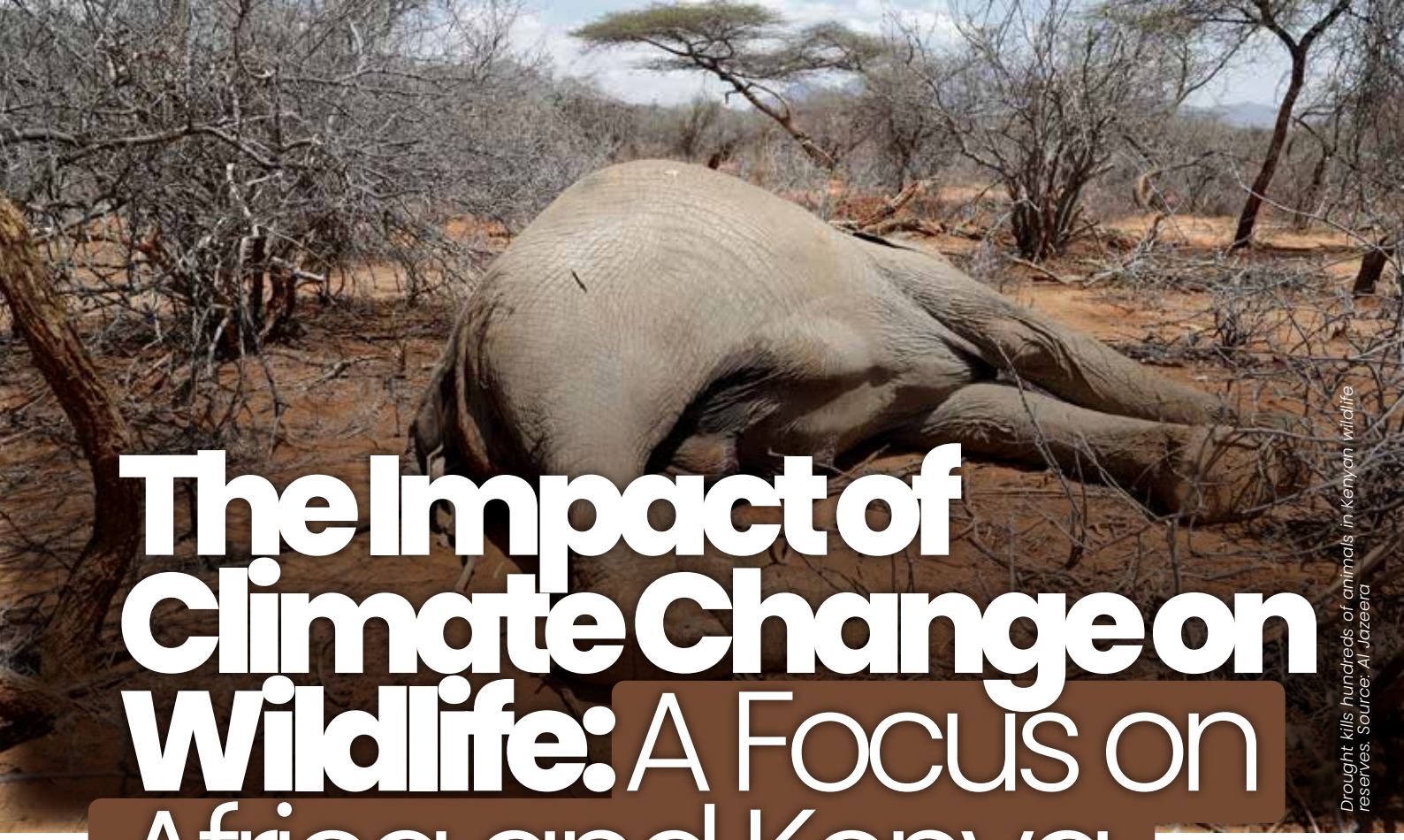

Drought kills hundreds of animals in Kenyan wildlife reserves. Source: Al Jazeera

The Impact of Climate Change on Wildlife: A Focus on Africa and Kenya

Climate change, sometimes called global warming, is like the Earth's fever. It happens because we do things that make the Earth warmer. This is mainly because people do things like driving cars, running factories, or keeping large number of livestock that produce gases that put extra heat into the air. This is drastically altering the planet's weather patterns and environment. These changes have profound effects on both animals and plants, endangering their habitats and food sources. Here we delve into the wide-ranging consequences of climate change on wildlife, focusing on its impact in Africa, with a special emphasis on Kenya.

Loss of Habitats

Climate change significantly contributes to the loss and transformation of animal habitats. The rising global temperatures, changes in precipitation patterns, and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events are rendering many areas unsuitable for various species, making them either too hot, too dry, or too wet to inhabit. In Africa, this transformation is keenly felt, as diverse ecosystems are undergoing significant shifts due to climate change. For instance, the Sahara Desert is expanding southward, encroaching on previously fertile lands in countries such as Sudan and Mali. This expansion results in habitat loss for several species, including the critically endangered Saharan cheetah and desert elephants, which are increasingly losing their homes.

Kenya, a country renowned for its wildlife, is also grappling with habitat degradation due to climate change. The Maasai Mara ecosystem, famous for its rich biodiversity and the annual great wildebeest migration, is suffering from habitat loss. Prolonged droughts and irregular rainfall patterns have caused grasslands to wither, leading to food shortages for herbivores, including zebras and wildebeests. These animals primarily depend on grass, and when there is insufficient rain, the grass becomes scarce, affecting the animals' well-being and leading to lower reproductive success.

Migration Disruptions

Many species of wildlife engage in seasonal migrations to find food and water. These migrations are critical for their survival. However, climate change can disrupt these essential patterns. In Africa, some of the most extraordinary wildlife migrations occur, and they are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The Serengeti-Mara ecosystem in East Africa hosts one of the world's most iconic wildlife migrations, with over two million herbivores traveling vast distances. However, as climate change leads to unpredictable and shifting rainfall patterns, the timing of this migration is being affected, which can result in food shortages, reproductive issues, and population declines.

Altered Reproductive Cycles

The timing of reproduction is critical for many animals, especially those in temperate regions. Climate change can disrupt these cycles by creating a mismatch between the timing of critical events, such as food availability, and the reproductive cycles of various species. This misalignment can result in reduced reproductive success and threaten the survival of certain species. In Kenya, white rhinoceroses are facing challenges due to unpredictable rainfall patterns. These rhinos need consistent rainfall to ensure adequate grazing for pregnant females and those lactating. Irregular rainfall can disrupt this pattern, leading to malnutrition and reduced reproductive success for the rhinos.

Increased Disease Transmission

Climate change contributes to the spread of diseases that affect wildlife. Warmer temperatures and altered precipitation patterns create conditions favorable for disease-causing pathogens like parasites and viruses to thrive. The consequences are often devastating, particularly in wildlife populations. A notable case in Kenya is the outbreak of anthrax. Climatic changes have made the conditions suitable for anthrax bacteria to grow. This has resulted in significant mortality among herbivores, including elephants and buffalo, with cascading effects on the ecosystem.

Threats to Endangered Species

The cumulative effects of habitat loss, disrupted migration patterns, altered reproductive cycles, and increased disease transmission are pushing many African species, especially in Kenya, to the brink of extinction. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List highlights several endangered species across the continent, with climate change recognized as a significant driver of their declines. In Kenya, the reticulated giraffe, a subspecies of the northern giraffe, is facing a serious risk of extinction. These giraffes primarily rely on acacia trees for food, but erratic rainfall patterns are causing these trees to disappear, making it difficult for giraffes to find suitable food sources.

Ruins of the Tana River Lodge, which has been gradually washed away. Source: Caroline Chebet.

Changing Oceans and African Coastlines

Although Africa is predominantly a landmass, its extensive coastlines are not immune to the impacts

of climate change. Ocean acidification, caused by the absorption of excess carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, is a global issue that threatens marine ecosystems, and African coastlines are affected, too. For example, off the coast of Kenya, coral reefs in places like the Malindi-Watamu Marine Reserve and Kisite-Mpunguti Marine National Park are experiencing bleaching events and coral degradation due to rising sea temperatures and ocean acidification. These reefs are critical for marine biodiversity and support local fishing industries, making their decline a matter of ecological and economic concern.

Water hyacinth in Lake Victoria.

Range Shifts and Invasive Species

As temperatures rise and habitats change, some African wildlife species are attempting to adapt by shifting their ranges. While some may succeed in finding new areas to inhabit, others may face difficulties, leading to localized extinctions. Furthermore, the influx of invasive species that thrive in the altered conditions can outcompete native species, further disrupting ecosystems.

In Kenya, the South American water hyacinth serves as an example of how invasive species can disrupt local ecosystems. This plant, introduced to Kenya, has spread in Lake Victoria, outcompeting native aquatic vegetation. This invasion has negatively impacted local fish populations and the livelihoods of fishing communities.

Conclusion

Climate change is a multifaceted and severe threat to wildlife, affecting species across the globe in various ways. In Africa, especially in Kenya, these impacts are keenly felt as animals and plants struggle to adapt to the changing conditions. The culmination of habitat loss, disrupted migration patterns, altered reproductive cycles, and increased disease transmission is pushing many African species to the brink of extinction. The urgency of addressing climate change for the sake of the entire planet, its ecosystems, and its inhabitants is evident in the context of Africa. To mitigate these effects, global cooperation and immediate action are essential. This includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting and restoring critical habitats, and promoting sustainable land and water management practices. Furthermore, it is crucial to support research and conservation efforts aimed at safeguarding vulnerable species and ecosystems, both in Africa and worldwide. As we confront the challenges of climate change, it is important to recognize that the well-being of humanity is intrinsically linked to the health of our planet's ecosystems and the survival of its diverse wildlife. Protecting and preserving these species is not only an ethical imperative but a practical one, as our own survival is intertwined with the web of life on Earth. Africa, with its unique and vulnerable biodiversity, serves as a poignant reminder of the urgency to address climate change for the benefit of all life on our planet.

Dr Benson Okita-Ouma
Director of Wyss Academy for Nature, East Africa Hub, Co-Chair of the IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group