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VIEWS

TRAVELWISE

KENYA'S CALLING:

REFLECTING ON RETURNING,
A JOURNEY FOR LEARNING



BY NICK WISE
Arizona State University
Phoenix, Arizona
Nick.Wise@asu.edu

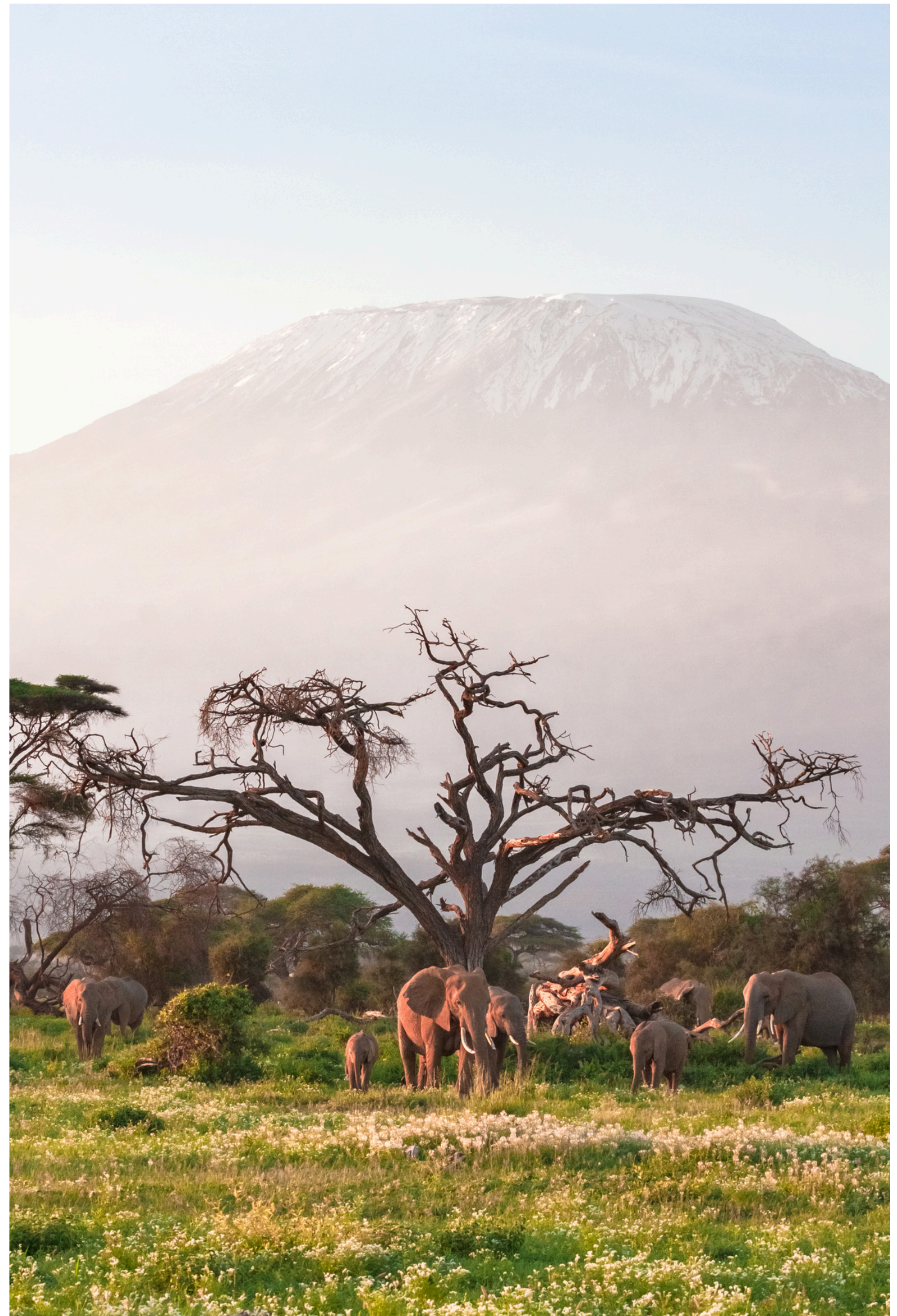
Jambo (hello)

There are some places around the world that call us back. To me, Kenya is one of those places. It is a destination where the boundaries between learning and lived experience blur. Cultural connections are inseparable from the rhythms of nature. In Kenya, every encounter with wildlife, landscapes, and community becomes part of an unfolding story of change.

These types of trips where we lead students abroad encourage experiential education. Each day is a journey of new encounters and experiences. I look forward to learning about local conservation and preservation efforts and how they have made headways since I last visited. Land stewardship and community approaches to sustainability are what capture my interests and these are details I will direct my attention to as we move from attraction to attraction around Kenya.

More than 10 years have passed since I first traveled to Kenya, yet the memories remain vibrant. I recall unforgettable sunrises across the savanna and walking among wildlife. I look forward to meeting new local tour guides who will narrate the natural and cultural settings in each attraction. The intricate storytelling from the guides help us understand the land. Traditions come to life through generations of stewardship and the deep respect I felt for communities who balance local livelihood and conservation in profoundly complex ways.

I was earlier in my career as an academic researcher when I first visited Kenya. Now, I am preparing to lead a group of students. As I prepare to visit Kenya again, it feels both familiar and entirely new. For the students who will join us in June 2026, Kenya will be an adventure of firsts. First safaris, first conversations with conservationists and park rangers, first entry into communities whose cultural frameworks differ from their own.



For me, the return offers something else: a chance to reflect on how Kenya has changed, how I have changed as a researcher and teacher, and how qualitative inquiry allows us to see a destination, not as a backdrop for tourism, but as a dynamic, evolving social landscape.

I discuss here some research reflections, pedagogical guiding styles, and the anticipation of what it means to revisit a place that continues to shape my thinking about tourism, sustainability, nature, culture, and community development.

Looking Back: A Decade of Distance, a Lifetime of Reflection

My initial journey to Kenya more than a decade ago introduced me to the profound interconnectedness of environment, community, and culture. At that time, I was primarily focused on experiencing the iconic elements of Kenya.

I visited Masai Mara's sweeping plains, the geologically active Great Rift Valley, experienced the bustling energy of Nairobi, and the beauty of Lake Naivasha. The chance to witness wildlife and learn in these cultural settings felt both humbling and transformative. What I came to understand over time was how these landscapes were entrenched in intricate systems of governance, cultural preservation, and resource negotiation.



As a qualitative researcher, travel encounters mean reflection. Reflection is both a method and a mindset. Revisiting my experiences through an interpretive lens reveals not just what I saw, but how I saw it."

Being reflective of my travel journeys involves filtering my assumptions, my cultural background, and my developing understanding of sustainability and responsible tourism. Community-based tourism models in many remote areas are central frameworks in Kenya. Conversations about conservation tended to emphasize anti-poaching efforts, wildlife population recovery, and the role of tourism in supporting protected areas. While these issues remain vital today, Kenya's approach has evolved significantly in ways that reflect broader shifts in global sustainability thinking.

Now, returning with the responsibility of guiding students, I am aware that my past experiences serve as both an anchor and a point of contrast. I seek this next opportunity to explore how the country's conservation and cultural landscape have transformed. Reflecting and teaching from the standpoint of qualitative inquiry enables me to help students explore and witness their surroundings and encounters with depth and sensitivity. I add here some considerations as I prepare to embark on a journey to explore conservation, preservation, and destination sustainability with students who want to learn and experience tourism and park management firsthand in Kenya.



Flag of Kenya

Preparing Students: Entering a New Culture Through a Qualitative Lens

One of the most meaningful aspects of leading this program is teaching students how to enter a place. For many, Kenya will be their first time in Africa, and for some, their first extended experience outside North America. The goal is not merely to observe Kenya, but to learn with Kenya. Critical qualitative thinking provides guiding principles that help students navigate new environments with humility, curiosity, and ethical awareness.



Observing Without Assumption:

Students are encouraged to pay attention to the textures of daily life—the interactions between guides and visitors, the way communities articulate their relationship to land, the decisions that shape wildlife conservation practices. These observations are not neutral; they require reflexivity and an understanding that meaning is always negotiated.



Listening as Interpretation:

Conversations with local guides, nonprofit leaders, park rangers, and community members are central to the program. These individuals are not simply sources of information. They are co-educators whose perspectives challenge us to rethink preconceived notions of sustainability, development, and tourism's impacts.



Recognizing the Emotional Dimensions: Qualitative work is embodied. There will be the surprise of encountering giraffes up close, the gravity of standing before endangered animals, or the emotional resonance of meeting a fostered elephant. We will learn how the survival of these iconic symbols of nature depended on human intervention. Such experiences evoke wonder and empathy, along with ethical questions that students can unpack. These experiences will encourage personal reflection and group dialogue.



Understanding Positionality: Our identities can shape our interactions, and this is important to recognize. We will learn to engage respectfully in communities that welcome us as guests. This includes understanding cultural norms, practicing humility, and acknowledging the privilege of accessing places and stories. Visitors like us will be outsiders to this culture, but gain from these local encounters. Locals are stewards of the land, and visitors are there to learn, support, and respect cultural values.

In this sense, the journey becomes more than an academic or mere travel experience—it becomes a process of personal transformation and critical awareness.



Southern White Rhino

Kenya Today: Evolving Conservation and Cultural Preservation

Over the past decade, Kenya has undergone significant shifts in how it approaches conservation, community development, and cultural heritage.

These changes form the backbone of the field study program. Again, the aim is not simply travel and exposure; students are intentionally situated within these evolving landscapes that Kenya has to offer, and conservation and preservation are the foundation for thinking and reflecting.

Community-based conservation efforts have continued to expand across Kenya with a dedicated national parks system. When I first visited Kenya, conservancies were gaining traction; now, they are integral to the country's conservation strategy. Places like Ol Pejeta Conservancy have become global leaders in community-centered wildlife management. Communities now participate in decision-making, benefit from revenue-sharing models, and serve as wildlife rangers and stewards. Conservationists continue to use new technologies. The use of drones to monitor or track migratory herds in real-time add new layers to protection. Strides to strengthen anti-poaching efforts see these individuals trained in tourism. Partnerships with NGOs and local governments have enhanced education, healthcare access, and employment opportunities. Surrounding communities see tourism as an exercise in longevity, and protecting animals from poaching enables generations to thrive and sustain off of Kenya's valuable natural resources.

The protection of endangered species in this regard is a collaborative effort among communities and visitors. The story of the northern white rhinos at Ol Pejeta has evolved into a symbol of scientific hope and global cooperation. Assisted reproductive technologies, genetic preservation initiatives, and intensive round-the-clock protection are the foundation of Kenya's commitment to species survival. Students will witness this effort firsthand, observing the critical balance between human intervention and ecological fragility.

Elephant orphanage programs have also expanded, emphasizing long-term rehabilitation, community education around human–elephant conflict. Elephant fostering models are in place to support conservation financing. Students will visit their fostered elephant, giving them a direct emotional and educational connection to this conservation work.

This trip is also about park management and sustainable tourism development. Cultural preservation is increasingly community-led, and Kenya has strengthened efforts to sustain indigenous knowledge systems. This is what we will experience when we visit the Maasai and rural pastoralist groups. Community-designed cultural tourism experiences now emphasize autonomy and representation. This is a shift away from earlier models where cultural performances were curated for tourists without community control. Visits to Maasai villages include dialogue about land rights, cultural change, and the coexistence of traditional livelihoods. These exist to ensure that conservation is the foundation for a sustainable tourism economy. This allows students to see cultural preservation not as static heritage, but as a living, adaptive practice.

The key point of communication is tourism is framed as a tool for sustainable futures in Kenya. The development of Kenya's tourism industry has evolved to address cooperative involvement and community resilience. Expanded conservancies, locally-owned tourism enterprises, and collaborative governance models underscore a commitment to balancing visitor experience with long-term ecological and cultural wellbeing.

What Students Will Experience

The visit this summer will offer students an immersive, multi-site journey aligned with national conservation and preservation priorities. Over 12 days, we will explore park management and sustainable community development in Nairobi, Ol Pejeta, Lake Naivasha, and the Masai Mara, engaging both natural and cultural systems.



Adumu or Enkipaata, also known as the Maasai jumping dance, is a type of dance that the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania practice.

In preparing for this field visit, highlights will include:

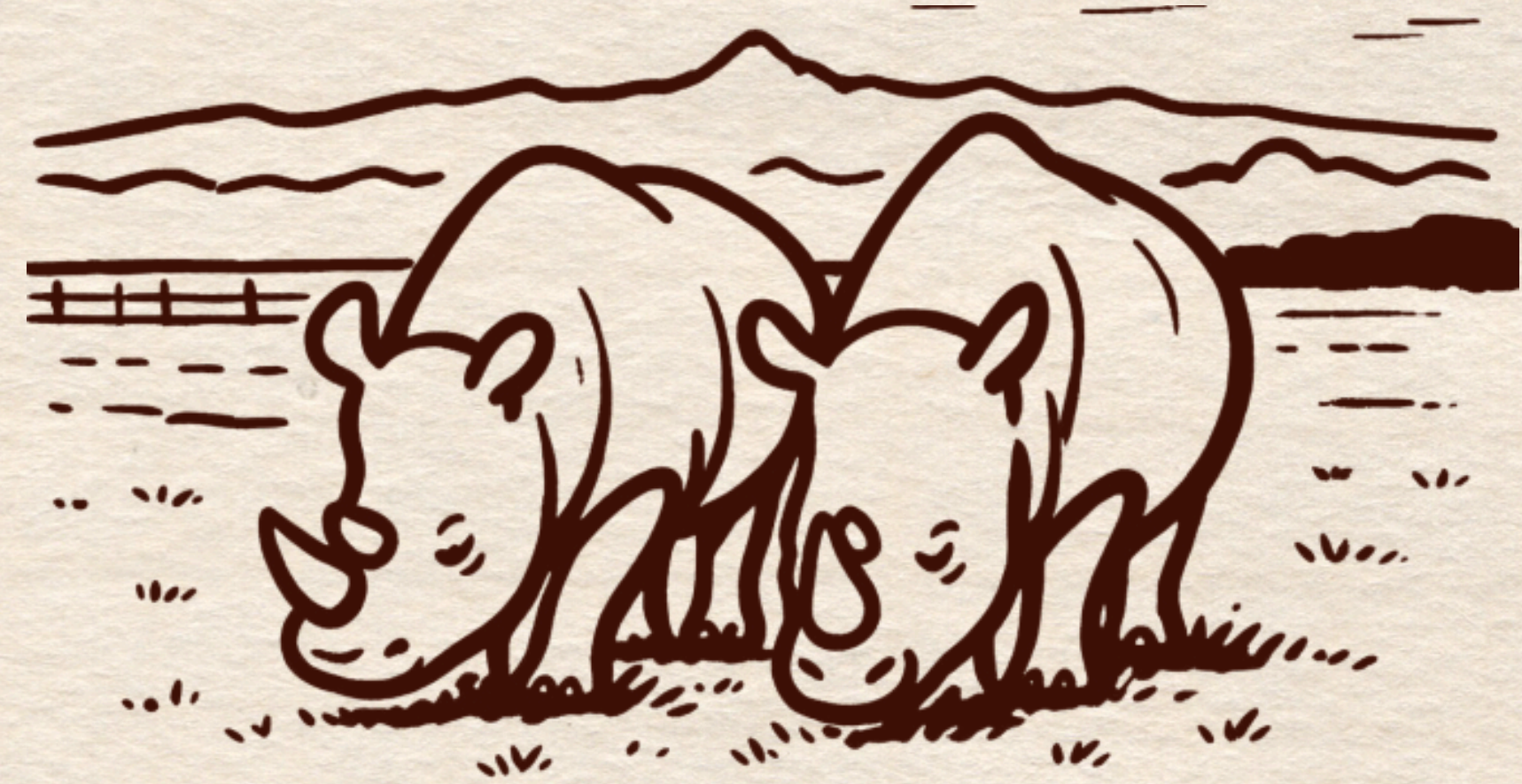


1 The role of nonprofits in urban conservation

This is the foundational learning that will set the tone for the trip, as Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, is a unique city that has a wildlife park bordering three sides. We will be visiting conservation organizations, meeting local experts, and witnessing how wildlife coexists around an expanding urban metropolis.

2 The frontline of species protection at Ol Pejeta Conservancy

This is where the last two northern white rhinos reside. Here we will learn about anti-poaching strategies, speak with rangers, and understand the ethical decisions behind endangered species management



3 A look into community conservation practices at Lake Naivasha



By staying at a conservation center near Lake Naivasha, we will be participating in ongoing community development to learn how they protect this natural resource and share it with the wildlife that depends on it. This is the chance to experience firsthand how tourism revenue supports local livelihoods and environmental protection.

4 A step into place-based learning with the Masai Mara



This will highlight interactions between nature, wildlife, and culture. Here, we will embark on safari and engage with Maasai communities. This will be a chance to learn and reflect on how cultural landscapes, wildlife conservation, and tourism economies intersect. Plus, we will be navigating through one of the world's most iconic savannas.

Kenya Calls Again

When I think about returning to Kenya with students, it is responding to a call that is both personal and professional. On one level, Kenya is calling me back because of the memories I experienced, learning from communities, and its natural beauty. The wildlife, landscapes, sunrises, and sunsets linger, but on a deeper level, Kenya calls for new reflections.

A lot has changed in a decade, and it is important to confront the complexities of conservation as the world changes, people are increasingly mobile, and information spreads faster than we can keep up. It is important to stress becoming and being a sustainable visitor and listening to communities whose stories challenge our assumptions. Sustainability is not about checking boxes but as a lived practice shaped by people, wildlife, and landscapes in constant negotiation.

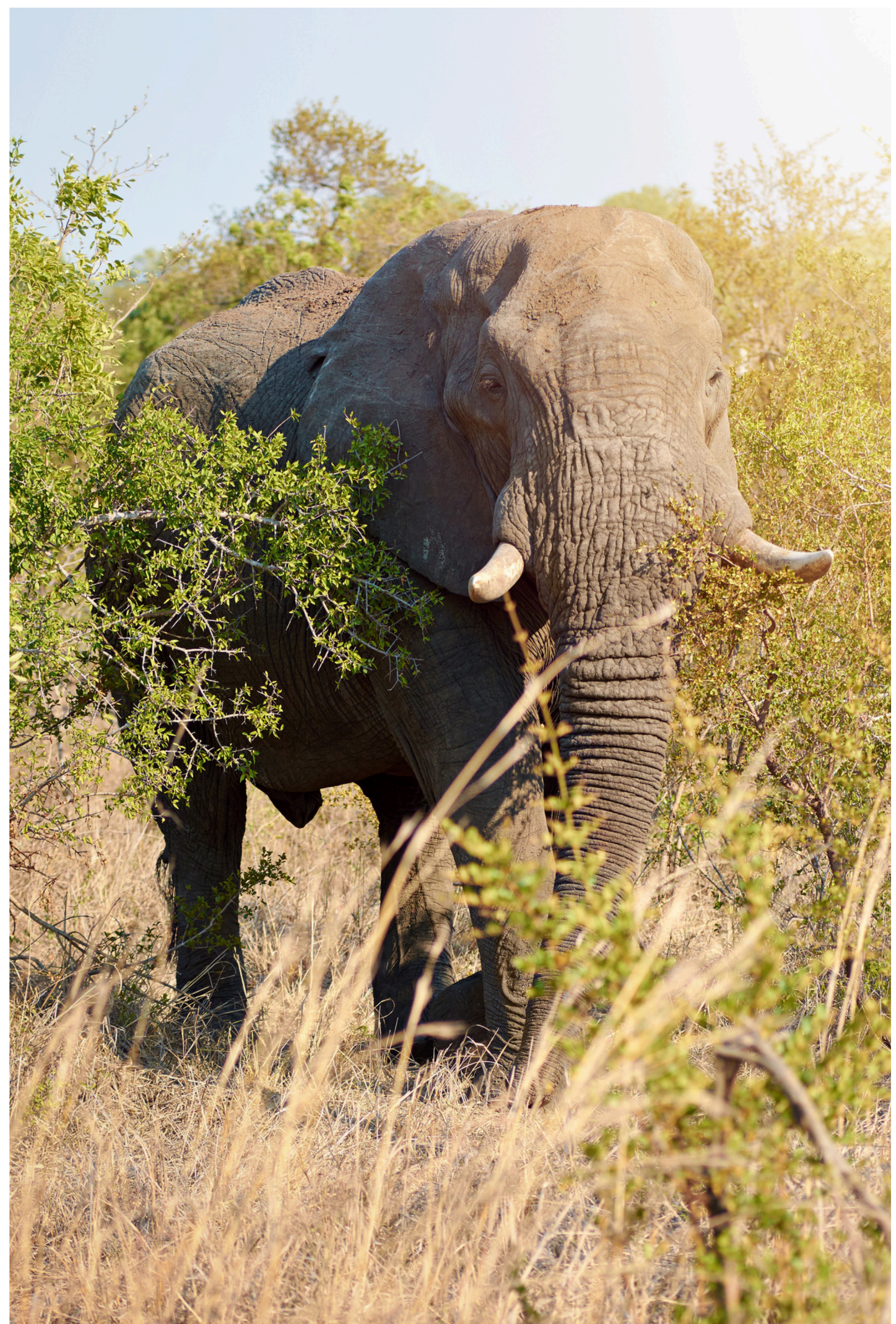
For students, Kenya promises a learning experience that extends far beyond the itinerary. It will change how they see park management, community cohesion, and tourism development. Field studies like this are a chance to understand culture and realize responsibilities that come with balancing local land stewardship and visitor management in places undergoing dynamic transformation. For me, this is an opportunity to reconnect. My visit to Kenya was one that shaped my early academic thinking, and I continue to reflect on those past experiences there in my teaching. With the next generation of students, the intention is to carry forward these reflective understandings of place, culture, and community. So, Kenya's calling (again)...and this time, returning is continued learning. 🗨️

"Asante"

Thank You

"Pole Pole"

Take it Easy



African Bush Elephant, also known as African Savanna Elephant.

About the Author: Nick Wise



Nick Wise is a faculty member at Arizona State University in Phoenix, Arizona. His research and teaching focus on tourism, sustainability, nature, culture, and community development. He brings a qualitative research lens to experiential education, leading students on field study programs that engage directly with conservation, cultural preservation, and community-based tourism.

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