

Ngorongoro: A priceless asset

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NGORONGORO CONSERVATION AREA AUTHORITY

Ngorongoro's wildlife and land has been a UNESCO site since 1979 and now its cultural heritage is to be included

Encompassing three spectacular volcanic craters, the Olduvai Gorge, huge expanses of savannah, forest and bush land, the Ngorongoro Conservation Area is the flagship of Tanzania's tourism industry.

The Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA), measuring 8,300 square kilometres, is also the only place on earth where mankind and wild animals co-exist in harmony. The NCA became a Man and Biosphere Reserve in 1971 and was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1979.

Originally part of the Serengeti National Park when the latter was established by the British in 1951, in 1959 the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority (NCAA) was formed, separating NCA from Serengeti. Land within the area is multi-use, providing protection status for wildlife while also permitting human habitation. Its uniqueness lays in the fact that the NCA is where man, livestock and wild animals live in peace: Maasai cattle can sometimes be seen grazing alongside zebras on Ngorongoro's grassland.

Apart from conserving world heritage, Ngorongoro plays a major role in national development. "We pay 30 per cent corporate tax, 3 per cent tourism tax, and remit 10 per cent of our earnings to the treasury," explains Bernard Murunya, the NCAA's Chief Conservator. "We also give over US\$125,000 to the local District Council as well as supporting the area's Pastoralist Council, in addition to funding various community projects such as schools, hospitals, veterinary services and road construction," he adds.

World Heritage site

The NCAA's wildlife and land has been a UNESCO site since 1979 and now its cultural heritage is to be included. The NCA is the only site in the world with a high concentration of wildlife living in harmony with human communities. The multiple land use systems in this area are among the earliest to be established around the world as a means of reconciling human development and conserving natural resources. The NCA also contains numerous paleontological, archaeological, and anthropological sites of exceptional quality.

The main crater

Had it not become the world's sixth-largest unbroken caldera, then what is now known as the Ngorongoro

crater could have been a towering volcanic mountain, as high as Kilimanjaro.

The crater is the flagship tourism feature for the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. It is a large, unbroken, un-flooded caldera, formed when a giant volcano exploded and collapsed some three million years ago. The Ngorongoro crater sinks to a depth of 610 metres, with a base area covering 260 square kilometres. The height of the original volcano must have ranged between 4,500 to 5,800 metres high. Apart from the main caldera, Ngorongoro also has two other volcanic craters: Olmoti and Empakai, the former famous for its stunning waterfalls, and the latter holding a deep lake and lush, green walls.

On the leeward of the Ngorongoro highlands protrudes the iconic Oldonyo Lengai, an active volcano and Tanzania's third highest peak after Kilimanjaro and Meru. Known to local people as the Mountain of God, Mount Lengai's last major eruption occurred in 2007. At the mountain's foot is Lake Natron, East Africa's major breeding ground for flamingoes.

Flora and Fauna: Wildlife

The area contains over 25,000 large animals including 26 black rhinoceros. There are 7,000 wildebeests, 4,000 zebras, 3,000 eland and 3,000 Grant's and Thomson's gazelles. The crater also has the densest known population of lions, numbering 62. Higher up, in the rainforests of the crater rim, are leopards, about 30 large elephants, mountain reedbeek and more than 4,000 buffalos, spotted hyenas, jackals, rare wild dogs, cheetahs, and other felines.

The legendary annual wildebeest and zebra migration also passes through Ngorongoro, when the 1.7 million ungulates move south into the area in December then move out heading north in June. The migrants passing through the plains of the reserve include 1.7 million wildebeest, 260,000 zebra, and 470,000 gazelles. The Lake Ndutu area to the west has significant cheetah and lion populations. Over 500 species of bird have been recorded within the NCA. These include ostrich, white pelican, and greater and lesser flamingo on Lake Magadi within the crater, Lake Ndutu, and in the Empakaai Crater Lake, where a vast bird population can be observed.

Flora and Fauna: Vegetation cover

Ngorongoro is home to lush green, rain-watered vegetation, as well as desert plants. The area has

uncultivated lowland vegetation, arid and semi-arid plant communities, abundant short grass used for grazing, and highland forests.

Scrub heath, grasslands, high open moorland, and the remains of dense evergreen forests cover the steep slopes of the crater, while highland trees including Peacock Flower, Yellow-Wood, Kouso (Hagenia abyssinica), and Sweet Olive can also be found. There are also extensive stretches of pure bamboo on Oldeani Mountain, and Pencil Cedar on Makarut Mountain to the west. Doweeds dominate the lower slopes, while the upland woodlands contain Red Thorn Acacia and Gum Acacia that are critical for protecting the watershed.

The crater basin is covered by open short grass plains with fresh and brackish water lakes, marshes, swamps, and two patches of Acacia woodland. The Lerai Forest is home to the Yellow Fever tree and Acacia, while Laiyanai Forest has Pillar Wood and Acacia Lahai. The undulating plains to the west are grass-covered with occasional Umbrella Acacia and Commiphora Africana trees. Blackthorn Acacia and Zebrawood dominate in the drier conditions beside Lake Eyasi. These extensive grasslands and bush are rich, relatively untouched by cultivation, and support very large animal populations.

Where human life began

At far end of the NCA stands the Olduvai Gorge archaeological site, widely regarded as the cradle of mankind and the most important prehistoric site in the world. It is at Olduvai where remains of Zinjanthropus, the world's first humans, were discovered by Dr Louis and Mary Leakey over 50 years ago. The earliest known specimens of the human genus, Homo-habilis, as well as early hominids such as Paranthropus boisei have also been found there. The Olduvai Gorge is a steep-sided ravine in the Great Rift Valley, stretching along eastern Africa. The windswept Olduvai is about thirty miles long, lying within the rain shadow of the Ngorongoro highlands. The gorge is named after oldupaai, the Maasai word for the wild sisal plant.

Millions of years ago, the site comprised of a large lake, the shores of which were covered with successive deposits of volcanic ash. Some 500,000 years ago seismic forces diverted a nearby stream, which began to cut down into the sediments, revealing the seven main layers in the walls of the gorge. Based on fossil evidence found at the Olduvai Gorge, it is believed that various hominid species have been occupying the crater continuously for the past three million years of Ngorongoro's existence. Native hunter and gatherers who initially lived in the vicinity were replaced by pastoralists a few thousand years ago.

Hotels and accommodation

The area has some of the best hotels and lodges in Tanzania, such as the classic Ngorongoro Crater Lodge,

built in 1939, and now operated by the 'And Beyond' group of South Africa, along with the Ngorongoro Rhino Lodge, built in 1942, the Ndotu Lodge, built in 1946, and the Ngorongoro Wildlife Lodge, dating back to 1971.

Newer establishments include the Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge and Ngorongoro Serena Lodge, built in the mid-1990s. The six facilities, all located along the crater rim, have a total bed capacity of 560. The NCAA also has 16 campsite areas. Three more firms, the Whitesands, Kibo Safaris, and Coastal travels intend to establish other facilities within NCA; the new entries will boost the area bed capacity to 1,000.

Famous visitors

About 450,000 tourists visit Ngorongoro every year, accounting for 60 per cent of the average 770,000 tourists visiting Tanzania per annum. Famous visitors include former US President Bill Clinton, the Queen of Denmark Magrethe II, former American Human Right Activist the Rev Jesse Jackson, Hollywood film star Chris Tucker, John Wayne, Prince William, and the entire delegation attending the 2008 Leon Sullivan Summit which took place in Arusha.

Some scenes from the Oscar winning Out of Africa and John Wayne's Hatari were filmed in Ngorongoro.

Conclusion

In addition to the above-mentioned attractions, visitors can also sample cultural tourism or eco-tourism in various 'Maasai' bomas and settlements. Gibbs Farm, located near Karatu along the NCA perimeters, specialises in this. There are also the 'Endoro River' nature trail expeditions, conducted within the Northern Highland Forest Reserve, where visitors can see elephant caves, waterfalls (150 metres high), enjoy bird watching and learn about local flora.

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One of the world's
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attractions

