



Balancing Culture and Conservation in Tanzania

Straddling the newly paved Makuyuni – Ngorongoro road, gateway to Tanzania's famed northern tourist circuit, the village of Esilalei and its roughly 5,000 Maasai residents face constant pressure on their traditional lifestyle. More than just tourists move through Esilalei. The village also lies within the critical Kwakuchinja wildlife corridor where wildebeest, zebra, and elephant move freely across the larger Maasai Steppe ecosystem.

In 1990, a group of Esilalei women formed the Naisho Women's Group - Naisho means "increase" or "multiply" in Maasai - to work towards preserving their culture and alleviating gender inequality and poverty. Seeking to capitalize on their location, Naisho established the Esilalei Cultural Boma in 1999 as a way of bringing tourist dollars to the village.

The Boma is a model Maasai homestead consisting of a ring of thatch and dung huts encircled by a protective fence of acacia thorn branches, set along the scenic shoreline of Lake Manyara at the base of the Rift Valley. On a typical day, tourists en route to Lake Manyara, Ngorongoro, and Serengeti visit the Boma where they are welcomed by traditionally clad women, entertained by spirited local dances, and offered a glimpse of traditional Maasai life. Visitors may also purchase handicrafts produced by the women.



Photo: USAID/Tanzania

USAID hands over a new handicraft hut to the Esilalei Village Council.

While the Boma concept was sound, success was limited due to Naisho's lack of business knowledge. Beginning in 2001, USAID and the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) started to work with Naisho, as well as with the larger community of Esilalei, on community-based approaches to natural resource management. This would help improve livelihoods in a manner compatible with both the traditional Maasai lifestyle and the needs of conserving Kwakuchinja and the greater Maasai Steppe.

AWF and Tanzania's Sokoine University of Agriculture provided basic business skills training to Naisho and worked with the women to diversify and raise the quality of their handicrafts. Training in marketing skills has enabled the group to make itself known to tour operators. More recently, a USAID-funded permanent hut for handicraft sales opened in June 2003 and the site was officially handed over to the Esilalei Village Council on December 19, 2003.

The Naisho's Women's Group is generating income for the rural community while preserving the traditional Maasai culture.

Naisho's annual income has increased sharply since the start of USAID support from \$400 during 2001 to over \$700 in 2002. This past year, Naisho tripled its income from the previous year earning over \$2,050, including over \$1,600 since the opening of the roadside handicraft hut in June. These earnings are helping to bring development to the village.

The future for Naisho looks even brighter. AWF successfully negotiated with the contractor for the new Makuyuni Road to have one of three required public toilets sited directly adjacent to the Boma, along with a speed bump that will slow traffic and provide greater roadside visibility and increased visitation to the facility.