Members of the Yala ecosystem site support group plant papyrus to restore degraded sections of the Yala Swamp, Credit: Ayiro Lwala

Local communities at the core of protecting ecosystems in Yala swamp

Designated as a Key Biodiversity Area, potential Ramsar site, and biodiversity hotspot for globally endangered and endemic species, the Yala swamp is one of the few remaining extensive freshwater wetlands in Kenya. With its unique satellite lakes, Lake Kanyaboli, Lake Namboyo, Lake Sare, and river tributaries flowing into Lake Victoria, the expansive wetland has been home to local fisherfolk, farming communities, and island dwellers for millennia.

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Despite significant milestone developments in biodiversity conservation and ecological restoration within the Yala swamp, degradation of natural resources persists, adversely affecting both biodiversity and human wellbeing. Nature Kenya is striving to put the Yala swamp on a sustainable footing through this Darwin Initiative project.

Multi-agency stakeholders comprising County Governments of Siaya and Busia, national government agencies, local communities and Nature Kenya established an 8,404ha Indigenous Community Conserved Area (ICCA) at the core of Yala swamp. The ICCA comprises natural areas surrounded by open-access farming land, grazing land, riverine forest and papyrus wetland. Stakeholders formed a federated governance system for the ICCA, with representation from farmers, fishermen, water users, forest users and tour guide associations, handicraft artisans, medicinal plant gatherers, community wildlife wardens, cultural/religious groups, islanders, among others.

The government is represented by the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and County Water, Agricultural, Livestock, and Fisheries Extension Officers at the Ward level. Village Natural Resource and Land Use committees (VNRLUCs) were formed in all the swamp-adjacent villages to enhance ownership of biodiversity conservation at the village level. Local resource use guidelines were developed through participatory processes to guide the use of resources within the ICCA, including fisheries, water and papyrus access.

VNRLUCs will facilitate delivering on-the-ground actions as agreed with the ICCA management committee.

Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG)-local community partners and conservation champions have been spearheading habitat restoration in line with the ICCA model. Over the last year, YESSG trainer of trainers coordinated the production of 124,143 indigenous and exotic tree seedlings for use in habitat restoration. About 64ha of the lower River Yala riparian zone were restored through the planting of indigenous trees and 60ha of woodlots established with exotic trees.

An additional 67ha of degraded wetland within the ICCA were restored through papyrus planting. Management guidelines were developed and are under application to promote the natural regeneration of papyrus in 100ha of degraded areas within the Yala swamp and 100ha of riverine vegetation within the River Yala riparian zone. Biodiversity monitoring was conducted within the ICCA. Key bird species such as Papyrus Gonolek and White-winged Swamp Warbler were recorded during the dry season detailed monitoring and their presence acts as a good indicator that the papyrus habitat is of good quality in these restored areas.

Guided by a management plan, with technical backstopping from the government, the ICCAs will be managed for multiple uses for the benefit of important cultural values and biodiversity, ecotourism, farmers, livestock herders, fisherfolk, and island dwellers.

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The ICCAs will ensure the continued flow of ecosystem services to enable production and ensure development overall is sustainable.

One of the restoration success factors has been the commitment of local community volunteers. The volunteers conduct community sensitisation, mobilise planting, and monitor the restored areas. When asked to comment on habitat restoration efforts, an elderly man from Rukala village in the lower reaches of the swamp summed up, “any threat to Yala swamp is a threat to our wellbeing, our livelihoods, our local economy, our wealth, our heritage, and our very own survival. This swamp defines our existence. Our destiny as a community is intertwined with the swamp, so we must protect it.”

Written by Emily Mateche. For more information on project 26-003 led by Nature Kenya, please click **here**.

Members of the Yala ecosystem site support group planting papyrus next to Lake Sare, Credit: Wilson Seda