

FROM MY OBSERVATION TOWER: REFLECTIONS OF A TOURISM INVESTOR

Pardamat residents call him Oloishorua because they have known him as a generous giver. At the same time, the Loita named him after the Maasai spiritual leader – Oloiboni – Mokombo, who hails from Loita because of his close association and friendship with Oloiboni. Oloishorua Mokombo, whose official documents read **SVEIN WILHELMSSEN**, came to Kenya backpacking with his friends 41 years ago. Fell in love with the Maasai Mara and promised himself to return. He came back in 1996, but this time, he lingered. He shares his thoughts with PHOEBE NADUPOI on why he stayed and much more.

How did you end up in the conservation space?

Like so many people I have met, it is pretty emotional; you come to this part of the world and are captured by it – I mean, the wildlife, the people and the nature. I was here for the first time in 1982, quite a long time ago, kind of backpacking in Africa, and I always remembered it. Then I was back in 1996 with my oldest daughter when she was ten. I befriended the late Mzee Ole Taek in Talek village, and he became a partner, and we founded Basecamp on New Year's Eve in 1997. So, it has been 25 years.

What did you seek to achieve—did you have an end in mind?

Not at that time. I was thinking about how we define ourselves at that moment, and we defined three core values: we want to be passionate about what we are doing, we are reliable, and we want to be fair. And if you think about the first one, we have been driven by passion. So instead of defining a strategic end, it came alive as we moved on.

But, of course, in the early days, it was about setting up a showcase, Basecamp as a model, but showcasing on a small scale. It was the first gold-rated camp in Kenya by the Eco-Tourism Society of Kenya.

As we all know, the big game-changer was the privatisation of land in the Mara, which threatened the whole ecosystem because, as you know, people are entitled to do with their land as they like. Still, it also held the clue to sustaining it because you could enter into lease agreements. So we were very much a part of that early movement. In our case, we managed five cabins next to Koyiaki Guiding School, inside what is now Naboisho; it gave us a foothold to becoming a partner.

So, our first big endeavour together with Dickson Kaelo, Mzee Ole Kereto and Mzee Ole Soit and other leaders was



SVEIN WILHELMSSEN.

to be instrumental in setting up Mara Naboisho. And that conservancy was standing on the shoulders of other successes because there were other conservancies before us, and we needed to build each other. You cannot see one conservancy as a success; it was a movement. But, in all fairness, the most significant contribution for Naboisho was 15-year leases which was a big increase because, before the establishment of Naboisho, it was usually up to five years, so the new leases signified the Maasai started thinking long-term in terms of committing land for conservation of wildlife. Secondly, we did some good things on the governance structure; equal representation between the tourism investors, landowners, and an independent chair. And thirdly, we also contributed to developing the controlled grazing plan for cattle inside the conservancy. There were elements that Naboisho added to the (conservancy) movement, which was very important; it was, in all modesty, awarded the best-managed community conservancy in Africa by Responsible Travel in 2016. So, we got this recognition, but one has to look at it as a contribution to the wider movement.

The Basecamp concept I founded in 1997 always had two legs: one was the responsible tourism operations with 12 camps today as Saruni Basecamp after we joined forces with Riccardo Orizios of Saruni Camps in 2021. Ten of these camps are in four conservancies in the Mara—Naboisho, Pardamat, Lemek and Mara North.

The other leg is Basecamp Explorer Foundation, and we contribute at the broader ecosystem level focusing on new conservancies MMWCA initiates and leads. The support could be setting up the legal structures, as we have now done in Oloisukut and Nyekweri, or it could be initial grant funding for the initial period of leases. It could also be support for rangers' salaries or small infrastructure needs and livelihood support.

You have been in the Mara landscape for over 20 years, seen the establishment of conservancies, their umbrella body – Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association (MMWCA) – and witnessed their growth. What do you consider an outstanding achievement of MMWCA?

MMWCA, with all its members, is an enormous success. It is not only a success for Kenya but Africa and beyond. To have established a very complex set-up within a short period with private ownership of land and work on an ecosystem level, benefitting not only a few people and not only the landowners, is extremely difficult. And it is a complex legal setting with all these dynamics. So, it is an extraordinary success, and one should always remember that despite the shortcomings and issues here and there, we are underfunded and running out of the wall down the

hill. The success should always inspire us: the landscape secured is more than 1,600 KM², and there are more than 15,000 landowners in 10 years. And the Maasais are investing for the long-term in this model and on behalf of the next generation. And for now, about five conservancies are waiting to join the Association.

Considering this model, the level of leases, and the concept of controlled cattle grazing inside the conservancies, I am convinced we have done something right; otherwise, people would not have signed up voluntarily.

In addition, success is the global showcase of grassroots mass mobilisation for people, nature and wildlife.

The second aspect is the level of fundraising that was delivered while building up from scratch. We are not a professional fundraising organisation where you bring the best fundraisers on the planet, this is done bottom up, and it is a tricky game. We have some of the best donors in the world supporting it, so fundraising has been a great achievement. The management of the COVID crisis was extraordinary. The glue was tested between the tourism partners, landowners, MMWCA, and donors—a huge success story. The partnership with the national and Narok County Governments is gradually growing; I think the newly gazetted management plan and the memorandum of understanding are part of the big success story. So, this success story is layered; it has interlinked levels because you cannot do this in isolation from the Kenyan authorities. But the core of the whole thing is the partnership between the tourism partners and landowners. If that trust is not taken care of and continuously built, it will not work. So we should not forget that this is a sustainable business case. We have close to 50 tourism investors in all these conservancies working with landowners. We are not a typical development project; I call it coming together—naboisho.

What was the Mara space like before the creation of conservancies and the establishment of MMWCA?

First, the type of tourism was colonial, the guides were in Khaki uniform, by and large, everybody, and then there were fewer Maasais and more people from other parts of the country. Nothing wrong with that, but it didn't have the feel of being community or looked community-based. I remember we started recruiting only the Maasais and had them wear their traditional clothing back in 1997. We had Big Moses Saiyialel and Tonkei Ole Taek. That was a significant change.

The second significant change was population pressure, which now is entirely different, as illustrated by all the



fences we have been able to pull down. Lastly, from a tourism point of view, wildlife was limited to the National Reserve, but today we have an unmatched, very exclusive product and wildlife experience in all these conservancies. And that didn't exist. If you take the case of Naboisho, in 2010, when it was first signed up, it wasn't a fantastic wildlife area because land use and management were poor. So, converting these areas into supreme wildlife spaces is a huge change.

You have done incredible things in this landscape. What is success to you?

Success means standing in front of the first 40 students with their principal, Morris Nabaala and seeing the shiny eyes of the students who have just enrolled at the Wildlife Tourism College of the Maasai Mara, seeing their enthusiasm and belief in themselves and the future.

Success is after a challenging process with Lemek Conservancy, hearing the Board led by Saning'o Ole Koriata say they are delighted with this partnership with me and glad to go forward together. Landowners trust and want to work with us, which is a success.

Success is, and it happened to me only a couple of months ago; a guest walking to me and saying, "I am taken by this experience that I have included your foundation in my will. When I pass away, you will be one of the beneficiaries".

Success is when the key donors we depend on for expansion say, "This is well done, and we will increase our support and the duration of our help.

What has made you stay in Mara for that long?

It's wildlife because it would not be about social issues only if I chose to work here. The beauty of African wildlife, the large mammals, but what I also find encouraging is that the politicians and the general public are starting to appreciate what the scientists have said for a long time that you can't solve the nature crisis and the climate crisis if you keep on destroying nature because nature is our best vehicle to reduce the enormous negative effects of climate change. Nature still absorbs 50% of human-made carbon (credits) emissions. So, if you destroy nature, you can't replace it. There is no technology; there is no compensation scheme; forget it. The most efficient way of

solving the climate crisis and temperature increase is to conserve nature, and when you preserve nature, wildlife thrives. All these conservancies are proof of this. But I am also intrigued by the Maasai culture, the myth, and the history.

On top of that, I am increasingly curious, interested and motivated by seeing the transition the community is going through. Because typically, when you have to go through such a rapid transition in the culture, it goes wrong. Often you are left with a few spokespersons, but the major population in a strong culture somehow evaporates. So, the core part of the culture is gradually destroyed. Most of the population still observes the Maasai core values and wants to take ownership. To be an observer and, hopefully, a supporter at some level of that transition is extremely interesting.

The biggest challenges include youth unemployment, gender issues and climate change. Also, from my observation tower, I think the level of monetisation of the landscape through individual leases—money does something to people; money does something to the culture. It makes people move away from collective thinking; it becomes more about “me and myself”.

Conservancies are an instrument for keeping a core part of the Maasai culture, particularly the aspect of thinking collectively. There is no more collective grazing, but you can still keep the core part of your culture through the conservancy because you would have to have about 80%

of the landowners agree to form a conservancy.

What's next for Svein? Any more “mountains” to conquer?

If I limit my answer to the Mara, then it would be the buffer zones. All the core conservancies need buffer zones, and climate change will increase that need because wildlife will need a wider area for food and water. So, we will be supporting MMWCA in implementing the Greater Maasai Mara Ecosystem Management Plan.

Secondly, although this would be a decent hill, not a mountain, I will focus on putting the newly-established Wildlife Tourism College of the Maasai Mara on the world stage.

Is retiring from active conservation something that has crossed your mind—will you hang your boots anytime soon?

No. And it's simple for me; when you have found your purpose, then retire from what? You must re-invent yourself if you are in good health and feel relevant. My mother passed 100 years, and I told her I would beat her. I am 69, so I still have 40 years to go.

Anything else you would like to say?

The Mara Conservancies' model has given the local landowners a tool to sustain their land ownership. We want to support this, believing local landownership is one key element for the long-term conservation of nature & wildlife.



PHOTO: FELIPE RODRIGUEZ.