
Kenya: The Mau Forest Complex threatened

Loss of forest cover in Kenya has contributed to diminishing livelihoods of many Kenyans caused by reduced land productivity, famine and drought. The current drought experienced in the country in 2005/2006 is a case in point. Large-scale livestock deaths were reported, and in many places, incidences of resource use conflict were witnessed, leading to loss of human lives.

Though most of Kenya's forests have been decimated by degradation among other factors, the Mau Complex forests cover, and in particular that of the Maasai Mau Forest has been the most affected, and has receded drastically over time.

The Mau Complex, the largest forest of Kenya, covers some 400,000 ha. It lies between 2,000 m and 2,600 m above the sea level, on the Western slope of the Mau Escarpment, and is situated approximately 250 km from Nairobi and border Kericho to the West, Nakuru to the North and Narok to the South. It comprises South West Mau, East Mau, Transmara, Mau Narok, Maasai Mau, Western Mau and Southern Mau. These seven forest blocks merge to form the larger Mau forest Complex. Out of all these blocks, only Maasai Mau is not gazetted.

As a montane forest, the Mau Complex is one of the five main "water towers" of Kenya, with Mt. Kenya, the Aberdare Range, Mt. Elgon, and the Cherengani Hills forming the upper catchments of all (but one) main rivers west of the Rift Valley. It feeds major lakes, three of which are crossboundary.

The Southern forests of the Mau Complex are rich in biological diversity in terms of fauna and flora. They host ungulates such as the Bongo and the yellow-backed Duiker; carnivores, including the Golden Cat and the Leopard, and the forest elephant. The forest of the Maasai Mau, in particular, comprises large stands of cedar and podocarpus forests with scattered natural glades.

A large majority of Kenya's population lives in Lake Victoria basin. This region is crossed by major rivers flowing from the Mau Complex. The water from Mau forests serves more than 4 millions people inhabiting more than 578 locations in Kenya and several locations in Northern Tanzania. In addition the Mau Complex provides continuous river flow and favourable micro-climate conditions - which are essential to crop production -, as well as many products including medicinal plants, firewood and grazing.

The forest is the home of the Ogiek Community, who from time immemorial to date predominantly inhabit Mau forest in Rift Valley province and until the 1950's had been subsisting on sustainable hunting of wild game and gathering of wild fruits. As a result of laws, policies and the rapid spread of Western religion and education, the Ogieks have lost their cultures, traditions and territories. They now find themselves practising small scale agriculture and livestock keeping. The Mau forest is also vital for the pastoral Maasai, who graze their animals there during the dry seasons.

More than 46,000 hectares have been excised to convert the forest to other alternative land uses like settlement and private agriculture during the last decade. The impact of the ensuing massive deforestation caused by factors including large-scale encroachment, charcoal production, logging of

indigenous trees, is already impacting tremendously on water resources, drying boreholes, drying rivers.

The Maasai Mau forest, with 46,278 hectares, is a major natural asset in terms of water catchment, micro-climate regulation, biological diversity. Between 1986 – 2003 it has suffered a loss of 20,330 hectares. In a Status Report 2005, the aerial survey shows that approximately 11,095 hectares in the western part of the Maasai Mau Forest (Narok South Constituency) was destroyed or heavily impacted by settlements. At the time of the survey, the forest was being actively cleared, with numerous plumes of smoke billowing out of the remaining forest canopy.

Forest excision for settlement is a complex problem. Often, forests are split off allegedly to resettle families that were forced to move from neighbouring forests. Most of the time, resettlement is carried out without local communities' participation with the result that they are distributed on small parcels while powerful people – well-connected grabbers, loggers and charcoal burners –take most of the land (see WRM Bulletin N° 55).

Article based on information from: "Mau Complex Under Siege. Continuous destruction of Kenya's largest forest", UNEP, Kenya Wildlife Service, KFWG, June 2005; "Maasai Mau Forest Status Report 2005", UNEP, Kenya Wildlife Service, KFWG, and Ewaso Ngiro South Development Authority; "Article 2 of the African Charter and the Ogiek: challenges and way forward", Kanyinke Sena, sent by the author, e-mail: kanyinke@yahoo.com; "Mau Forest Complex On The Spotlight", Ogiek Welfare Council, forum for friends of Peoples close to Nature, <http://build.blodeuwedd.org/?q=node/288>
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- Uganda: Sugar company plans to destroy Mabira forest

A Ugandan sugar company plans to expand its sugar estate destroying 7,000 hectares or nearly a third of Mabira forest, one of the few remaining intact forests around the shores of Lake Victoria, home to unique species of monkeys and birds.

The plan has proved hugely controversial for threatening hundreds of unique species confined to dwindling patches of rainforest and may affect the rainfall in a region already suffering from drought linked to climate change.

President Yoweri Museveni ordered an assessment in August of the feasibility of giving away a quarter of the protected Mabira forest reserve to the privately owned Sugar Corporation of Uganda (Scoul), one of Uganda's biggest sugar companies, for clearing to widen its neighbouring sugar plantation. Museveni was quoted in the local press as saying industry must take priority. "Forests are easier to plant than constructing industries," the state-run New Vision reported him as saying. "If you have factories, you can get funds to conserve the environment." (!)

The move outraged parliamentarians, Mabira residents and officials at the National Forest Authority (NFA), who say the environmental cost of trashing one of Uganda's last remaining patches of natural forest would be incalculable. But the government says extra jobs would outweigh losses caused by the removal of the forest.

"You can't cut the forest. We'd lose our lives," said 50-year-old John Kasule, who lives outside the reserve. "The forest brings rain, we collect firewood from there, we use it for houses and rope. There are 40 types of medicine we would lose," he said, pointing to a dense green tangle of trees and thick

vines stretching into the distance.

The forest absorbs pollution in an industrial area, sinking millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide, and helps maintain central Uganda's wet climate -- removing it would bring drier weather, hurting crop yields, a NFA report said. "Mabira is a watershed for two rivers contributing to the Nile, an ecological stabiliser between two major industrial towns and it protects Lake Victoria," said NFA spokesman Gaster Kiyingi.

"Instead of being negative ... we need to plant more trees," Environment Minister Maria Mutagamba said. But others disagree. "How many years have foresters been doing research in how to regenerate rainforest? We don't know where to start," said Jacovelli. "A tropical forest with hundreds of species is impossible to replant. Once it's gone, it's gone."

Article based on: "EU Scheme Cuts Uganda Sugar Funding in Forest Row", November 16, 2006, and "Plan To Axe Ugandan Forest For Sugar Sparks Anger", November 29, 2006, by Tim Cocks, Reuters News Service, sent by Andrew Boswell, e-mail: a_boswell_2004@yahoo.co.uk