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Avifauna conservation in Mutito and Muumoni Hill Forests boosts ecotourism in Kitui County

County:	Kitui		
Sector/s:	Environment, Climate Change & Forestry	Sub-sector/Theme:	Forest Conservation
Keywords	Mutito, Muumoni, Important Bird Area, Key Biodiversity Areas, Participatory Forest Management		
Target Audience:	1,136,187 people of Kitui County		
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Introduction (*Context and Challenge*)

Lack of conservation of Mutito and Muumoni Hills forests led to the degradation of ecosystem services, including lack of water downstream to the communities, and low income within the community, among others. These challenges prompted conservation efforts to increase ecosystem services and improve the livelihoods of the surrounding community.

The project which targeted communities in Kitui East and Mwingi North sub-counties with a population of 55,289 and 29,344 respectively, aimed to resurvey avifauna and establish its conservation status in the Mutito and Muumoni Hills forests of Kitui County (a previous survey had been done in 2006). Consequently, these dryland forests would be tabled as proposed Important Bird Areas (IBAs) to Birdlife International (the body that gives IBA status) with a focus on fostering conservation actions and also promoting viable ecotourism activities together with the County Government of Kitui.



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Mutitu and Muumoni Hill forests are gazetted dryland indigenous forests with some small pockets of exotic plantations. Degradation of biodiversity in these areas has been recorded following human interference such as illegal harvesting of timber and charcoal production, among others. These hills have a rich diversity and abundance of birds as well as other diverse taxonomic groups, though the bird species in Muumoni Hills had reduced from more than 200 species of birds recorded in 2006 (Malonza, et. al., 2006) to 152 species in the 2017 survey (Barasa et al., 2017) which also recorded 9 species of reptiles and amphibians. Mutitu Hills have 215 bird species (Barasa et al., 2017).

Implementation of the practice (*Solution Path*)

The project which started in 2016 in Kitui East, Mwingi North Sub-counties and Headquarters included the following activities:

1. Development of activity plans and schedules with time frames on how to develop Mutito and Muumoni as bird-watching sites.
2. Bird surveys to document existing birds in Kitui County and identify bird hotspots.
3. Setting up of site support groups in Muumoni and Mutito.
4. Capacity building of local groups through workshops and training (leadership and governance, environmental education, policy and advocacy).
5. Initiation of bird monitoring activities, e.g. monitoring protocols.
6. Development of nature-based income-generating activities for the site support groups.
7. Development of a comprehensive checklist of birds of Kitui County.
8. Profiling of Mutito and Muumoni Hill Forest Reserves as Important Bird Areas

- *Key implementers and collaborators and their roles*

The County Government of Kitui was the client, Nature Kenya was the consulting firm, and the National Museums of Kenya did technical backstopping.

- *Resource implications*

A total sum of KSh 3M was spent on the project.



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- *Sustainability measures*

As part of the deliverables for this project, community conservation groups were formed, and income-generating activities for the community were proposed. The project is running smoothly.

Results of the practice (*outputs and outcomes*)

The outputs were:

1. Profile of existing birds in Kitui County with bird hotspots were identified.
2. Site support groups in Muumoni and Mutito were set up.
3. Capacity building of local groups through workshops and training (leadership and governance, environmental education, policy and advocacy).
4. Bird monitoring activities, e.g. monitoring protocols were initiated.
5. Nature-based income-generating activities for the site support groups were proposed.
6. A comprehensive checklist of birds of Kitui County was developed.
7. Mutito and Muumoni hill forest reserves are now defined as Important Bird Areas.

As a result of the above, the surrounding local community has benefitted through employment opportunities, i.e. tour guiding, camping facilities and initiation of nature-based enterprises like honey production; it has also catalyzed revenue for the County Government, which is used for other development projects.

- *Key activities undertaken ultimately led to positive results*

All the activities undertaken for this project led to positive results.

Lessons learnt:

The set budget was way too low. While the objectives were achieved, the project only proposed viable income-generating activities for the site support groups. Ideally, the project ought to have set up the IGAs for the community groups.

The project design was excellent; however, it should have been implemented in the entire county.



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Recommendations (**Conclusion**)

Conservation efforts in the drylands need collaborative efforts bringing together a wide scope of expertise and knowledge.

Entities seeking to undertake conservation activities ought to have set aside reasonable resources (KSh 10 million and above). It is important to also consider current trends in climate change and incorporate mitigation and adaptive measures into conservation efforts.

Reliance on single-source funding should be avoided as it limits the scope of activities to be achieved.

Further reading:

1. Barasa et al, 2017. *Development of Mutitu And Muumoni Hills Birdwatching Sites Report*, Nature Kenya, BirdLife International & County Government of Kitui, February 2017.
2. Malonza et al, 2006. *Biodiversity Assessment in Dryland Hilltops of Kitui and Mwingi Districts*, National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi-Kenya.

Photo Gallery



Illegal tree felling for charcoal production



Examining a bird aught by a local boy during the study



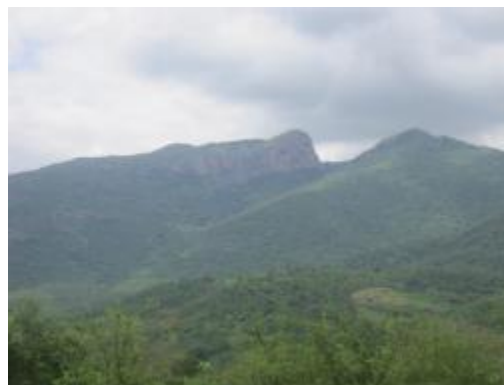
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Illustration of Kitui County birding hotspots



Photo of Kenyan endemic and range restricted Hinde's Babbler



Mumoni Hills showing rock outcrops and scrubland vegetation



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Maarifa Centre
Sharing Kenya's Devolution Solutions



Pancake tortoise resting in a rock crevice



Beehive initiative in Muumoni Hills Forest



Community training held in Mutitu AIC Church on 4-6 Aug 2016



Practical session on bird identification and guiding



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Community training held in Muumoni Hills at Kitui Youth Polytechnic on 8-10 Aug 2016