

History of the Aberdare Fence



The Aberdares are vital to Kenya – a unique montane forest ecosystem in a country where just over two percent of the land is still covered by closed canopy forest. Spanning over 160 km just north of Nairobi, the Aberdares provide invaluable services in support of the nation’s economic development, human well-being and long-term environmental stability.

A unique ecosystem

Four out of seven of Kenya’s largest rivers, flowing north, west, east and south, rise in the Aberdares. They provide power and water to seven major towns – including to over three million people of Kenya’s capital city, Nairobi. On the foothills of the Aberdares, 30% of Kenya’s tea and 70% of its coffee are produced. Four million farmers depend on its rich soils and rainfall. The Aberdares are home to diverse species of wildlife, many of conservation interest – from elephant, giant forest hog, rhino and leopard to the critically endangered mountain bongo: a valuable and popular tourism asset for Kenya.

Over the years, the increasing human population in the prime agricultural land surrounding the Aberdares meant that farming activity was being conducted right up to the national park and forest reserve boundary. Regular crop damage by wildlife, especially elephant, was a major problem for the farmers, who suffered great losses. Encounters between farmers and wildlife occasionally led to human fatalities, and served to heighten tensions between humans and wildlife.

At the same time, the wildlife and forests of the Aberdares faced numerous threats arising from human activities, including poaching, bush-meat hunting, snaring, illegal logging, charcoal burning and encroachment. By the 1980s, these activities had decimated the wildlife population, almost wiping out the black rhino in particular.

Early beginnings with a long-term vision

Committed to saving the dwindling rhino population in the Aberdares and seeking solutions to the human-wildlife conflicts around the National Park, conservationist Ken Kuhle established the Rhino Ark Kenya Charitable Trust in 1988 with the objective of building a 38 km game-proof electric fence around the Park Salient jutting out into the farms around Mweiga. His background in engineering, coupled with his skills in farming and passion for conservation, positioned Ken well to ensure that the design for the fence would achieve its objectives.

What was originally a 38 km fence along the Park Salient of the Aberdares became, over 21 years, the world’s longest conservation fence, nearly 400 km in length, protecting over 2,000 sq. km of prime forests and water catchments, often referred to as the Aberdare Conservation Area.

The fence rises seven feet above ground. It is electrified and wired down to three feet below ground (to deter burrowing wildlife) and the upright posts are hot wired to deter baboons and monkeys from scaling them.

Completion of the fence – proving a foundation for sustainability

The fence - completed in 2009 - was built in nine phases which were launched by Kenyan key personalities, including the late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai, Minister for Finance Amos Kimunya, and Minister for Forestry and Wildlife Noah Wekesa. The fence was formally commissioned by President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga in March 2010.

The President recognized the fence as an invaluable investment protecting water catchments, pristine mountain forests and an area of rich biodiversity – as he noted that:

“Our great mountain forests are the ‘water towers’ and the ‘lungs’ of our beloved Kenya. They and the precious flora and fauna within them must be sustainably managed and conserved for all Kenyans and as a global heritage for all time.”

