



Louise Ndegwa, the treasurer of Hombe CFA, tends to a wild tree nursery in Mt. Kenya, Credit: Nature Kenya

Restoring one of Kenya's key water towers

The Mt. Kenya forest ecosystem is one of Kenya's five main water towers, this unique ecosystem covers over 200,000ha within central Kenya and has earned global recognition as a designated UNESCO World Heritage site and an Important Bird Area. The forest ecosystem, comprising of the famed mountain and surrounding forest areas, provides a home to hundreds of plant species and iconic wildlife. This includes African elephant, leopard, buffalo, giant forest hog, the Critically Endangered mountain bongo and the black-fronted duiker. The Kenya Forest Service (KFS) is responsible for the management of the complex yet critical ecosystem.

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The pressures faced by Mt. Kenya forests has also intensified human-elephant conflicts in adjacent areas. Elephants tend to stay away from deforested areas and those colonised by *Lantana* bushes in favour of visiting farms for food. *Lantana* has already colonised 1,200ha of the Upper Imenti forest, 1,500ha in the Lower Imenti, 500ha in Ngaya forest and an additional 500ha in the Nyambene hills. In addition to intensifying cases of human-wildlife conflicts, *Lantana* invasions pose a threat to the natural regeneration of local vegetation, as the it forms impenetrable thickets blocking the necessary sunlight needed by saplings.

The challenge, according to KFS, is critical and urgently requires attention. The KFS admits that restoring the forest is an expensive venture that requires partnerships. “*Lantana camara* invasion is one of the biggest challenges we are currently experiencing. The plant has created thickets and canopies in areas where fodder for wild animals once grew, forcing elephants to look for alternative food sources, ending up moving into people's farms.



Community members of Gathiuru Community Forest Association, Kenya, Credit: Milka Musyoki

"In some instances, elephants get electrocuted, and in other instances, people get killed. Removing the weed is an expensive venture, and we are entirely dependent on partnerships," Meru County Ecosystem Conservator said.

Through support from the Darwin Initiative and World Land Trust, Nature Kenya is implementing a restoration project targeted at reclaiming degraded areas within the water tower. Ecosystem Assessment conducted by Nature Kenya indicates that 6,200ha of Mt. Kenya forests are degraded and require urgent restoration.

Nature Kenya has adopted innovative approaches of creating linkages and building the capacity of Community Forest Associations to enable them to mobilise resources locally. These approaches seek to enhance the restoration of areas identified to require urgent attention in Mt. Kenya. Creating linkages among local communities and private sector players like Kenya Breweries Limited and Safaricom Limited has seen companies adopting degraded sections for restoration. Restoration activities currently taking shape in Mt. Kenya.

"This approach aims to create a model where public and private sectors team collaborate to restore this vital water tower," Nature Kenya Species and Sites manager Paul Gacheru says.

The approach also entails training Community Forest Associations on resource mobilisation and engaging county governments to save the forests. The aim is to create a restoration model which can be replicated in

other degraded areas across the country. A Restoration Strategy Framework for Mt. Kenya forest to guide long term restoration of the ecosystem has also been developed.

Community Forest Associations members have also undergone training on wild tree seed collection and propagation. The propagated wild tree seedlings are for planting in degraded forest areas, says the Nature Kenya Community Liaison officer Martin Kiama. "Through this approach, we are creating a sustainable model. This will ensure that the tree seedlings planted in degraded areas are site-matched. Previously, seedlings were procured from nurseries outside designated restoration areas. At times, trees planted were not suitable for sites earmarked for restoration," explains Kiama. Through wild seed collection and propagation, the Community Forest Association members also benefit from selling trees to organisations and partners who have adopted forest parts for restoration.

While the Mt. Kenya restoration model ensures that community livelihoods are catered for through wild seed collection and propagation and beekeeping, the approach also engages schools and households adjacent to the forests.

Written by Caroline Chebet. For more information on project 25-031 led by Nature Kenya, please click [here](#).