Recommendations For a Smooth Ecological and Social Transition into the Future for Agro-pastoralists of the Baringo Lowlands, Northern Kenya (abstract)

Ashley G. Lanfer
Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies

The semi-arid Baringo lowlands of northern Kenya are inhabited primarily by agro-pastoralists. Each of Baringo’s three agro-pastoral ethnic groups historically practiced subsistence ranching on communally owned land. In 1895, Kenya became a British protectorate. Westerners perceived the indigenous health care, education and communal property systems of the Baringo lowlands as inadequate. They implemented powerful new systems of health care, education and property in an effort to modernize, westernize and develop Baringo. As a result, the transition in Baringo from traditional livelihoods on communally owned land to western livelihoods on privately owned land has been ecologically and socially destructive. Grazing land has become increasingly degraded. There has been sharp decline or local extinction of terrestrial flora and fauna species. The human population is increasing faster than the national average. Heavy emphasis is placed on formal, impractical education. Local people experience inner conflict between the traditional values of an interdependent community and the western values of individual wealth, property and power. If current trends continue, increasing land degradation will further compromise local people’s ability to survive. Many potential alternatives are unreasonable due to Kenya’s poor political and physical infrastructure and the semi-arid climate. Also, foreign aid hand-outs have been neither consistent nor socially beneficial to local people and increased reliance on these programs is therefore not recommended. This analysis focuses on how Western influence can be used for the good of the land and its people. Recommended policies incorporate new economic realities into traditional land uses. They include the facilitation of a smooth, equitable transition into a private property system; stabilization of domestic livestock populations through more sophisticated participation by Baringo residents in the market economy; expansion of family planning to all Baringo residents; and greater participation in and benefits from conservation by local people. These recommended policies have been tested and proven by families, individuals, or communities in Baringo with assistance from a local environmental NGO.

ASHLEY G. LANFER is a student at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies and expects to complete her Master’s degree in Environmental Science in 2001. She worked for Rehabilitation of Arid Environments (RAE) Trust in Baringo, Kenya in 1997 and 1998. Based on research on innovative land management strategies of local people, Ashley wrote two land management handbooks for semi-literate East African pastoralists. Her research focus at Yale has been trans-boundary protected areas in the tropics. In 2000, she researched and wrote a booklet for southern African communities affected by trans-boundary protected areas. Ashley received a Bachelor of Arts in English and in Environmental Studies with an emphasis in Environmental Writing from Dartmouth College. She received the Downey Prize in Environmental Studies and the Lombard Public Service Fellowship at Dartmouth. Ashley’s other experiences include developing educational curriculum with the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia, and free-lance writing.

Ashley G. Lanfer, 197 15th Street, Atlanta, GA 30309. Phone: (203) 865-2686; Email: ashley.lanfer@yale.edu or sashgraves@aol.com