lost altogether in twenty-first century South Sudan, allowing human-wildlife conflict to escalate to the point of destruction for many species.

"Animals can live with humans. This was the case in the 1980s. The problem is that the population has increased and many villages are coming up, extending to places which were once hideout zones for wild animals. Some

[18] Hillary, Amuom and Leonardi, *Elephants are stories now*.
[19] Kristof Titeca, Patrick Edmond, Gauthier Marchais and Esther Marijnen, 'Conservation as a social contract in a violent frontier: The case of (Anti-)poaching in Garamba National Park, eastern DR Congo', *Political Geography* 78 (2020).
[20] International Union for Conservation of Nature, *Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories* (IUCN, Gland, Switzerland, 2013)

communities settled along the migration route between the Badingilo and the Kidepo."[21]

Wild animals also pose threats to people and their livestock and crops.[22] Participants in a focus group discussion in the KGR explained that they only engaged in hunting and trapping animals in the vicinity of their farms and at harvest times, to try to protect their crops.[23] A wildlife officer also spoke of the need to offer some form of compensation to farmers whose crops were damaged by wildlife in conservation areas.[24]

In addition to population increase in particular areas, the causes of increased human-wildlife conflict are readily identified by people themselves as well as external analysts, and may be broadly categorised as political, economic and environmental/climatic. Politically, successive governments have had limited interest or capacity to make and enforce wildlife protection during and since the Sudanese civil war (1983-2005), in which both rebel and government armies often depended on wild animals as a source of food and revenue, undermining any commitments to their protection.

"Many things changed during the time of SPLA/M because this was the wartime headquarters of the guerillas (SPLA) and there was not enough food but there were many [wild] animals [to eat]. The wildlife laws were a bit relaxed and this was not reversed after the CPA."[25]

Before the 1980s, customary authority over and regulation of natural resources at a local level relied either on social and spiritual sanctions within communities or government backing to enforce state laws. Chiefs, elders and other community authorities do not usually have the capacity to prevent logging or hunting by soldiers or others with powerful connections.

"The people doing killing [of animals] are not only civilians. There is a zonal barracks here and soldiers are surviving on hunting and selling meat to the communities."[26]

Natural resource use is deeply political, within communities as well as when it involves external interests. Communities are heterogeneous and often marked by internal tensions and conservation initiatives have real potential to reinforce inequalities and expose tensions between different generations, genders, interests and socio-economic levels among people living within a boma or county. The study of social contracts around conservation in the Garamba National Park emphasises that these were always deeply unequal, benefiting particular chiefs or communities more than others, as well as enabling exploitation by park guards and external interests.[27]

This links to the economic changes that have given new or increased commercial value to some natural resources and wild products, such as charcoal, bushmeat, ivory and skins. At the same time, the effects of armed conflicts, insecurity and changing climate have exacerbated food insecurity in many areas, including Kidepo, making meat and other wild foods a crucial source of nutrition and survival.[28]

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[21] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 17 April 2025.

[22] Ranga Gworo, David Otim and Gaya Raddadi, *Enhancing community-based social protection for sustainable use of aid in South Sudan: Guidance for conflict and context-sensitive aid* (CSRF, 2025), p. 14.

[23] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 18 April 2025.

[24] Interview with male wildlife officer, Ikwoto County, 19 April 2025.

[25] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 17 April 2025.

[26] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 18 April 2025.

[27] Titeca et al, 'Conservation as a social contract'.

[28] Starvation, drought force Ikotos County residents to flee to Kenya- Radio Tamazuj; Hunger forcing people to flee Kidepo Valley County: official- Radio Tamazuj

"We eat bush meat. You cannot go a week without bush meat. I can honestly say that on behalf of all families here. It's part of our diet."[29]

This is not a choice for most people but a necessity, just as women may have no choice but to use charcoal for cooking in urban or insecure areas.[30] In early 2025, around 6.1 million people were expected to be acutely food insecure in South Sudan as a whole.[31] Such economic contexts pose real challenges for conservation if it is to avoid conflict with local people.

2. Conflict between conservation and communities

The KGR has seen very limited enforcement of conservation regulations since its creation in the mid-1970s. Even at that time, an external conservation consultant employed by the FAO suggested that the area was not really suitable for such a large protected area: 'the development of a viable reserve in the area selected is scarcely practicable in view of the degree of settlement within it and its importance to the Didinga as a grazing area' (Blower 1977, 24-5). Since then, settlement and grazing has only increased, along with timber extraction and charcoal production "The legal framework of Kidepo Game Reserve allows for sustainable utilisation of natural resources including grazing and hunting rights, as described in Wildlife Conservation and National Parks Act, 2003."[32] While this context makes conservation complex and challenging, it also offers an opportunity to pioneer methods of enabling co-existence between people and other species, rather than trying to separate them territorially as has often been the attempted method in African conservation.

People in the Kidepo area are, however, very much aware of conservation practices in neighbouring countries which have sought to exclude people from protected areas and/or to prevent hunting. They therefore expressed suspicion and wariness of any conservation initiatives in case these threaten their land or hunting rights.

Firstly, interviewees resented any application of the term 'poaching' to their hunting practices, which they see as long-established customary rights. The term 'poacher' has a long and problematic history in African contexts, originating with colonial authorities that often sought to control or prevent African hunting in favour of white big game hunters. As Rosaleen Duffy has shown, the term has also been used in more recent contexts to demonise and dehumanise African hunters and thereby justify militaristic methods of conservation, including at their most extreme, shoot-to-kill policies within protected areas.[33]

While often depicted negatively as destructive 'poaching' and assumed to be antithetical to conservation, African hunting practices were historically subject to their own laws and taboos as well as being limited by the type or availability of weaponry.[34] The current context is greatly complicated by the commercial trades in wildlife products, both locally and internationally, and by the involvement of military actors and availability of sophisticated weaponry.[35] Distinguishing clearly between subsistence and commercial hunting is often difficult, if not impossible. But nevertheless, it is

[29] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 16 April 2025.

[30] Leonardi et al, *Fuelling Poverty*.

[31] UNOCHA, [South Sudan: Humanitarian Snapshot January 2025]

[32] Antoninova et al., *Wet season aerial survey of Kidepo Game Reserve*, pp. 21-24.

[33] R. Duffy, 'Waging a War to Save Biodiversity: The Rise of Militarized Conservation', *International Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2014): 819-34

[34] Gworo. *How do local communities conserve wildlife*?; Howell, 'A Note on Elephants and Elephant Hunting among the Nuer'.

[35] Ledio Cakaj and Sasha Lezhnev, *Deadly Profits: Illegal Wildlife Trafficking through Uganda and South Sudan* Enough Project (2017).

important to recognise that wild meats and a range of other wild foods and materials continue to play an important part in people's diets in a place like Kidepo, and that hunting has always been part of livelihood strategies and socio-cultural life.[36] Attempting to prevent hunting altogether therefore has real potential to cause tensions and conflicts and to alienate people from conservation initiatives.

Local hunting could and should also be seen as a potential positive resource for conservation. Hunters, fishers and others who use wild species (including plants and grazing) inevitably possess a great deal of specialist ecological knowledge.[37] Creating opportunities for knowledge sharing and non-recriminatory dialogue with such people could therefore be a valuable way to build a picture of species within particular areas and learn about their behaviours and environments, while also building trust between conservationists and communities.

The sensitivities around whether hunting is labelled 'poaching' also centre on a question of ownership. One government wildlife officer interviewed in Ikotos claimed wildlife as 'national animals' that communities should have no right to hunt, while communities see wildlife as part of their communal resources and a vital source of food and income. Again, this may be a more positive starting point for dialogue around conservation: how can your or our wildlife and environments be better protected, including for future generations? For people who feel excluded and marginalised from any benefits of national economic development, let alone global economies, identifying local values and benefits of conservation may be more productive than attempting to enforce national laws which might be perceived as the appropriation of community resources.

The question of ownership also characterises the other major focus of potential conflict between conservation and communities: land.

"I am told that this is going to be a park and communities here have to move away, but we will not accept that displacement."[38]

In reality, the KGR – and other game reserves – do not require the removal of people or prohibit natural resource use, provided this is sustainable. But broader debates in South Sudan over the national Land Policy (which does provide for evictions from National Parks) have increased fears and misunderstandings over land rights in wildlife reserves and elsewhere.[39]

Although people in the KGR have not been evicted previously from the reserve, some are nevertheless fearful that this could happen, which may contribute to the suspicion of new conservation initiatives expressed recently by some community leaders to the media.[40] Respondents also made references to people losing access to their customary land when national parks or other conservation areas were created in neighbouring Uganda. In the Karamoja region bordering the KGR, a long and ongoing history of land alienation for conservation (especially the Kidepo Valley National Park), hunting and mineral concessions has left considerable uncertainty,

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[36] Simonse, *Kings of Disaster*, pp. 76-77.
[37] See e.g. Gift Simon Demaya, John Sebit Benansio, Thomas Francis Lado, Salah Khatir Jubarah, John Leju Celestino Ladu and Luca Luiselli, 'Local Ecological Knowledge in South Sudan Can Help Conservation and Management of *Cyclanorbis elegans*', *Chelonian Conservation and Biology* 18(2) 2019.
[38] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 17 April 2025.
[39] Land Policy; https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/torit-land-policy-participants-reject-land-belongs-to-the-people
[40] Africa Press, 'Budi and Tore Residents Protest Wildlife Project Exclusion' 5 June 2025: https://www.africa-press.net/south-sudan/all-news/budi-and-tore-residents-protest-wildlife-project-exclusion

insecurity and resentment over community land rights.[41]

In any conservation plans, it is vital to understand what are often multiple, overlapping communal rights to land, some of which may be seasonal and less visible on the landscape. This is particularly the case in the kinds of areas most likely to be targeted for conservation, such as forests, wetlands and areas used for grazing, hunting and collecting of wild foods, fuelwood and building materials. Without permanent settlements or cultivations, these areas were historically designated as 'wastelands' and may continue to be mischaracterized by external actors as unoccupied or underutilized. But they are used, even if seasonally or occasionally, and may be particularly important during times of food shortage.[42] Such lands are claimed as the ancestral territory of a community or family, and this includes areas which were gazetted as parks and reserves during or since the colonial period. Complex land tenure systems have usually enabled other people to access land and natural resources belonging to another community, provided they acknowledge the 'owners' of the land and are engaged in subsistence rather than commercial uses of the land. Many communities have a chief of the land/soil, or 'landlord', with ancestral and spiritual authority and responsibility for the land as a whole. Individuals and families also have rights to occupy and use smaller pieces of land within this territory, but the landlord is supposed to represent the community's collective custodianship of the land and manage its use.[43]

A sense of ownership of land and the multiple species within it could be a positive rather than a negative for conservation, giving people incentives to use natural resources sustainably. But questions of ownership can also be a source of potential conflict between communities.

3. Conflicts between communities

As well as the risk of provoking tensions between local people and conservation agencies or departments, land questions are also highly sensitive in terms of relations and potential conflicts between different communities. Opening up any questions around the boundaries of national parks or reserves or land-use planning is one of the most risky and provocative activities that conservation agencies can engage in. Any attempts to map boundaries and land use are likely to provoke tensions, not only over the broad fear of evictions and exclusions, but also over which community owns any affected land and therefore has the right to negotiate its use. Over the past twenty years, the boundaries of local administrative units such as bomas, payams and counties have become an increasing focus of rival claims and conflicts over customary land ownership. This is due to multiple factors, including the politicisation of administrative boundaries along ethnic lines and the real or anticipated exploitation of resources within territories.[44]

Never historically demarcated or even clearly mapped, the precise location of boundaries may be both firmly asserted and hotly contested, particularly if there are significant implications for the control (or loss) of

[41] Margaret A. Rugadya and Herbert Kamusiime, 'Tenure in Mystery: the Status of Land Under Wildlife, Forestry and Mining Concessions in Karamoja Region, Uganda', *Nomadic Peoples* Volume 17, Issue 1, 2013: 33–65; E. Hsiao, 'Protecting protected areas *in bello*: Learning from institutional design and
conflict resilience in the Greater Virunga and Kidepo landscapes', *Goettingen Journal of International Law*, 10 (1) 2020, pp. 67-110.

[42] Martina Santschi, https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/blog/conflict-sensitive-engagement-with-rangelands-forests-and-wetlands-in-south-sudan/ blog; C. Leonardi and Santschi, M. *Dividing Communities in South Sudan and Northern Uganda: boundary disputes and land governance* (Rift Valley Institute, 2016).

[43] On debates and tensions over land rights and the authority of 'landlords', see Leonardi and Santschi, *Dividing Communities.*

[44] Leonardi and Santschi, *Dividing Communities.*

resources. When disputes arise, customary hunting rights and obligations are often brought up as evidence of territorial claims: hunters naturally crossed communal boundaries in pursuit of game, but were supposed to know whose territory they were in and to recognise the landowners' authority by gifting them part of any animal killed there. In some cases, to avoid conflict, hunters kept to their own communal hunting areas, as an interviewee in the KGR stated:

"There are customary limits to hunting. We don't cross the river (Kidepo). The other side of the river is not for us."[45]

The Kidepo area has been particularly troubled by conflicts between different cattle-owning communities in recent years. While there is a long history of cattle-raiding and intercommunal warfare in the region, this has been exacerbated and reshaped by wider military, political and economic dynamics since the 1990s. The presence of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army headquarters in Chukudum in the 1990s-2000s contributed to what a 2007 study of Budi County termed 'a military-commercial elite' controlling the lucrative transborder cattle trade and drawing young men from local communities into cattle-raiding on an unprecedented scale and to the detriment of chiefs' and elders' authority. Conflicts over local territorial control were further fuelled by the scramble for gold and other mineral resources, making boundaries hotly contested.[46] It is not surprising then that local-level conflicts have increasingly become entangled with state-level and national politics and conflicts.[47] According to information gathered during fieldwork, there have been conflicts between Buya and Didinga in Budi County, cattle raids across the valley between the Didinga and Logir, Logir and Keteobo, Dongotono and Logir, Logir and Otuho, and a land dispute between the Otuho and Dongotono. Some of these conflicts have also been reported in the media and attracted reconciliation efforts.[48]

This highly volatile context makes particularly evident the need for a conflict-sensitive approach to conservation. It is therefore very positive that the work of the Enjojo Foundation and Saferworld (funded by the EU) in this area has begun with peacebuilding initiatives before any conservation-focused programmes. Building structures, networks and communication capacity at the boma level is an important foundation for any work in the area. These structures will need to be functioning very effectively if any questions are to be raised over boundaries, whether of the KGR or between bomas. It should also be recognised that local authorities will not necessarily be speaking for all residents equally, nor will they necessarily have power over all individuals and interests within bomas. Understanding the deeper causes and dynamics of conflict within and between communities will be a vital process before any attempt to map or alter boundaries.

Conservation is fundamentally a territorial exercise and both governments and local communities in different places and periods have seen the potential to use conservation to establish and enforce claims to particular territories. This may be one of the benefits that local-level authorities hope to get from conservation, if it protects their territory from

[45] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 17 April 2025.
[46] Anne Walraet, 'Governance, violence and the struggle for economic regulation in South Sudan: the case of Budi County (Eastern Equatoria)', *Afrika Focus* 21, Nr. 2 (2008), pp. 53-70.
[47] Small Arms Survey, *Living with Lobong: Power, Gold, and the UPDF in Eastern Equatoria* (Situation Report, 2024).
[48] E. Equatoria State: 5 killed during cattle raid in Budi County- Radio Tamazuj; Over 2000 cattle raided in Kideopo valley, Ikotos County- Radio Tamazuj; Religious leaders spearhead reconciliation efforts to resolve Ikotos crisis- Radio Tamazuj; Ikotos County political leaders resolve to end violence- Radio Tamazuj; UNMISS convenes community dialogue to end cattle-related conflict in Kidepo Valley | UNMISS

encroachment by other communities or interests.[49] But this also demonstrates that conservation is a highly political exercise with real risks of exacerbating or becoming entangled in conflicts over territory and resources.

4. Impact of wider conflicts

As suggested by the Small Arms Survey, the local conflicts in the Kidepo area may have been instigated or exploited by higher-level political actors, and this is very much the pattern across South Sudan.[50] Broader political and military conflicts in the country create additional challenges and risks for conservation, both indirectly, in terms of lack of government interest or investment in conservation and strains on governance generally, and more directly if conflicts affect the area itself. The effects of armed conflict on environments and wildlife can be very varied: sometimes displacement and disruption of economic activities can create temporary spaces of environmental recovery,[51] but sometimes wars enable or drive greater unregulated exploitation of natural resources.

The Kidepo area has been affected by past conflicts in both South(ern) Sudan and northern Uganda. The international border in itself has become a growing focus for tensions and conflicts,[52] undermining any possibility of cross-border cooperation around conservation in the greater Kidepo landscape. Between 2007 and 2014, there were some (USAID-funded) efforts to establish transboundary conservation management, but these were abandoned after funding ended: "Instead of supporting rangers in the park when armed conflict resurged shortly after, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) took over Kidepo Wildlife Reserve in South Sudan, potentially breaching its protected zone status". Reports suggested a link to ivory and other resource trafficking out of the KGR.[53]

"In places like the Greater Virunga Landscape and Kidepo Landscape, complex relations between State and non-State armed groups require extreme conflict sensitivity and unconventional approaches to conservation."[54]

The implications for conservation are complex, including potential difficult choices about whether and which authorities or armed groups to work with in a conflict context. But as Hsiao argues, it may be most valuable to work with local-level actors and draw on long histories of connections and conflict resolution practices among local communities, including those that traverse the international boundary. As the Enjojo Foundation has recognised, building local-level communication and negotiation capacities (including early warning systems) is a vital foundation for enabling and sustaining any other work in contexts affected by conflicts at multiple scales.[55]

Conclusions and recommendations

"I am from elephant family. I have never seen an elephant in my entire life. I don't know what it looks like. People say it is a big animal. There was a time I found the footprints of an elephant in the valley and it was like a big hole. The belief is that when you die, in your next life, you become an elephant. If you don't come back as an elephant, that means you didn't live a good

[49] Titeca et al, 'Conservation as a social contract'.
[50] Small Arms Survey, *Living with Lobong*.
[51] Eg Imatong forests near KGR: Virginia Gorsevski, Eric Kasischke, Jan Dempewolf, Tatiana Loboda and Falk Grossmann, 'Analysis of the Impacts of armed conflict on the Eastern Afromontane forest region on the South Sudan-Uganda border using multitemporal Landsat imagery', *Remote Sensing of Environment* 118 (2012) 10–20.
[52] South Sudan, Uganda armies meet to resolve clashes- Radio Tamazuj; Ikotos MPs raise alarm over border encroachment by Uganda- Radio Tamazuj
[53] Hsiao, 'Protecting protected areas'
[54] Hsiao, 'Protecting protected areas'
[55] https://enjojofoundation.org/what-we-do/

life. In the past, when a family died, an elephant would appear at the burial place."[56]

There is no doubt that the Kidepo Game Reserve is an immensely challenging context in which to undertake wildlife conservation work. Elephants and many other species have disappeared entirely from the sight and experience of people living in and around the reserve, despite their importance for local cultures, identities and livelihoods. We should not pretend that communities alone can remedy this loss or even that they necessarily want to, and we should remember too that communities are not homogenous or harmonious groups but made up of often conflicting interests. The Kidepo valley is severely affected by recurrent food insecurity, conflicts and lack of infrastructure, as well as by the broader political tensions and economic hardships of the country, all of which will impact on any conservation projects.

Yet the challenges of this context also create some unique opportunities for developing innovative and imaginative approaches to conservation with the people of the Kidepo Valley or other game reserves. The designation as a Game Reserve entails continued human presence and activity in the area, ensuring that co-existence rather than human-wildlife separation has to be the goal of conservation. This is therefore an opportunity to negotiate and navigate the compromises and trade-offs that will be necessary for wildlife conservation to be pursued amidst human settlement and activities. This in turn raises the question voiced by a wildlife officer in the area:

"What options do we have for the community as benefits of them protecting the animals? These questions are valid in the eyes of community."[57]

The most difficult question indeed is what incentives there could be for people to stop or prevent hunting and extractive practices that may be lucrative, necessary for survival or controlled by more powerful interests. The usual answer in conservation elsewhere has been to promise financial benefits from tourism, but that is a very distant and uncertain prospect for the KGR. Yet, this too presents an opportunity to develop alternative answers and models as to why people should protect wildlife and use natural resources sustainably, answers that (particularly in the constraints and challenges of a context like Kidepo) will have to come from communities themselves rather than being imposed on them. This could help to pioneer new and better policies and practices for *conservation with the people* in other contexts too.

Recommendations for conservation with the people:

These recommendations are relevant primarily for the ongoing EU project in KGR being implemented by Enjojo Foundation and Saferworld. However, they are also relevant for the conservation sector more broadly. Conservation work being somewhat nascent in South Sudan, many conservation organisations and authorities could benefit from these recommendations, as well as other learning that comes from the KGR project.

Approach conservation as a dialogue between multiple, equal partners, interests and knowledge-holders rather than as the imposition or transmission of projects and laws from above/outside.

As conservation organisations increasingly recognise, local people are vital to their success and can no longer be treated as a problem or threat to be removed or coerced to protect wildlife, as was the case in much twentieth-century African conservation. But there can still be an underlying, patronising assumption that people need to be educated and persuaded to

[56] Boma focus group discussion, Ikwoto County, 17 April 2025.

[57] Interview with male wildlife officer, Ikwoto County, 19 April 2025.

engage in conservation initiatives by external experts and/or government authorities. This ignores both the harsh conditions that make wild resources vital to survival, and the extent of knowledge and appreciation of wild species that already exists within local communities. Any engagement around conservation needs to be approached instead as a dialogue and negotiation between equally-but-differently knowledgeable parties.

Recognise that biodiversity loss and environmental damage also represent economic and cultural loss for local communities.

Making this the starting point for any dialogue between conservationists and local people would foreground the needs, rights and knowledge of communities about wildlife and ecologies and highlight their own incentives for and methods of conservation. There is the risk that as wild animals become rarer or disappear, or as people hunt them out of necessity, their deeply rooted historic meanings and protections may be lost. Talking about these animals and their meaning for particular groups could be an important way of drawing on people's own values and reigniting a sense of ownership and obligation to protect wildlife.

Recognise the extent and value of ecological knowledge held within communities and their cultures as a starting point and resource to work with.

This means building trust and long-term relationships, including with people who may be seen as the biggest threat to wildlife, such as hunters or fishers, but whose professions require specialist knowledge of species and environments. It also means talking to people whose expertise is often ignored or undervalued, such as women with knowledge of wild foods, medicines and fuelwood. And it means treating culture as a repository of ecological knowledge and values, held in stories, songs, proverbs, dances and arts. Working with these cultural forms of knowledge could reveal and revitalise ideas of custodial ownership and relatedness towards other species that can in turn underpin community conservation efforts.

Recognise that conservation involves negotiating a social contract between different interests and around the costs and benefits of living with wildlife.

There is a need to negotiate social contracts around conservation that are not based on unrealistic promises of tourism or development but on working out what rights and duties people have in relation to their own environments and the species within them, and enabling them to exercise these. Rather than an emphasis on the value of wildlife to national, external and global interests, local engagement may be better secured by discussion of the value of natural resources to communities and their own interests in using these sustainably for future times and the next generations. There may be species that are more important to local people than the large animals on which tourism is based, creating positive opportunities for conservation to focus on broader ecologies and less 'charismatic' species.

Recommendations for conflict-sensitive approaches to conservation:

Prioritise community engagement during the conception and inception phases of conservation initiatives and understand that these can easily be perceived initially as a threat to people's land rights and livelihoods.

New projects will not be people's first experience of conservation, and they will view projects in light of their historical experiences and wider knowledge of conservation practices in South Sudan and neighbouring countries, which have often involved excluding people from protected areas, denying their ancestral land rights and prohibiting or limiting hunting and other forms of resource use. Controversies over land appropriations and policies within South Sudan have exacerbated insecurities over customary land rights. Conservation contracts

agreed solely between government and external agencies without substantial prior community involvement are therefore likely to be viewed with suspicion, fear and resentment. It is vital to prepare the ground thoroughly through community-level consultation and negotiation.

Recognise that conservation (whether by communities, governments or agencies) is inherently political, involving control over territory and land-use and intersecting with multiple competing interests seeking to exploit and access resources.

This means that every decision has political consequences, from the location of headquarters and selection of staff to the relationships of conservation organisations with government authorities at all levels. Conservation spaces are not isolated from broader political and military conflicts and conservation planning needs to consider the risks and potential impacts of any conflict escalation, locally or nationally. It is also important to recognise that wildlife services are part of the state security apparatus.[58] This is not a reason to avoid working with them: wildlife officers may have long experience and considerable knowledge, and they may have positive connections to local communities. But their origins and political affiliations will shape relations with these communities and their association with authoritarian governance may have both negative and positive implications for conservation work.

Undertake conflict sensitivity and political economy analyses in advance of conservation projects, and approach any mapping of land-use and boundaries as a highly sensitive and risky exercise.

Conservation and land-use plans will raise deeply political and contentious issues over who does own or have rights to use natural resources within particular territories, with the potential for conflict within and between local communities and with higher or other powerful interests. It is vital to undertake prior research and analysis to understand the political economy, forms of inequality and intercommunal relations in conservation areas, to identify actual or potential conflicts and fault-lines within and between communities. It is also crucial for conservation organisations to understand that all boundaries are likely to be contested and that land rights are layered and complex, including secondary or seasonal access rights as well as more permanent or primary claims to ownership.

Donors should envisage long-term support for conservation plans and projects. Communication, consultation, and sustained engagement are key.

A conflict-sensitive approach to conservation is a long-term process, requiring careful research, analysis and preparation and the gradual building of relationships, institutions and trust with communities and other stakeholders. With sustained support, conservation agencies can improve coordination, communication, dialogue and information-sharing between different communities, interests and authorities, which could help to mitigate and warn of conflict risks as well as building long-term relations and resources for conservation.

[58] Christopher Day and Adrian Garside, 'Wildlife Management in South Sudan, 1901–2021: Conservation amidst Conflict', *African Studies Review* (2024), 67:3, 610–631.