

CONSERVATION

Elephants do not draft policy, but their movements tell us how to get it right



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Climate change has transformed variability into volatility. Movement is no longer seasonal adjustment; it is survival strategy for humans and wildlife alike.

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 linking the Samburu and Laikipia ecosystems

Motion cameras captured her and her family passing 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.

Her route cuts across conservation zones, pastoral land and political boundaries. That movement must be negotiated carefully and protected at all costs.

This is the recurring story of Kenya's northern rangelands. Rainfall no longer arrives with former predictability. Rivers and ponds swell and vanish; wells fail; pastures green unevenly. It is an unforgiving environment for any form of life that does not adapt. Adaptation must now frame conservation, environmental stewardship and sustainable livelihoods for local communities.

When systems governing the delicate balance between humans, wildlife and livestock falter, the cost falls hardest on those closest to the land. Families in Ol-donyiro and the wider Isiolo landscape have lost livestock to drought, crops to elephants moving beyond constrained dry-season ranges and, in some cases, relatives to human-wildlife conflict. The economic strain is not abstract.

Benjamin Loloju, a resident of Ol-Donyiro, grazes his livestock a few metres from Liana's migratory path. For years, the absence of a structured governance framework meant this proximity was managed by chance, tolerance and occasional tragedy rather than policy. That is the baseline against which progress must be measured.

Conservation has historically relied on



fixed boundaries: fenced parks, reserves, conservancies and exclusion zones. Across northern Kenya and other wildlife-rich regions, this model assumed ecological stability and a minimal human footprint. It presumed ecological rhythms would oscillate within a narrow band of historical memory. Under accelerating climate stress, that assumption is failing and demands urgent intervention. Wildlife does not respect static lines when water and forage shift beyond them.

Elephants illustrate this with uncompromising clarity. They respond to gradients of water, forage and safety. When drought intensifies, they extend their range. When corridors are blocked, they do not retreat because a strategy was drafted in a boardroom. They push through farms, settlements, fences, roads and railways.

Migratory corridors are climate infrastructure: a hydrological logic made

visible on land, akin to transport networks for people. They enable water, grazing pressure, livestock and wildlife to redistribute under stress rather than accumulate at boundaries until conflict erupts.

The most credible corridor designs in northern Kenya are not wildlife-only interventions. They are dual-purpose systems, functional for elephant movement as well as pastoral livestock and community access.

This is not political compromise; it is technical necessity in a landscape shared by humans and wildlife under identical climate pressures. When a corridor serves both Liana's ancestral route and Loloju's grazing needs, it becomes politically durable in a way a wildlife-only designation never could.

In January 2025, the Isiolo County Government partnered with communities and stakeholders to initiate the gazette-

ment of sections of three wildlife corridors linking the Marsabit, Samburu, Isiolo, Laikipia and Mount Kenya ecosystems. The initiative was finalised in February 2026 within the Physical and Land Use Development Plan for Ol-Donyiro town.

Sections passing through and around the town were identified as choke points which, unless secured in law, risked blocking the corridors. Embedding them in the statutory plan created a powerful policy instrument guiding land use and governance, one that cannot be overridden without triggering formal review involving all stakeholders.

The corridors now sit within the same legal architecture as roads, utilities and settlement zones. They can be invoked and defended.

When a wildlife corridor is embedded in a spatial plan, it gains standing in governance processes from which it would otherwise be excluded. Community members and government agencies now possess a legal instrument to defend its integrity. In concrete terms, this marks the beginning of what is often described but rarely achieved: a lasting solution.

Several factors made this outcome possible: national policy frameworks anchored in the 2010 Constitution, political goodwill including a 2023 Presidential Directive to preserve wildlife corridors, scientific evidence reinforcing local knowledge of movement patterns and sustained community engagement.

A corridor functioning in stable climate must adapt to one that is not. Community-governed systems emerging in northern Kenya offer a technically credible response to ecological flux.

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's community — is the conservation challenge defining this work.

The elephants will tell us whether we succeeded. They always do.