



Feeding giraffes at Lake Baringo, Kenya, 2021 (translocation). Photo by Ami Vitale courtesy of Save Giraffes Now.

Giraffes for Peace

In a world that feels increasingly at odds, Kenya’s Baringo giraffes showcase how a common cause can unite communities.

Wildlife

March 26, 2025 · by [Laurel Neme](#)

On the shores of Lake Baringo in Kenya’s Rift Valley, an unusual common denominator has helped bring peace to two warring communities after generations of fighting: the love of giraffes.

Clashes between the two pastoral communities — the Pokot and Il-Chamus (also known as Njemps) — had ebbed and flowed over decades, with most of the conflicts revolving around access to land, water or cattle.

A cycle of droughts and floods, the spread of invasive plants that reduced grassland for livestock, and a surge of malaria made matters worse.

By 2000 the country was in the throes of its worst drought in 60 years. The impacts on the Lake Baringo region were devastating. People were displaced, and many lost much of their livestock. Already-existing tensions increased and spurred a steady stream of brutal skirmishes involving cattle raids, home invasions, attacks, and killings between the two groups.

“It was very bad,” recalls Rebby Sebei, a 35-year-old woman from East Pokot who now manages the Ruko Community Wildlife Conservancy in Baringo County. “It was based on who you were, if you had a different language.”

The violence continued to escalate. In March 2005 a series of armed attacks by Pokot warriors on the Il-Chamus resulted in several dead and more than 2,000 head of cattle stolen.

The brutality also pushed people from their homes.

“Women were forced to spend the night in the bushes and sleep there with their kids,” Sebei says. But the bush, too, was hazardous. “There were so many dangers, like snakes and scorpions.”

Families were often separated, including Sebei’s.

When she was around 15 years old, she came home for school break and found her family gone.

“At first I couldn’t find them,” she says. “I had to inquire, talk, get some good people to take me around. At that time, there were no mobile phones, no transport, no mobility. I needed to walk for long distances.”

When the family finally reunited, they stayed in the bush where it was safer.

“We spent many nights outside,” she says. “It was very memorable.”

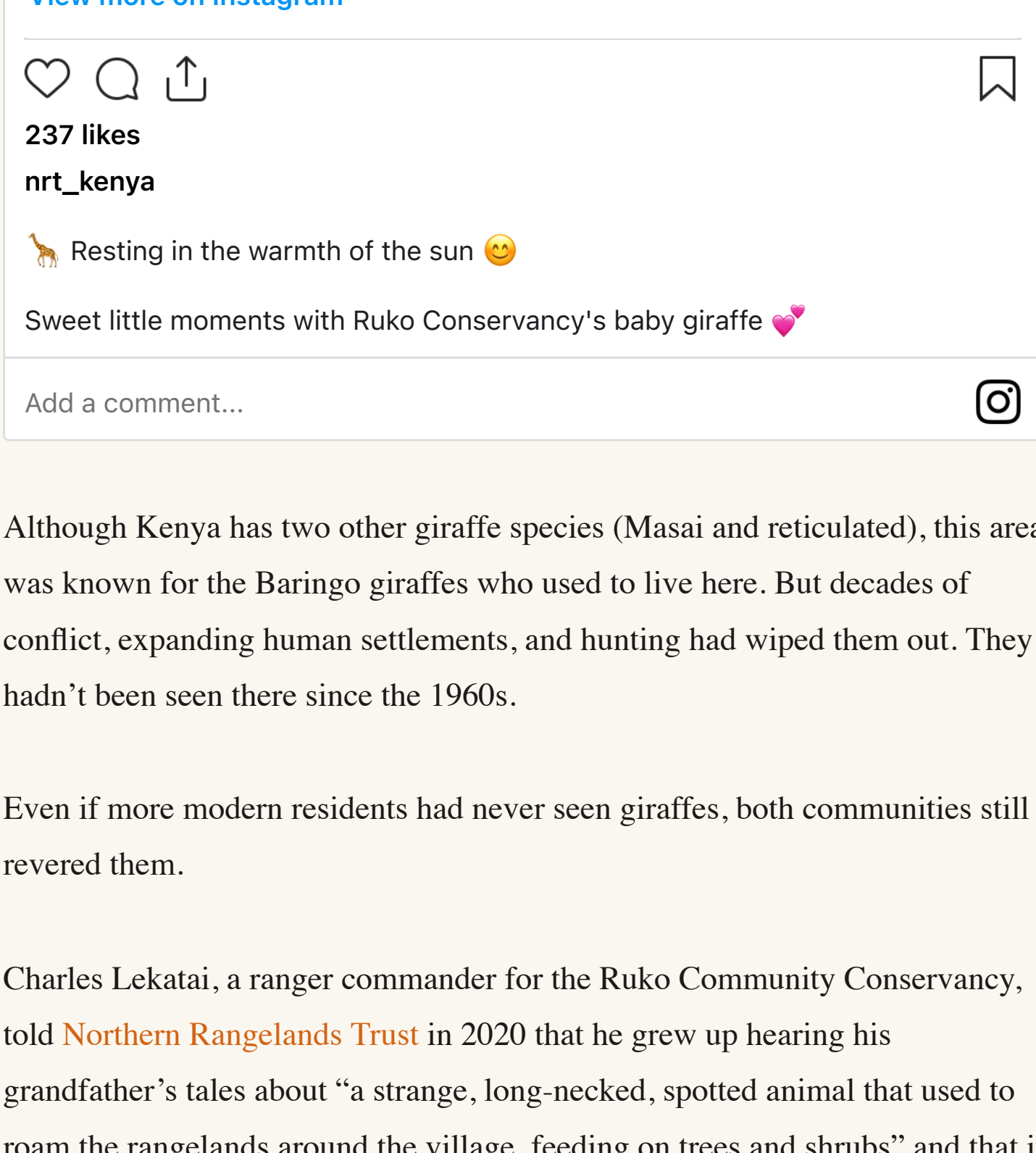
A Big Idea

To stop the violence, elders from both communities sought common ground.

And they found it with giraffes.

By restoring these animals they both treasured to their ancestral land, they would work together toward a shared purpose. That, in turn, would build trust and increase understanding among the different communities.

Historically, the area was home to the rare Baringo giraffe (also known as Rothschild’s or Nubian giraffe, *Giraffa camelopardalis camelopardalis*). A subspecies of northern giraffe, they’re known for a coat pattern that disappears down their legs so that it looks like they’re wearing white socks. According to the [IUCN Red List](#), there are only about 2,000 left in the world, including fewer than 800 in Kenya.



Although Kenya has two other giraffe species (Masai and reticulated), this area was known for the Baringo giraffes who used to live here. But decades of conflict, expanding human settlements, and hunting had wiped them out. They hadn’t been seen there since the 1960s.

Even if more modern residents had never seen giraffes, both communities still revered them.

Charles Lekatai, a ranger commander for the Ruko Community Conservancy, told [Northern Rangelands Trust](#) in 2020 that he grew up hearing his grandfather’s tales about “a strange, long-necked, spotted animal that used to roam the rangelands around the village, feeding on trees and shrubs” and that it captured his imagination.

Sebei says the animals had a particularly important cultural relevance.

“Giraffe are associated with someone who plans, who sees far, because of their height,” she says. Like seeing into the future. “Elders equated that to the vision of people coming together and living in peace.”

Working Together

Based on that vision, the two communities came together in 2008 to establish the 44,000-acre Ruko Community Conservancy (so named because it brought together the Rugus and Komollion areas of Baringo County), with each setting aside part of their land for it and being part of the management board.

They also designated about 100 acres on the Longicharo peninsula as a special area for the giraffe. Not only was it lush with acacia trees — a giraffe favorite — but its geography (surrounded by water on three of its four sides) would make it easier to protect them from poachers.

In 2011 the communities worked with the Kenya Wildlife Service and others to move eight Baringo giraffes — two males and six females — to the conservancy.

The achievement, the first time that the animals had lived in this stretch of their native habitat in 70 years, received media coverage around the world.

“We sang, celebrated, and the elders blessed the giraffes,” conservancy warden [James Cheptuliel](#) recalled to [Northern Rangelands Trust](#) in 2018. “Everyone, whether Il-Chamus or Pokot, came together to celebrate the return of the giraffe to Baringo.”

Both communities hoped that working together would not only help the giraffes but also ease tensions and make their own lives better by bringing in tourism.

And it worked.

By 2018 the conservancy had about [500 guests](#) each year, with 40% of tourism revenue paying for conservancy operations and the rest split equally between the two communities for healthcare and education.

“In spite of our past differences,” Cheptuliel said in 2018, “what matters to us now is the work that the conservancy has entrusted us with.”

Challenges

But it wasn’t all rosy.

“We were having all sorts of challenges,” Sebei recalls. Some giraffes died.

Calves did especially poorly. The first was strangled by a python, and others died shortly after birth, likely related to nutritional deficits.

“Calves couldn’t survive more than 14 days,” Sebei says. “There were constant attacks by disease and pests. And there wasn’t enough forage to sustain pregnancies.”

To address the problems, the conservancy started to explore moving the giraffes. Together with the American group [Save Giraffes Now](#), they built a 4,400-acre sanctuary on the mainland.

But they had to accelerate their plans.

In 2020 intense rains caused the lake’s water to rise dramatically, cutting the peninsula off from the mainland and trapping the giraffes on a small, muddy 8-acre island.

While the conservancy and its partners figured out what to do, rangers ferried lucerne pellets and other food to the island to help keep the giraffes alive.

Giraffe Rescue

Eventually the community designed a special barge to bring the giraffes across a mile of open lake. In essence, it was a big raft, with tall, reinforced sides on 60 empty steel drums for buoyancy, towed by motorboat.

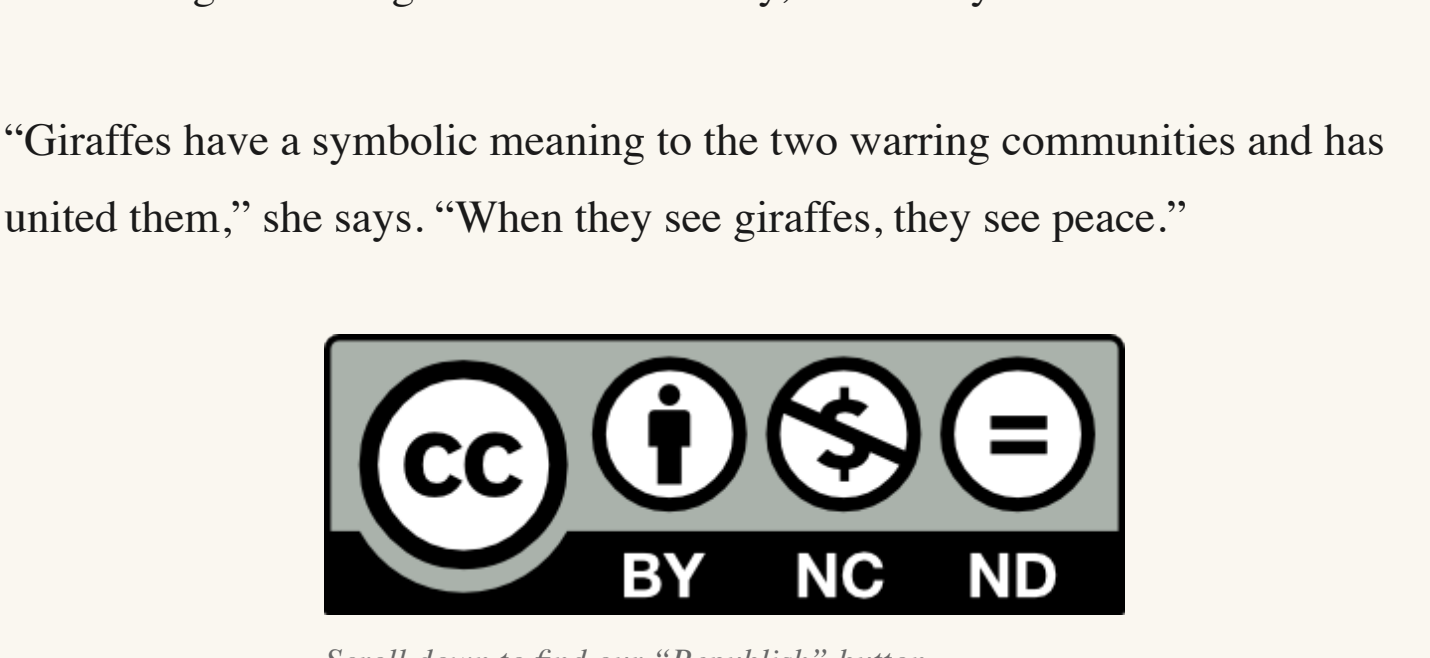


Asiwa, a giraffe who has become stranded on Longicharo Island, is moved off the flooded island by a barge December 2, 2020. Photo by Ami Vitale, courtesy of Save Giraffes Now.

One by one, the community — together with partners [Kenya Wildlife Service](#), [Save Giraffes Now](#), and [Northern Rangelands Trust](#) — brought the giraffes across the lake, with the first moved on December 2, 2020, and the last — a mom and newborn calf — four months later, on April 12, 2021.

“One unique thing about this move was that the community tried training the giraffes to enter the barge voluntarily using food — acacia and mangoes,” said Susan Myers, CEO of [Save Giraffes Now](#). “They were able to move three of eight giraffes successfully that way, and this model is now being tried elsewhere in Africa.”

Today the herd has grown to 30, up from 18 in 2023. Translocations and successful births drove the population expansion. In July 2024 [Kenya Wildlife Service](#) moved seven giraffes overland by truck from a farm in Eldoret and, in January 2025, another two from the [Giraffe Center](#) outside Nairobi.



2024 Ruko Translocation: Photo courtesy of Save Giraffes Now.

The partners hope the newcomers will improve the giraffes’ genetic diversity as they breed and multiply, which [Kenya Wildlife Service](#) notes will help “ensure the robust health in their offspring.” That, in turn, would eventually help them repopulate the entire region.

As before, the communities welcomed the arrival of the giraffes with singing and dancing. And they also recognized the burgeoning peaceful coexistence between them.

At the celebrations members of both communities expressed how the conservancy had brought them together. For example, James Parkitore, from the Il-Chamus community, told [Agence France-Presse](#) that he thought the conflict “is over now because we are interacting,” while Pokot farmer Douglas Longomo said “we can move freely without any fear.”

Kenya continues to experience devastating drought and floods — including a deadly flood in the capital city of Nairobi in May 2024. The constant flooding has doubled the size of Lake Baringo since 2010, which in 2022 inspired some residents to [sue the government](#) for not doing enough to address climate change. The region has also experienced [outbreaks of malaria](#), exacerbated by the floods which leave pockets of standing water that act as breeding grounds for the mosquitoes that carry the disease. And the people around Baringo have experienced an “[endless cycle of displacement](#).”

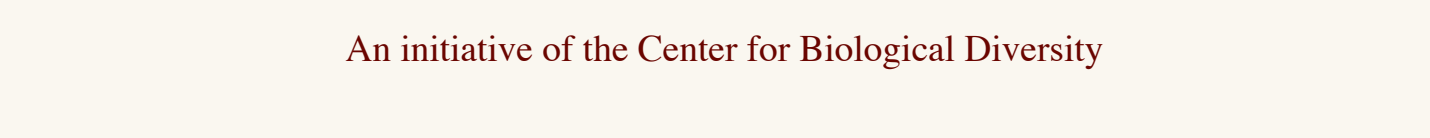
But even amidst this stress, the giraffes and the most recent translocations remain “a game-changer to the community,” Sebei says.

“Giraffes have a symbolic meaning to the two warring communities and has united them,” she says. “When they see giraffes, they see peace.”



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