

No caldera comes close

By **DR FREDDY MANONGI**

CHIEF CONSERVATOR, NGORONGORO CONSERVATION AREA AUTHORITY



FREDDY MANONGI began his career as an anti-poaching ranger at Moyowosi Game Reserve and subsequently worked in planning with Tanzania National Parks. After obtaining international experience in Botswana, Malawi and Mozambique, he rose to the position of Rector at the College of African Wildlife Management in Mweka. He was appointed Chief Conservator of Ngorongoro in October 2013. He holds an MSc in Conservation Biology from the University of Cape Town, and a Ph.D from the University of Bangor, Wales.

Covering an area about half the size of Wales, Tanzania's Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) is a unique environment where humans and wildlife co-exist in harmony.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site for more than three decades, Ngorongoro's vast swathes of savannah, forest, and bush land, along with the Olduvai Gorge and three spectacular volcanic craters, make it the flagship of Tanzania's tourism industry.

Located next to the Serengeti National Park in northern Tanzania, the NCA is multi-use, providing protection for wildlife, as well a home for the peoples who have lived there since the dawn of humanity, and contains a huge number of paleontological, archaeological, and anthropological sites of exceptional quality.

The park is dominated by the Ngorongoro volcanic crater, an, unbroken, un-flooded caldera which is about 20 kilometers across and more than 600 meters deep. Apart from the main caldera, the NCA boasts 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.

In the northeast of the park towers the iconic Oldonyo L'engai, 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.

The Ngorongoro crater provides a safe haven

for some of Africa's most exciting wildlife, among them black rhinoceroses, lions, leopards, elephants, mountain reedbuck, buffalos, spotted hyenas, jackals, rare wild dogs, cheetahs, and other felines.

The legendary annual wildebeest and zebra migration also passes through the NCA, 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 NCA is a bird watcher's paradise, with more than 500 species, including pelicans and flamingoes.

Ngorongoro provides a range of environments, from lush green rain-watered vegetation through to semi-arid plains, as well as dense evergreen forests that cover the steep slopes of the crater. 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 extensive grasslands and bush of the park are rich, relatively untouched by cultivation, and able to sustain their huge animal populations.

But the NCA also offers a fascinating glimpse into the origins of man, and is one of the oldest continually inhabited places on the planet. The Olduvai Gorge archaeological site is one of the most important prehistoric sites in the world, and is where *Zinjanthropus*, the world's first humans, were discovered by Dr Louis and Mary Leakey more than half a century 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.

To preserve the NCA's delicate balance, visitor numbers are tightly monitored, and the crater's six lodges have a total capacity of just 560 beds, although new accommodation will double that figure in the coming years. Camping accommodation is also available. Visitors are also encouraged to get to know the people who live here through visits to Maasai settlements. **F**



The world's largest unflooded, unbroken caldera