

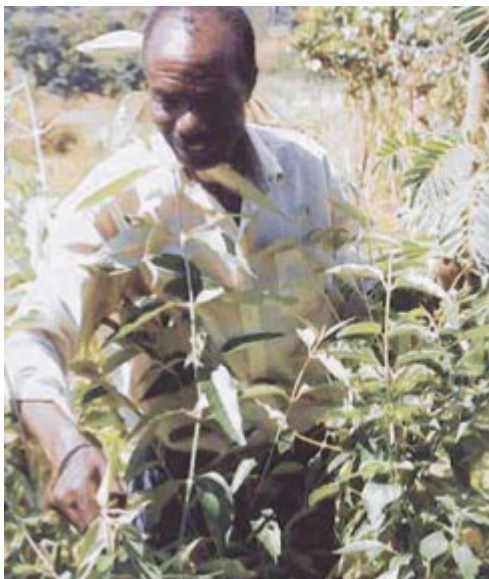


Who'll save Kakamega forest

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Herbalist Charles Miheso has for decades harvested medicinal plants at the Kakamega forest. He has been in the business for the past 30 years. To him, the forest is life because of the vegetation which is his source of livelihood.



A herbalist picks leaves at the Kakamega forest and, right, 350-year-old umbrella tree (*Maesopsis eminii*) stands resolutely in the middle of the southern part of Kakamega forest. Said to be the oldest TREE in the forest, the locals call it Mama Muteret and it is 47 metres tall and about a metre in diameter. But now even the kingly tree is threatened by loggers.

Photos/STEPHEN AGWATTA and ELLY WAMARI

He learnt the trade from his father who became a herbalist at an early age and continued practising until 1990 when he retired at the age of 89. "My father knew the forest well and plucked all his medicines from there," says Mr Miheso.

The 55-year-old has a huge supply of herbs for use by his patients. And business has recently improved, with an increase in demand for herbal medicines by the residents.

Like Mr Miheso, the forest is the source of livelihood for Mama Bibian Makonjio. The elderly woman frequently sneaks into it to collect firewood for sale despite the risk of arrest by forest guards. "If I do not take the risk my children will go hungry," she says as she carries home a huge bundle of firewood.

For the two villagers news of recent scientific findings that the forest could be depleted in the next 50

years makes little sense. At a recent workshop in Kakamega town, a group of international researchers warned that the forest, with its captivating and breathtaking beauty, is threatened with depletion unless urgent steps are taken to stop the plunder of its resources.

The cuckoo hawk

The forest cover could rapidly dwindle from the current 108 square kilometres to less than 20 square kilometres within five decades if the level of degradation is not checked.

The forest is famous for its more than 400 bird species, including the pink-backed and grey herons, the African black duck, the harrier hawk, the little sparrow and the cuckoo hawk. It is also home to various butterfly species and monkeys, and continues to attract researchers from far and wide.

The unique monkey species include the Debraza, which is found at Kisera, a part of the forest manned by the Kenya Wildlife Service, as well as the blue and red-tailed types and the bush baby. Other primates are the Potto monkey and the baboon.

The forest bestrides the border of Kakamega and Vihiga districts and was gazetted as a national heritage in 1964. It harbours the Buyangu national reserve and Kisere as well as nature reserves at Isecheno and Yala.

Parts are intact, but human activity has interfered with much of the natural forest. Besides the trees, it has patches of natural grassland.

According to a team of researchers involved in a project funded by the German government for the conservation and management of the biodiversity, the forest is threatened from all corners due to over-exploitation of its resources.

The team made public their findings at a recent workshop on biodiversity monitoring and analysis in Kakamega town.

The forest plays the important role of attracting rain and acting as a wind-breaker. Communities living around it have benefited by harvesting herbs with a medicinal value and honey as well as grazing their livestock and growing food crops in parts they have encroached on.

The forest forms an important segment of the western tourism circuit, attracting visitors from all over the world.

But its splendour and glamour could be lost to future generations if nothing is done to pre-empt the grim forecast by researchers.

Although the predictions are based on scientific projections, the local people do not envisage a situation in which the reality will dawn on them. For them the forest they have co-existed with is there to stay and any talk of its depletion is but a myth.

The communities are aware of the campaign to conserve and protect the forest's biodiversity and are fully involved in the programmes, but they remain sceptical about the scientific data presented to them.

But the scientists warn that it is only a matter of time before the full impact of the degradation is felt.

They have been involved in the research to recommend steps to be taken for the conservation of the forest — an extension of the Congo rain forest.

For Prof Klaus Frohberg and his team, it is a race against time as they grapple to stop the plunder that could have disastrous climatic consequences. The predications were presented by Dr Daniel Mueller, a member of the research team, who has been trying to establish the level of degradation.

In his report, he outlines factors behind the depletion, which include wood extraction for domestic and commercial use, grazing of livestock and the growing demand for land by the local communities.

Population growth, high poverty levels and demand for forest products are cited as the main factors.

According to data obtained from satellite images, the forest has decreased by 8 square kilometres in the past 12 years — between 1989 and 2001— and it is projected that by 2049 only 68 square kilometres will be left.

Parts of the forest which have been protracted but have not been spared from the plunder include Kakamega, Kisere, and Malava Kaimosi in Vihiga district.

Dr Mueller says that although deforestation shows signs of slowing down in recent years in some parts, the cover continues to disappear. It is estimated that parts which have been destroyed could take up to 75 years to be restored.

But there is a glimmer of hope as the campaign to save the forest gathers momentum. The German ministry of Education and Research has released 10 million euros (Sh930 million) in the last six years to fund the ongoing research.

Dr Mueller sums up his prediction thus: "The future of the forest is uncertain. The natural forest continues to decrease? a rather pessimistic view but it's useful to illustrate what might happen in future."

But according to the project coordinator, Dr John Mburu, the campaign is beginning to bear fruit. "Although the scenario looks grim, there are issues of benefit which can be addressed to get communities living around the forest on board the campaign to reverse the destruction," he says.

He adds that 30 per cent of families around to the forest extract firewood from it to the tune of Sh2.8 million annually, 37 per cent rely on the medical plants and 29 per cent graze their animals.

"The dependency on the forest per family translates to Sh30,000 a year, with 34 per cent of the people relying directly on the forest for a livelihood," he says.

The call on donors to intervene and to save the forest is gathering pace and currently the German researchers are working on a policy document to be presented to the Kenya government for possible adoption.

Prof Frohberg says a report on the progress of the campaign has been submitted to the Government.

Project's third phase

A proposal for the third phase of the project targeting capacity building for the communities has been forwarded to the German government for approval, but the report has to be resubmitted to include a component on climate change.

Prof Frohberg says that although several studies have been conducted on ways to conserve the forest's biodiversity, efforts should be made to establish a joint management strategy to address the issue.

"We need to look at the conservation policy and the best ways of tackling the threat to the forest and hope the Government will follow our recommendations," he adds. The next phase of the project planned for September, if approved, will address conservation and management of biodiversity for rural livelihoods.

And then perhaps Mr Miheso and Mama could begin grasping and be fully involved in the campaign to stop the plunder.

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