
Kenya: Is the government serious about forest biodiversity conservation?

During the meeting of the Subsidiary Body (SBSTTA) of the Convention of Biological Diversity held in Montreal, Canada from November 12 to 16, NGOs raised the issue of the contradiction between the Kenyan Government's commitments and actions regarding forest biodiversity conservation.

The fact is that while government delegates were meeting in Montreal to take action to ensure biodiversity conservation, the government of Kenya's recent announcement of its intention to excise over 67,000 hectares of forests showed a clear lack of commitment in that respect. This decision would have severe implications, particularly given the country's critically low forest cover (less than 2% of Kenya's total land area). If implemented, the announced excisions would affect the two largest of the five main water catchment areas of the country: Mount Kenya and the Mau Forests.

In particular, the large proposed excision in the Mau Forest would have complex and grave social and environmental consequences. The government proposes to excise 35,301 hectares of Eastern Mau Forest (54% of the forest reserve); 22,797 hectares of South-western Mau (27% of the forest reserve); and 1,036 hectares of Western Mau forest (only 4.5%, but all forest).

The government is not even taking into account that these forests are not empty. The Ogiek, an indigenous hunting and honey-gathering people have lived in the Mau forest for hundreds of years. They have all along sought the recognition of this area as their ancestral land. After years of dispute, authorities have refused to recognize this heritage as Ogiek land and instead ordered the Ogiek to leave the forest. The Ogiek have a right to live in their ancestral home but the government wants to give the land to private individuals rather than conserve it for the benefit of the Ogiek and the entire nation.

These Forest excisions in Kenya will lead to a significant loss of the nation's biodiversity. The South Nandi Forest Reserve shelters a globally-threatened species, a small bird called Turner's Eremomela. Any further excision of South Nandi forest, however small, will further endanger this bird.

The excision of Eastern Mau Forest will have a devastating impact on the world's largest concentration of flamingoes in Lake Nakuru, which is protected under international law (Ramsar Convention). The Government's plan is to excise almost the entire catchment area of Lake Nakuru, which will lead to major changes in quantity and quality of the water feeding the lake. Lake Nakuru's value as one of Kenya's most popular parks, may disappear with the flamingoes.

Furthermore, the excisions of the Mau Forest will significantly reduce the ability of the forest ecosystem to cope with natural disasters, in particular drought, hence leading to more severe impacts. Drought has affected Kenya since historical times. The latest drought, experienced in 2000, had unprecedented impact on the people of Kenya and the nation's economy, including water and electricity rationing, since 70% of the electricity is produced by hydro-power plants. Several assessment studies have shown that the severity of this impact was associated with past and current destruction of Kenyan forests.

In Mount Kenya, excision of the Sagana II section of the Homba area will cut off a critical and already-fenced “corridor” used by elephants to migrate from the northern to the southern part of Mount Kenya through the Thigu forest, leading directly to human-wildlife conflict. The repercussions of excising Mt. Kenya forest will also be felt as far as on the mangrove ecosystems of the East-African coast. For instance, the current deforestation in this forest leads to a higher siltation in the Tana River and reduced output in the five hydro-power stations.

The situation described above is by no means an exception. Many other governments that have signed and ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity (as Kenya has) continue destroying those same forests they have committed themselves to protect. The question therefore needs to be posed; are the Kenyan and many other governments serious about forest biodiversity conservation?