

Livestock keepers' rights: Conserving endangered animal genetic resources in Kenya

By Dr Jacob Wanyama and Danielle Nierenberg
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Maralal, Kenya, is mostly known for its wildlife. And as we made the seven hour, bumpy trek from Nairobi — half of it on unpaved roads — we saw our fair share of water buffaloes, rhinos, impala, and giraffes. But we weren't here to go on safari. We were here to meet with a group of pastoralists — livestock keepers who had agreed to meet with us and talk about the challenges they face.

We met in the community primary school and it was humbling to see so many people — many wearing traditional Maasai clothing, brightly woven clothe, beads, elaborate earrings — come through the door to greet us.

Over the years, pastoralists like the well-known Maasai here in Kenya have been pushed out of their traditional grazing lands to drier and drier regions, places where it was easy to ignore them. But as the effects of climate change, hunger, drought and the loss of biodiversity become more evident, it's increasingly hard to push livestock keepers' rights aside. Governments need to recognise that pastoralists are the best keepers of genetic diversity.

Anikole cattle, for example, a breed indigenous to Eastern Africa, are not only beautiful to look at but they're one of the "highest quality" breeds of cattle because they can survive in extremely harsh, dry conditions — something that's more important than ever as climate change takes a bigger hold on Africa.

Although most of the people we met don't have access to cable TV or even radios, they do have a good sense of the challenges their fellow livestock keepers face all over Kenya. They are aware that climate change is likely responsible for the drought plaguing much of East Africa, killing thousands of livestock over the last few months. They know that conflict with neighbouring pastoral communities over water resources and access to land makes headlines in Kenya's newspapers. And they know that many policy-makers would like to forget they exist, considering their nomadic lifestyle barbaric, as our guide Dr Pat Lanyasunya, a member of the Africa LIFE Network, explained.

Unfortunately, governments and agribusiness don't share the same viewpoint. They're increasingly promoting cross-breeding of native breed with exotic breeds — breeds that were designed to gain more weight and produce more milk. The problem is, however, that these newer breeds have a hard time adapting to sub-Saharan Africa's dry conditions, as well as the pests and diseases present here. As a result, pastoralists who adopt these breeds have to spend more on feed and inputs, like pesticides and

antibiotics to keep cattle healthy.

One of the most serious problems we heard about was the effects that replacing indigenous breeds of livestock with mixed breeds of more exotic cattle have had during the drought. These livestock keepers began replacing their indigenous Zebu cattle with mixed breeds about 15 years ago after missionaries introduced them to the community. While the new breeds were bigger and could potentially produce more meat or milk, they aren't as hardy as native cattle that can travel long distances without much water.

According to one of the community elders, the “old breeds could go 40km [for food and water] and come back,” but the new breeds can't tolerate the distance or the heat. In the past, water sources could be much farther away and the cattle could thrive, but now they need to be much closer.

That's one reason different pastoralist communities sometimes clash — when cattle can't travel far for water, livestock keepers have to find it elsewhere, often at sites that are traditionally used by different communities. A man wearing a Harley-Davidson hat along with his Maasai shawl acknowledged that although they fight with other communities over resources, “they're just like us”, trying to survive with very little support from the government or NGOs. The conflict has not only effected the raising of livestock, but also forced schools to close and created more internally displaced people as they are driven off the land.

What surprised us most about these livestock keepers is their understanding that the world is changing. They know that many of their children won't live the same kind of lives that their ancestors lived for centuries. Many will choose to go to the cities, but they said if their children become “landed”, they want them to maintain links to the pastoralist way of life. And they said that for some of them, livestock is what they do best and what they have a passion for — and that they should be allowed to continue doing it.

Dr Jacob Wanyama is a veterinarian and coordinator for the Africa LIFE Network. Danielle Nierenberg is a senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute.