OPINION

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Lessons from elephants to ease human-wildlife conflict

A month ago in January 2026, a Global Positioning System (GPS) collar signalled that a 24-year-old elephant matriarch, Liana, had left Samburu National Reserve. She moved West, then South, across the landscape that connects Samburu and Laikipia ecosystems.

Motion cameras captured her and her family going through Ol-Donyiro, along a corridor that thousands of herds have followed for generations. Leading her herd, she tracked water, forage and safety guided not by policy documents but by ancestral memory passed down through generations.

The route cuts across conservation zones, pastoral land, and political boundaries. That movement is the literal footprint of the delicate balance in nature for the ecosystem, more so the human-wildlife relationship that needs to be carefully negotiated and protected at all costs.

When the systems that govern the delicate balance between humans, wildlife and livestock fail, the cost falls hardest on the people who live closest to the land. Families in Ol-Donyiro and the broader Isiolo landscape have lost livestock to drought, crops to elephants moving outside constrained dry-season ranges, and in some cases, family members to human-wildlife conflict.

The economic and livelihood strain is not abstract. Benjamin Loloju a local resident at Ol-Donyiro, tends to his livestock a few metres from matriarch Liana's migratory path. For years, the absence of a structured governance framework meant that this proximity of pastoralists like Loloju and the elephants was managed by chance, tolerance and occasional tragedy rather than by policy. That is the baseline against which this progress must be measured.

Previously, conservation has relied on fixed boundaries. The fenced parks, reserves, conservancies and exclusion zones. It presumed ecological rhythms would oscillate within a narrow band of historical memory.

Wildlife, moreso elephants, do not respect these static lines when water and forage shift beyond them. They respond to gradients of water, forage and safety. When drought intensifies, they extend their range. When their movement corridors are blocked, they do not turn back because a plan has been formulated in a boardroom or conference hall. They push through farms, settlements, fences, roads and railways.

Climate change has converted variability into volatility. Movement is no longer a seasonal adjustment; it is a survival strategy for humans and wildlife alike. The recognition of this intertwined existence, of shared ecological stress and competition for water and grazing between local communities and wildlife, is necessary to craft lasting solutions.

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Benson Okita-Ouma | Policy

The migratory corridors are a climate infrastructure. A hydrological logic made visible on land; a mechanism for landscape resilience that allows water, and grazing pressure, livestock and wildlife to redistribute under stress rather than accumulate at a boundary until conflict erupts.

What distinguishes the most credible corridor designs in Northern Kenya is that they are dual-purpose systems, functional for elephant movement and for pastoral livestock movement and community access. This dual purpose logic is the technically correct response to a landscape shared by humans and wildlife under the same climate-driven pressures.

When a corridor serves both Liana's ancestral route and Loloju's community grazing needs, it becomes politically durable in a way that a wildlife-only conservation designation does not.

In January 2025, the Isiolo County Government teamed up with partners and communities to initiate gazettement of sections of three wildlife corridors connecting the Marsabit, Samburu, Isiolo, Laikipia and Mt Kenya ecosystems and finalised the initiative in its Physical and Land Use Development Plan in February 2026, for OlDonyiro town.

The sections passing through and circumventing the town were largely considered choke points that unless quickly secured into law would lead to blockage of the corridors. By codifying them into the local land use and governance policy, the corridors now exist in the same legal architecture as roads, utilities, and settlement zones. They now have a different political status, a status that can be invoked.

When a wildlife corridor is embedded in a spatial plan, it acquires standing in governance processes it would otherwise have no access to. Community members and government agencies now have a legal instrument through which to defend the corridors' integrity. We have, in concrete terms, the beginning of what is often described but rarely achieved—a lasting solution.

The basis of such initiatives is anchored in the political goodwill including a Presidential Directive of 2023 to preserve wildlife corridors, science reinforcing local knowledge and structured community engagement. The GPS collars data from elephants like Liana provided the spatial evidence that Isiolo County planners and surveyors used to designate the corridors' boundaries and legal protection status. The process listened to what Liana and her herd were telling us about their needs, and gave that message the weight of law.

That message coupled with engaging the local pastoral community who have herded these rangelands for generations, who sat in dialogue after dialogue, who contributed invaluable knowledge of the landscape, and held on to a trust that the process would serve their socio-economic and cultural interests alongside those of the wildlife they live with, yielded the success that will outlast us all. This is where and how conservation actually happens. In the human architecture that makes dialogue possible and creates meaningful impact in the years that follow.

The Samburu-Ol-Donyiro–Laikipia corridor is a testament that county governments, community conservancies, national agencies, research institutions can align around a shared definition and vision of what this landscape is for. This is major administrative achievement and a proof of concept — community co-design, science-backed mapping, and statutory embedding — that is replicable across Kenya and other climate-stressed rangelands in East Africa that face the same convergence of climate volatility.

A corridor that functions well in a stable climate must be adaptive enough to function in one that is not. Liana did not choose the Ol-Donyiro corridor because a plan designated it. She chose it because the landscape could sustain her family. Maintaining that capacity under climate stress for her, and for Loloju and his fellow pastoralists is the conservation challenge that will define the future of this work.

The elephants will tell us whether we got it right. They always do.

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