

MASAI MARA & BEYOND SAFARI ETIQUETTE

Safeguarding the wellbeing of the natural environment: A delicate balance between the financial benefits of tourism and the sanctity of wildlife.



STORY &
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
**ANGELA &
JONATHAN
SCOTT**

The advent of wildlife tourism to Parks and Reserves around the world has been a mixed blessing. It helps to generate much-needed foreign currency for the local economy. Some of this revenue goes towards managing protected areas and helping local communities living with wildlife to meet their development needs. Getting the right balance between the financial benefits of tourism and the sanctity of the natural environment, and the wellbeing of local communities and wildlife, is no easy matter and needs to constantly be monitored. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Greater Masai Mara Ecosystem in Kenya.

The overdevelopment of tourism facilities in and around the Masai Mara National Reserve (MMNR) has resulted in swarms of vehicles

crisscrossing the landscape in search of predator sightings, leading to scenes of utter chaos as reported recently in a hard-hitting article in the New York Times entitled, *The Cheetahs Made a Kill. Then the Safari Trucks Swarmed In* (4 January 2023).

The priority has to be safeguarding the wellbeing of the natural environment. Too often our tourism industry and administration have been willing to sacrifice the environment in wanting to make a “quick buck”, even though this defies good business practice in today’s world of Global Warming, Climate Crisis and catastrophic loss of Biodiversity. We are now paying the real price for years of “business as usual”.

We are not alone in this dilemma. In Indian forest reserves, a tiger sighting can rapidly degenerate into a noisy scrum of vehicles crammed with excited visitors





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blocking the big cat's chosen path. To try and sensitise nature enthusiasts and photographers on species and wild habitats, a group of influential Indian conservationists, photographers, authors and cartoonists have created a guidebook titled *Stop! Don't Shoot Like That: A Simple Guide to Ethical Wildlife Photography*. The guidebook is authored by Shekar Dattatri and Ramki Sreenivasan, co-founders of the wildlife portal Conservation India. "The sad truth is that for every responsible photographer who respects nature and tries to minimize his or her impact, there are hordes of unruly, uncaring shutterbugs, who have become a menace to wildlife," says Sreenivasan. "Most photographers probably don't even think about their impact (ecological footprint) on wildlife habitats, and may regard animals simply as models that exist for their photographic pleasure."

Sacred Nature Initiative

In an attempt to address the disconnect that many people feel today to the idea that the health of the natural environment is life itself, we founded the non-profit Sacred Nature



Initiative (SNI) in 2021, whose intention is to inspire, educate and conserve. SNI is currently supporting Narok County Government's One-Mara Brand initiative. This takes an ecosystem approach in partnership with stakeholders, such as the Masai Mara Wildlife Conservancy Association, to help safeguard the welfare of local communities and the wellbeing of protected areas, while developing sustainable and attractive tourism products. Embedding a strong culture of good practice - a Safari Etiquette - would help elevate the safari experience to new standards of excellence. In doing so it would go a long way to turning the dream of having the Greater Mara Ecosystem declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site into a reality.

LEFT PAGE

Vehicles encircling a cheetah that had just killed. Its 4 companions were unable to locate their companion and went hungry.

TOP

Vehicles at a tiger sighting in Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, in India.

BELOW RIGHT

Croton and acacia thickets are vital as shade and den sites for big cats.



SAFARI ETIQUETTE

Responsibility of Camps and Lodges:

Camps and lodges must provide guests with a comprehensive briefing before they set out on their first game drive. It is much easier to remind visitors to be quiet and respectful when they see their first lion and are overwhelmed with excitement and emotion if they have been briefed properly before departing from camp.

Your Driver/Guide is in charge: Listen to what they have to say. If you feel that they are driving too fast or too close to the animals, politely let them know your feelings.

River Crossings: Do not get out of the vehicle at river crossing sites when wildebeest and zebras are crossing. These are life or death moments for the migratory animals and you may inadvertently cause them to stop crossing and panic. Predators such as lions and leopards also stake out these river crossing sites to try to ambush the herds. Don't do anything that might disturb their attempts to gain a meal.

Combatting Ticket Fraud: Narok County loses millions of dollars annually due to fraud. Guests should ask for and carry a valid Entrance Ticket for each day they visit the

Reserve, irrespective of whether the cost is included in the safari and paid for by the tour company, lodge or safari guide.

Do not sit or stand on the roof of the safari vehicle: Sitting or standing on the roof exposes more of you to wildlife. Suddenly the animals see you as a human being. This is more likely to make them nervous. And, you could fall off if the driver moves or stops suddenly or hits a deep hole hidden in the grass.

Try to keep as quiet as possible when approaching a sighting: If there are other vehicles present be courteous and considerate. Try to share the experience by letting others enjoy a good view too. Ask your guide politely not to use their phone or radio while at a sighting.

Do not encircle wildlife: Doing so may block their chosen (or intended) entry and exit route. It was - and still should be - customary not to drive opposite to another vehicle, potentially positioning yourselves in their shot or photograph. If you do this by mistake acknowledge the fact to the other vehicle, thereby promoting good manners and friendly encounters.

If you are watching a mother with young ones, be particularly careful of the way she

TOP

Visitors leaving their vehicles to take "selfies" at a river crossing site. Taking selfies at the Maasai Mara during the wildebeest migration can be an exciting and memorable experience, but it's essential to do so responsibly and with consideration for both your safety and the well-being of the wildlife and the environment.

is responding to your presence. If she looks nervous or wants to move, then it is time to back off or even leave altogether if necessary – departing as slowly and quietly as possible.

If a predator is on the move, give it space; don't block its chosen path. If it is walking down a track do not block the track with your vehicle, forcing it to detour around you. And rather than driving directly behind a predator, choose a track that loops around.

If a predator is hunting, be particularly careful not to move – or not to move too soon. Starting the vehicle may startle the prey animal causing it to look up, alerting it to the hunter. This is the time to pick up your binoculars and simply enjoy the thrill of watching events unfold as nature intended, rather than trying to “get the shot” at the expense of a predator's efforts to obtain a meal.

If you are watching a mother with cubs in a den – stay back. You are going to have to accept that there are times when you just cannot get into the right position to take a photograph because to do so would disturb your subject. No image is worth causing distress to a vulnerable animal, prompting it to move and possibly putting it in danger. Take a moment to savour just being on safari without a camera pressed to your face. Bring binoculars with you to make the most of your sightings.

In high-density tourism destinations like the Masai Mara, we would encourage the authorities to close off big cat dens sites until cubs are large enough to safely move around with their mother. There have been incidents where small cubs have been run over by



TOP
Vehicles blocking the path of a lioness trying to move young cubs to a new den site. Wildlife should always be given the right of way. Attempting to drive through or around a group of animals can cause stress and disrupt their natural behavior.

BELOW
Leopard forced to carry a large cub to safety when hounded by vehicles.



TOP

Kike the cheetah: Big Cat Week, 2003. This is not acceptable. Do not let big cats climb onto your vehicle or lie in its shade.

BELOW LEFT

Cheetah cubs love to play around vehicles. Do not let them, by carefully moving away if they approach.

BELOW RIGHT

Big cats become habituated to vehicles at an early age. Move away if they come too close - 25 meters is a good distance.

vehicles or the mother forced to move from a secure den site due to the close approach of safari vehicles. This is a form of harassment that can lead to cubs being killed by predators - and buffalo at times - when exposed in the open.

It has been scientifically proven that the presence of vehicles does impose a degree of stress on wildlife. However, this can be minimised to tolerable levels if the protocols outlined above are respected by guides and visitors and enforced as necessary by management.

Cheetahs raise fewer cubs in high-density tourism areas in the Masai Mara ecosystem. Drivers/guides must do everything possible to minimise their impact on cheetahs. Research conducted by the Kenya Wildlife Trust's Mara Cheetah Project found that females in areas with a lot of tourists on average raised one cub or less per litter to independence, compared to two or more cubs in low tourist areas.

Big Cats and Vehicles: There was a time when allowing a cheetah to jump up onto vehicles was considered acceptable. It isn't, and we acknowledge the part Big Cat Diary played in allowing people to think it was. It is the responsibility of all guides to move away if they think a big cat may try to climb up on to their vehicle or lie in its shadow. Observe the utmost caution when moving your vehicle near big cats and their cubs.

Creating new tracks into croton and acacia thickets opens them up to fire and over time thins them out. All three big cats - and other animals - rely on the cover of thickets for shade and den sites. They are safe places for animals seeking some peace and sanctuary. We should do as much as possible not to disturb them.

Respect Protected Area Rules and Regulations: Adequate Rules and Regulations are already in place in Protected Areas to help ensure that the wellbeing of the wild animals is a priority to be respected at all times. That is not the problem. It is the implementation and enforcement that



is sometimes lacking. In the Masai Mara, for instance, fines are seen as no more than a slap on the wrist by some drivers/guides, something that can be “negotiated” with the authorities with little likelihood of any real consequences. Once guides and visitors are made aware that a breach of the regulations is taken seriously by the relevant authorities, and crucially, that it is supported by all Tourism Stakeholders, indiscipline can be stopped in its tracks.

All driver-guides should have Bronze certification from the Kenya Professional Guides Association. This should be the minimum requirement for guiding visitors in the Greater Mara Ecosystem and needs to have more emphasis on good guiding protocols. An affordable National Safari Guide’s Certification process is long overdue. Guide qualifications being non-compulsory (and unmonitored) is the single biggest problem facing Kenya’s tourism industry.

It has become common practice in Masai Mara for photographers to utilise customised 4x4 vehicles with low-angle facilities. Examples are open-sided vehicles cut down to the floor, or a vehicle with a porthole with a door that can be lowered. This allows guests to lie on the floor in full view of the animals being photographed - most commonly big cats - defeating the whole basis on which safari

vehicles can approach wildlife by masking the human form to some degree.

Off-Road Permits for Stills

Photography: This practice has no merit in such a highly-sorted-after tourism destination as the Masai Mara. They promote disharmony among other visitors, can be subject to abuse and are likely to exacerbate bad behaviour that does not align with the Reserve’s Rules and Regulations - and those of the surrounding Wildlife Conservancies. Exceptions might be made for a National Geographic photographer, for example, whose article could reach and influence millions of potential visitors to Kenya.

Ultimately, the intention is for guides and visitors to join hands in ensuring they can act in the best interests of the wildlife and its precious environment without the need for heavy-handed or visible interventions from the authorities. ●

BELOW

The crowding of tourist vehicles during the Great Migration in Maasai Mara can be a common issue, especially during peak migration periods when large numbers of tourists flock to witness this incredible natural spectacle.



Jonathan & Angela Scott are the only couple to have won the Overall Award in the prestigious Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition as individuals. They have written and illustrated 40 books and presented numerous television series, the latest being Animal Planet’s Big Cat Tales. In 2021 they founded the Sacred Nature Initiative to help reconnect people to nature.