Can Pastoral Communities Offer Sustainable Ecological Management Solutions? The case of Mwanda-Marungu Pastoral Commons in Taita Hills, Kenya

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Introduction

Indigenous peoples’ and Community Conserved Areas and territories (ICCA) provide myriad of ecosystem services to millions of people worldwide and are now emerging as one of the key paradigms of “Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs)” promoted by policy makers like the IUCN among others.

Despite emerging interests in ICCAs, few studies in the past dedicated to study pastoral commons, yet pasturism is practiced in 37% of Kenya’s landscape while contributing to over 13% of Kenya’s economy (Frickh, 2001), and pasturism being a typical system for the commons.

Materials and methods

Ethnographic methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews with validation of data conducted through fifteen sessions of focus group discussions of between 6 to 10 respondents per session. Sample size n = 234, data organized in themes/domains as described by CBD’s Aichi Target 11 guidelines and explored whether the identified pastoral commons fit the criteria of ICCAs and OECMs. This included field visits to the common territories themselves and use of landscape analysis through aerial data and Google Earth.

Results

We identified three pastoral Commons (Map 3), but in this first phase focused primarily on Mwanda-Marungu commons which we found the one having most elements described by ICCAs, as well as meeting the Aichi’s Target 11 guidelines on OECMs. Mwanda-Marungu pastoral resources are managed by a Council of Elders (Waghiyo Wai Kimet’ meaning ‘Elders of Wildness’).

These Elders have overall rights over three villages, and each village abide by the rules and customary norms set by them. But within villages, there are other elders with lower degree who report to Waghiyo wa Xie. These three villages include itinyi and Marango, who Mwa Mwea, located on higher ecological zone, and Marango, located on the plains which borders Taveta West National Park.

Elements that we found to go in tandem with ICCAs/OECMs criteria in Mwanda-Marungu Pastoral commons: (i) Shared ownership (ii) Good community governance structure of common lands (iii) The commons offer a myriad of socio-ecological benefits to local community. At the same time, rules consist on: 1) No fire burning-charcoal/smoking cigarettes within common protected areas. 2) Grazing on the upper/hilly ecological zone (in itinyi and Marango Mwa Mwea villages) is prohibited during wet seasons and all herders are to graze in Marango village at that time. 3) Herders have their specific days to take livestock to the determined water points and saltlocks. 4) Elders report that they have set rules that demands all herders and livestock to have vacated water/saltlows points by 3pm afternoon so as to pave way for wildlife. The minimizing human-wildlife conflicts. 5) No non-villeage member is allowed to graze inside the community land. 6) The use of religious shrines called (kagas) that all together help to conserve forests and pastoral habitats. 7) No grazing in one area for over 2 days so as to minimize pasture degradation and 8) Resources (wild vegetables, fruits, insects, herbal medicine, water, trees, wildlife) found in their territory belongs to all members and none has more utility rights over the other, hence being obliged to protect them from husbandry depletions.

Discussion

Our study, contrary to what the literature seems to suggest up to present, confirms the important presence of pastoral commons in Kenya through a fine grain ethnographic verification of their existence in two very separated areas of the country, at the same time as our knowledge of their presence in many other sites of Kenya. With elaborate form of customary management strategies that are aimed at environmental protection, wildlife co-existence, governance structure that guarantee sustainable functioning of these commons and consensus on utilization of resources in their community landscape, it gives at the same time sense of identity and existence. This confirms Kenyan pastoral commons as deeply embedded in local religion/culture being key for conservation management and institutional replication. All of it reinforces the hypothesis that Taita commons could very probably be considered OECMs (currently under study).

Conclusion

We conclude that more research is necessary to find ways of strengthening customary management regimes such as these pastoral commons, which seem important to conserve the present pastoral landscapes we studied. The goal would be to promote the present sustainable provision of ecosystem services and socio-cultural identity attached to them, and which seem to guarantee a certain environmental conservation whilst assuring livelihoods and even possible future human development (social, economic, cultural, etc.). They are in fact facing real urgent challenges that have been able to verify on the ground, such as generational shift, acculturation, climate change and even explicit land grabbing by government departments (surveyors) etc. The ICFA Consortium and the WDMC through the International ICCA Registry that they promote or the UCN through the OECM approach that it is also putting forward, could maybe contribute to reinforce these so valuable (bio-physically and socio-culturally) African systems.

References


