

Law of the Maasai

By Laura Taccari, D Repubblica

To reach Cottar's 1920s Camp, you have to go up from Nairobi on an aircraft, landing on a rectangle of rust-coloured ground in the Masai Mara, where you will meet Enock, the guide, who will lead you through the Olderkesi Private Reserve, running along the border with the Serengeti in Tanzania - all organised by travel agency Journeys by Design.

The real journey, however, begins upon arrival at your destination, in this remote piece of the world where Charles Cottar arrived in 1909. Fascinated by accounts of President Roosevelt's safari, he settled here with his family and founded Cottar's Safari Service, one of the first registered safari companies that welcomed tourists from all over the world, including the Duke and Duchess of York.

Today, the Cottars enterprise lies in the hands of Calvin Cottar, who as well as running the family business, fights for the development of ethical tourism in the area. "The 'Cottar's model' demonstrates how nature-based tourism can improve biodiversity conservation and promote financial equality among rural communities," explains Calvin.

What is the relationship between local communities and the tourism industry?

"If we lose the land, we lose the culture. If we lose culture, we lose peace. If we lose peace, we lose community. If we lose the community, we lose our way of life forever," he recites a maxim of Oloiboni Kitok, a senior Maasai prophet. "We are at an existential crossroads. It all started when a district officer British, Hugh Grant, went to collect taxes from the family Sentau. It was an obligation throughout Kenya, paying taxes with livestock if you didn't have money. Grant chose a large black bull. The owner loved the bull so much and begged [that it should not be used in lieu of rent], but without success. His anger grew and he killed Grant on the spot with a spear and for this he was executed after a long trial.

Since then, the Maasai had no choice but to accept the British concept of land and law. Previously the land was used communally, and livestock was individually owned. Wildlife was everyone's and the Maasai prided themselves on depending almost exclusively on their livestock. The British system made land individually owned and state wildlife. This incentivized the elimination of the fauna by the locals, while the proceeds ended up in the pockets of tourism operators and central government through taxes. Our reserves in the Mara bring back common sense, the local control, responsibility, and money to the Maasai community.

What values drive the Cottar's model?

"The community has total control of their land, not the government, and we can't force them to maintain wildlife if they don't want it. The policies inherited from Europe, and continued to this day, maintain wildlife (both on private land and on community ones) under the ownership of the central government. Economic incentives encouraged communities to convert their lands to agriculture, causing the elimination of forests nature and wildlife. In Kenya, we have since 1977 lost 80% of animals due to this change in land use. What we do here at Olderkesi is to offer landowners a rent to maintain the forest and wildlife. In this way, biodiversity becomes a legitimate and profitable use of the territory."

How is the local Masai Mara community structured today?

"In a nutshell, the Maasai are both the camp landowners and the Olderkesi conservancy landowners. We have an arrangement to pay them annual land rent and variable fees, which are sufficient enough to discourage them from fencing or farming the land, thus allowing wildlife on the

conservancy to roam freely. We are partners because without our involvement, they would be most likely be economically disadvantaged. We also provide 'above the line' services such as medical clinics, school meal programmes, family planning initiatives, water projects, bridges across the dangerous rivers, microfinance for women's groups, honey, and beadwork programmes. These are all necessary for an improved multiplier economy."

How have you seen the region change?

"Kenya in general and the Mara region specifically have suffered significant losses since 1977. Between 70% and 90% of large ungulates, between 85% and 90% of big cats, and some species have suffered a reduction by 97%."

What should a visitor expect from the safari?

"Visitors should look for safari camps and companies that have real and provable track record in directly securing private or community land for conservation purposes, along with ensuring equity through revenue sharing with the landowners and community. Lodges located within National Parks or Reserves do not count in regard to securing land and neither do lodges and camps that only pay for their immediate campsite without contributing to the conservation of the broader area. If the Maasai only earn money from buildings and structures rather than from the wilderness and biodiversity itself, then tourism developments will continue to be built and destroy the very wilderness tourists are coming for."