National parks, conservation outreach, and migration in Tanzania

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Issue

Across tropical regions, national parks and other types of protected areas are the keystone strategy supporting biodiversity conservation. Increasing populations of resource-dependent people place pressures on protected resources within parks and on surrounding ecosystems. These pressures threaten such iconic landscapes as Tanzania’s Serengeti Plains and Mt. Kilimanjaro.

People living in rural areas near the borders of Tanzania’s parks rely almost entirely on small farms and livestock to support their livelihoods. By most accounts, these resource-dependent households are poor and food insecure. Limited resource access imposed by park restrictions along with frequent conflicts with wildlife further constrain their livelihood options.

For decades, people-park tradeoffs have been at the center of conservation management debates. Central to these debates is how best to direct limited resources funding both biodiversity protection and outreach strategies aimed at benefitting park-adjacent people.

Recently, high rates of migration by rural people to park-adjacent areas has been identified as a factor that heightens pressures on biodiversity and resident communities. Outreach activities providing benefits such as schools and health centers may act as attractors, thereby accelerating in-migration.

Many within the conservation community took this finding as support for a fundamental shift in policy away from outreach or community-based strategies in favor of greater protectionism. In practice, this amounts to shifting funds and resources away from programs intended to benefit adjacent households and communities. Funds and resources would instead be directed towards enforcing rules and boundaries.

While global studies supporting or refuting migration to park borders have significant implications, research at the national scale is required to inform conservation policy and practice. This brief reports research conducted in Tanzania aimed at uncovering the mechanisms of park-migration dynamics.

Research Findings

Using detailed demographic data along with financial records from Tanzania National Parks Authority, we evaluated the following two questions:

1. Do farmers and livestock keepers preferentially migrate to the borders of parks?
2. Do Tanzania National Parks outreach programs attract migrants to park borders?

Our analysis included satellite measures of ecological resources, and other benefits provided by outreach, then these policies may be threatening the very biodiversity that they aim to support. Recent research found evidence suggesting a global trend of accelerated migration to the borders of parks and cited outreach as a mechanism of attraction.

Policy Implications

If farmers and livestock keepers migrate to park-adjacent areas to access jobs, social services, cash payments,
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productivity (NDVI), human population density, and other controls.

Conservation policy in Tanzania, as in the majority of tropical countries, is focused on protecting valuable biodiversity through strictly protected national parks. These parks are governed centrally through state-level policies. Because parks are surrounded by poor rural households, park policies directly impact livelihoods.

Based on our findings, Tanzania National Parks should direct support towards community-based outreach projects in order to offset the costs experienced by communities. Parks do not attract rural migrants, and the few benefits provisioned to communities through outreach programs do not influence migration patterns.

Related research shows that both residents and migrants indeed value parks for ecosystem services and other non-material benefits. In addition, positive interactions between people and park programs or staff lead to improved attitudes about conservation and more sustainable resource use practices. Finally, migrants who report benefits from living near parks may be more likely to support management of local village resources.

Conservation organizations and development donors should support programs that work to promote stronger relationships between park authorities and adjacent communities. These relationships are best cultivated on the ground, in villages, and in households rather than from project offices. If so valued, migrant-resident communities can be productive partners in achieving biodiversity and development goals.

Further Reading

This brief is based on the study, Human Migration, Protected Areas, and Conservation Outreach in Tanzania, which is published in the journal Conservation Biology.

1. Salerno J. Forthcoming. Repeat migrants in the frontier may be changing hyper-mobile behaviors with implications for local natural resource management.
