

Conserving Mount Kenya



Mount Kenya, Africa's second highest mountain and Kenya's highest, sits on the equator - 180km north of the capital Nairobi. The purpose of the Mt. Kenya Electric Fence, which will stretch 450km in length, is to bring harmony between nature and the forest adjacent communities and to protect a natural asset of critical importance that supports economic development at national and local levels.

World Heritage site

Mount Kenya is a solitary mountain of volcanic origin which reaches an altitude of 5,199 metres with deeply incised U-shaped valleys in the upper parts. The mountain's natural habitats are protected areas. The moorland and the peak zone (71,500 hectares) received the status of National Park in 1949. The surrounding forest belt, covering approx. 212,000 hectares was gazetted twice, first as Forest Reserve in 1932 and later as National Reserve in 2002.

Designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO since 1997 the mountain has been described as *"one of the most impressive landscapes of Eastern Africa with its rugged glacier-clad summits, Afro-alpine moor lands and diverse forests, which illustrate outstanding ecological processes."* Mt. Kenya's forests present a rich biological diversity, not only in terms of ecosystems but also in terms of species, in particular plant species of which 872 have been recorded to date. The area also has a wide variety of fauna with six species of large mammals of international conservation interest, including elephant, black rhino, leopard, giant forest hog, bongo and black-fronted duiker, and twelve species of ungulates.

Mt. Kenya plays a critical role in water catchment for the entire country – including the Ewaso Nyiro River and the Tana River, Kenya's largest river which supplies water to the Seven Forks hydropower stations representing 30% of Kenya total installed electricity generation capacity, as well as to major irrigation schemes, including Mwea, Bura and Tana Delta.

Observed challenges

The boundaries of the protected areas on Mt. Kenya are characterized with dense forest next to some of the most densely populated areas of the country. Such co-existence brings a number of challenges which are unsettling the forest and the people. Regular crop damage, especially by elephants, is a major problem for farmers, and encounters between farmers and wildlife occasionally lead to human fatalities and serve to heighten tensions between them. Unsustainable use of forest resources in areas of high biodiversity result in forest degradation, loss of biodiversity and reduced catchment values.

Indirect impacts from climate change are compounding the increased temperature coupled with reduced cloudiness and rainfall has increased the vulnerability of the forest to fire. In the past decades, there has been a noticeable increase in both frequency and intensity of wildfires in the forest and the moorlands.

Strategic interventions

Launched by Hon. Njeru Githae, Ministry for Finance, on 7th September 2012, the Mount Kenya Electric Fence will encircle over 2,700 sq. km and will be approximately 450 km in length. As of October 2020, over 205 km of the fence has been built.

As one of key principles in all Rhino Ark fences, the Mt. Kenya Electric Fence is being built by members of forest adjacent communities under the supervision of a technical team from Kenya Wildlife Service. The involvement of the local communities creates job opportunities and ensures ownership of the fence project by the neighbouring communities.

Alongside the building of the fence, Rhino Ark supports conservation education projects in local schools, through the establishment of bongo wildlife clubs and the provision of educational materials.

Towards addressing the illegal exploitation of forest resources, Rhino Ark has established a joint aerial surveillance programme. Every three months, field managers from Kenya Wildlife Service, Kenya Forest Service, Mount Kenya Trust and Rhino Ark fly together above the hotspot areas of the mountain to detect emerging issues and assist plan forest protection interventions.

Partners

In addition to the involvement of local communities in the project, Rhino Ark engages with a number of invaluable partners. These include Kenya Wildlife Service, Kenya Forest Service, Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, Treasury, County Governments, Community Development Funds, Upper Tana Natural Resources Management Project, Wildlife Conservation Society, Mount Kenya Trust, Mount Kenya Wildlife Conservancy, Ragati Conservancy, Bongo Surveillance Project, Space for Giants, and British Army Training Unit Kenya.

"The potential benefits of the electric fence are not illusionary. They are a reality, already demonstrated by the 400 kilometers electric fence built around the Aberdare ecosystem.

The experience of the Aberdare fence has provided a management and policy blue print for the protection and sustainable exploitation of our precious 'water towers' which are of critical value to us, and indeed the entire global community. Building on the lessons learned, we are today initiating a similar project for Mt. Kenya."

Hon. Njeru Githae, Minister for Finance, 7 September 2012

