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LOW-IMPACT, HIGH-YIELD IS THE WAY TO GO
DR MOHANJEET BRAR | MANAGING DIRECTOR, GAMEWATCHERS SAFARIS

When Jake Grieves-Cook signed an agreement with Maasai pastoralists to start a wildlife conservancy in 1997, little did he know he was on the cusp of a revolution. The resulting Selenkay, the first such conservancy in Kenya, sits on 13,000 acres of pristine land near Amboseli National Park.

Eight years later, the founder of Porini Camps signed another agreement, this time with landowners near the Masai Mara, to establish the 18,700-acre Ol Kinyei Conservancy. Thus began an exciting model of ecotourism, with people and conservation at its centre.

“This is the future of tourism. A low-impact, high-yield model that pays for conservation,” says Mohanjeet Brar, managing director at Gamewatchers Safaris, whose Porini Camps are feted the world over for practising sustainable tourism in Kenya.

Every tent the company erects conserves 700 acres of wildlife habitat, while landowners receive a payout from tour operators respective to the land size amalgamated to form the conservancies.

It is such incentives that move locals to conserve what the rest of the world has lost. Yet the model, of course, can only work with guests using the facilities in the conservancies. In 2020, such guests were rare because of the global travel restrictions.

But with the pent-up demand for travel, Brar says visitors will opt for safaris that are off-the-beaten track, memorable and safe.

“Due to the pandemic, people want to travel as families,” he says. “In the conservancies, children can take nature walks, forage in the wild and engage in wholesome activities without undue worries about their health.”

In Kenya, especially among the Maasai community, there is a thin line between wildlife conservation and human needs. Both activities are interdependent. As wildlife thrives, so do the people – their warmth drawing even more guests to the conservancies.

“First-time visitors to Kenya come for the animals, then they come back for the people. The wildebeest migration comes and goes, but the Masai Mara remains. The people are still there, and they have a lot to teach us about conservation.”

In the past, the conservancies have relied heavily on visitors from the UK and the US. But Brar believes it is time the country expanded its pool of source markets if this conservation model is to be sustained.



Far left: Mohanjeet Brar, managing director, Gamewatchers Safaris

Left top to bottom: Enjoying the facilities and surroundings at Gamewatchers’ Nairobi Tented Camp, located in the heart of Nairobi National Park

“Recently, we got visitors from Mexico, a market that is usually not on our radar,” he says. “An airline like Kenya Airways, through its New York route, can play a big role in aggregating such loads from emerging markets in Latin America.”

And, as Kenya’s tourism industry begins the long road to recovery, individuals such as Brar hope the tourism model his outfit started almost 25 years ago will continue supporting conservation and reel in more visitors.

Final take? “Sustainable tourism is the new frontier.” ➔