

Walking for peace

Camel Caravan in northern Kenya

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Northern Kenya has a history of neglect and violent conflict. Many ethnic communities are pastoralists and some adhere to cultural norms and conflict-prone practices such as cattle raiding. More recent sources of conflict have stemmed from infrastructure projects and wildlife conservation, as the accompanying increase in government and private security has exacerbated competition for scarce resources and tensions between state and traditional methods of conflict management.

This article recounts efforts to build and maintain pathways to peaceful coexistence with an original approach: an annual camel-led 'peace walk', known as the Camel Caravan. This is occurring in a context of multiple security actors. Government security in the region includes various entities, including rapid deployment units, wildlife rangers and a growing military presence in conflict hotspots. International conservation organisations employ private security personnel to protect endangered wildlife and 'restore peace' by force.

Ewaso Ng'iro River and Camel Caravan

The Ewaso Ng'iro River is a source of livelihood for roughly seven million people. The river crosses 10 counties and various habitats, with different and competing community needs and economic activities.

The annual Camel Caravan by community members is an innovative peace initiative. Taking place along 300 kilometres of riverway, the Caravan emphasises the importance of water to this arid area and its dual role as a connector of people and source of conflict.

Camels are a symbol of resilience and tolerance, signifying the multi-ethnic pastoral lifestyle of northern Kenya. At least six ethnic groups participate; communities that often clash when competing for natural resources, especially during the dry season, when groups trek far in search of pasture and water. Conflicts erupt regularly during this time in areas with continuous water supply.

The Caravan facilitates two types of community interaction. First, it is a shared space in which communities meet and come to see that they share problems. Second, it offers political and traditional leaders an opportunity to discuss issues and reach a wider national and international audience and effect political change. Communities also showcase their individual cultures through awareness meetings held along the river.

Caravan goals and tactics

The Caravan has three goals: highlighting issues facing the river, including proposed infrastructure projects; exposing illegal activities by agricultural and horticultural companies; and promoting sustainable national water management approaches in the face of ever-increasing international demand for flowers and organic food.

The Caravan route traverses the terrain of various ethnic groups and provides opportunities for encounters, chipping away at stereotypes that groups may have of one another. It also creates a platform to jointly address issues of marginalisation, using the river as a starting point.

Cultivating trust between communities that are fighting over natural resources requires a combination of strategies

and approaches. Before the Caravan, time and resources were spent on open community peace forums organised by civil society. These helped to identify positive community influencers, and over the years a cohort of these 'peace ambassadors' emerged to link communities, civil society and the state. They are trained in methods of conflict transformation and especially conflict monitoring.

The Camel Caravan has become an ongoing process with river-basin communities. It has spillover effects with community-based peace initiatives and helps to foster mediation in cases of conflict, sometimes without the involvement of state security actors. This informal space for encounter has increased interaction between the river's various ethnic groups and, equally, enabled communities to speak with one voice against external threats to their livelihoods. This has culminated in a regular political dialogue between county leaders along the river.

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Impacts

The Camel Caravan has had two major outcomes to date. First, the ongoing contact has stimulated community-based initiatives and connections. An outstanding example is a peace accord formulated between the Ilngewsi Maasai and the Samburu. This protracted conflict between two ethnic groups was resolved in 2017 using traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and the involvement of the peace ambassadors.

Second, informal spaces have enabled formal and government-acknowledged agreements between communities. Community-initiated success stories include water resource user associations as first monitors of cattle raiding, which has reduced the number of protracted conflicts.

The Camel Caravan has lobbied successfully for the removal of illegal water obstructions by government security agencies. Also, counties have ratified legislation to outlaw practices harmful to the river such as sand harvesting, and established a forum to liaise in efforts to protect natural resources. By connecting decision-makers and local people, leading to formal measure such as this, the Camel Caravan has proved an unusual but effective conflict resolution initiative.



Preparing the Camel Caravan outside Ewaso, Laikipia County, Kenya, 5 August 2019. © IMPACT Trust