

Marakwet's Forest under threat: Challenges, Solutions, and the Importance of Education

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Around the world, climate change and

human activity are destroying vital natural resources such as forests. The district of Marakwet, in Kenya's Rift Valley Province, is no exception. While the government is taking gradual steps to try to preserve Kenya's forests, the process is far from complete, and greater community participation will be necessary for it to be fully effective.

Africa has approximately 552,326,000 hectares of forested land, 97.6% of which is under public ownership. Kenya's forest area is estimated to cover about 1.7% of the country, well below the internationally recommended 10%. While the government has stated its intention to reach 10% by 2008, it is highly unlikely that Kenya's forest cover will increase to even close to that goal, as pressure on land continues to increase due to rapid population growth and changing forms of land use.

The Kenyan government has been a signatory to a number of international conventions on biodiversity and environmental conservation, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UN Framework Convention on Combating Desertification, and others. However, its actions have failed by far to live up to its commitments. Little has been done to implement the tenets of these conventions, and the future of Kenya's forests remains uncertain.

Marakwet, in western Kenya, enjoys a much higher percentage of forest cover (38%) than the national average, and the gazetted forest covers an area of approximately 65,000 hectares. The forests were gazetted in 1964, and are currently administered by three established forest stations: Cherangani Forest Station, Chesoi Forest Station, and Cheptongei Forest Station.

Marakwet houses half of the Cherangani forest complex, an important source of biodiversity and one of Kenya's five water towers. The forest serves as a catchment for rivers Nzoia, Kerio, and Weiwei, which feed into other important bodies of water and are depended upon by farmers in the region.

For more than ten years, the forest in Marakwet has been degraded by income-generating activities such as charcoal burning and the collection of roofing timber for sale. These activities are exclusively carried out by members of the local communities; no large companies are active in exploiting the forest in this region. The forest cover is further compromised by families who are gradually clearing more of the trees in order to expand their fields and homesteads.

The consequences of the forest degradation in Marakwet district are dire. The biodiversity of the forest is threatened, and it is estimated that 8,000-10,000 hectares of the forest have been destroyed and turned into fields for cultivation. River volumes have been steadily decreasing to the extent that irrigation further downstream is no longer guaranteed, and some streams have dried up completely. Tree cover has decreased, and traditional beekeeping activities are no longer feasible due to the lack of forage and anchor trees. The attitude of the local communities is that the forest was given to them by God, and thus they can do with it what they will. They are ignorant of the serious environmental damage that their activities are causing.

In recent years, the government has become involved in forest conservation activities, which has led to conflicts and misunderstandings with the local inhabitants of the region. Programs and regulations initiated by the Minister of Environment and natural resources have prevented the local communities from carrying out their usual activities in the forest, which has provoked anger in local residents.

Besides activities such as charcoal burning and timber collection, the forest is often used for grazing by local farmers. This has occurred for decades, with periodic evictions at various times. Recently, the government has been acting more vigorously to prevent people from using the forested land in this way. This has become a very destructive situation, and has led to an extremely negative relationship between the government and the local community, who feel that the government is interfering with their God-given

right to use the forest as they see fit. They do not understand the reasons behind the restrictions the government has imposed on forest use, and thus feel that the government is acting against their interests.

Historically in Kenya and elsewhere in the world, the relationships between local communities and institutions mandated with natural resource management have been strained, and this has certainly been the case in Marakwet. However, this relationship is not fated to be negative. With proper education and the participation of local communities, forest conservation can become a constructive partnership rather than a perpetual struggle.

Educating communities about the environmental consequences of their actions and the importance of conservation is crucial to ensuring the effectiveness of conservation efforts as well as a productive relationship between the government and the local community. At this point, a conflict of interest between income generation and forest conservation is perceived by local residents, but this does not have to be the case. In Marakwet, there are more environmentally sustainable alternatives to activities such as charcoal burning that residents could pursue without significantly changing their standards of living. In addition, harmful activities such as cutting trees for firewood can be improved by instructing local people to collect fallen wood for firewood instead of cutting living trees. Simple changes such as these can have a significant impact on the success of forest conservation efforts.

The technique of education and information dissemination to local communities has proven very effective in the case of the World Environment Day activities organized by the Marakwet Muslim Women and Girls' Foundation at Kapsumai Primary School in 2007. The goal of these activities was to promote respect for the environment and educate the students and other community members about conservation and how their actions affect the forest, in the hopes that the participants would take the lessons home to their families as well. The participants were extremely receptive to the ideas and facts presented, and all committed to changing their behaviour and educating those around them.

These activities also enabled the participants to understand the government's actions in relation to the forest, and why they were prevented from carrying out their usual activities there. They began to understand that the government was not

trying to destroy their livelihoods, but rather protect the foundation of life itself. By educating communities about the environment and the reasons why it must be protected, the people become participants in conservation efforts rather than opponents of it.

In addition to informing local residents about the importance of the forests, fundamental perceptions about the value of forests must be changed for conservation efforts to be truly effective and sustainable. People in Marakwet and indeed the world over should be taught to see the value of forests not only in terms of supplies of timber and firewood and venues for expansion, but in terms of water, rainfall, food, medicine, flood control, oxygen production, grazing, tourism, and so on. When the connection is clearly made between biodiversity and life itself, the conflict of interests that is perceived between forest conservation and local livelihoods can be transformed into a symbiotic relationship.