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KAKAMEGA FOREST IS DYING

Introduction

The value of Kakamega forest to Kenya has been evident to many people for a long time. We might reasonably infer that this precious resource, unique in Kenya, is therefore adequately protected against the ravages of man. However, forests may remain intact in law and on the map, while within they can be destroyed, and that is what is happening.

The Importance of Kakamega Forest

Kakamega Forest is unique in Kenya for its West African character and contains many species of both plants and animals not found anywhere else in the country. Because of its unique characteristics, the forest has been a field laboratory for biologists for a long time. The proportions of species of which this is true varies from group to group, but in those that have been studied (orchids, trees, amphibians, snakes, birds and mammals) between 10% and 20% of the species occurring in Kakamega forest occur nowhere else in Kenya (Diamond, 1979).

The avifauna of the forest is well known. About 199 species of forest birds occur here. Among the birds there is little endemism, apart from an endemic sub-species of Ansorge's Greenbul. However, the avifauna is rich and distinctive in composition, with many species such as Ansorge's Greenbul, Blue-headed Bee-eater, Chapin's Flycatcher and Turner's Eremomela, that are absent from all or most of the superficially similar mid-elevation forests in Uganda (Bennun & Njoroge in prep.). The forest also holds large populations of black and white colobus monkeys, red-tailed monkeys and substantial

numbers of de Brazza monkeys. The forest butterfly composition is very diverse and important both regionally, and continentally. The small mammal species composition of the forest is also very rich and shows strong affinities to the Zaire basin (Bennun & Njoroge in prep.).

General Conservation Problems

There is no doubt that Kakamega Forest is being cleared. Most of the destruction of the forest has taken place in the last 20 years, with the forest covering 3–4 times its present area before the second world war and twice that again two centuries ago (Kenya Wildlife Fund Trustees (KWFT), 1984). A survey of standing timber volume in 1991 showed that the forest had lost nearly 50% of its volume over the preceding 26 years, and that it would take at least 60 years to restore Kakamega's 1965 condition. This destruction was mainly caused by extensive commercial logging. The forest department also deforested parts of the indigenous areas, which were to be made into softwood plantations, for a proposed pulp mill. Indigenous, commercially valuable hardwoods were also planted. However, much of the natural forest was lost.

The human pressure on Kakamega is extremely intense. The area has a population growth rate of 2.8% per year, and is one of the most densely populated parts of Kenya. This makes protection completely inadequate over much of the forest. Extensive illegal extraction of fuelwood (ca. 100,000 cubic metres per year), charcoal, gold, timber, grass for thatching, lianas for ropes and

withes for baskets from Kakamega are estimated at KSh 100 million per year (Emerton, 1994). There is also hunting of wild animals by the adjacent communities. Forest and glade grazing legalised by a presidential decree passed in 1994, continues to prevent trees from regeneration and leads to policing problems.

Present Activities in the Forest

The activities in the forest are not new from the ones already documented. However, the intensity varies from one patch to another. I will give an account of the activities at the different patches of the forest.

Malava East and Malava West

Malava East and West are forest patches along the Kakamega-Webuye Road. They occupy an area of about 400 ha and 300 ha respectively. These two patches experience severe logging and what remains of the forest are scattered trees, next to the main road.

I encountered four active pit sawing and several sites of previous similar activity. At one site a stem of about 3 m circumference was on a pit saw. There was a track with visible wheel marks leading to the site. Several cut stems were also evidence and numerous sighs of previous cuttings. These activities were common on the weekends. It was normal to meet people carrying logs out of the forest (most of them run away when a stranger is noticed). Cattle were also used to ferry logs, especially at dusk. Several trails cutting through the forest facilitated these activities.

Buyangu and Kisere

Buyangu National Reserve (3,997 ha) run by the Kenya Wildlife Service, was established in 1985, and Kisere (471 ha) was upgraded to similar status, as a result of the proposal by KWFT (1984). The forest here showed little disturbance. The canopy was more closed and the understory more open. There

was also good evidence of regeneration. However at Makhakha, I collected ten snares within a span of 30 minutes. I handed the snares to the KWS rangers, who I noticed patrolling the site the next day.

Isecheno

Isecheno Forest Station (310 ha) was mostly affected by charcoal burning, tree felling and partial logging. Five charcoal burning sites were noticed in the forest. The charcoal is sometimes transported by night by donkeys. Several cut stumps were also recognised with one incidence of pit sawing.

Several cattle tracks pass through this forest to the Kalunya glade. Most adjacent vegetation to the tracks is dead and little regeneration taking place.

Ikuywa

Ikuywa Forest covers an area of about 1000 ha. Here logging, charcoal burning and intensive firewood collection continues to reduce the forest stand. Charcoal burning is a very common activity. For every 1 km transect one encounters one or two charcoal sites. Once a *Celtis africana* of 2 m circumference was burning on a large clearing inside the forest. Vegetables, e.g. *sukuma wiki*, are planted on sites previously used for charcoal burning. I gathered that the locals prefer these sites because they are fertile and produce good vegetables.

Logging is also a common activity and *Croton megalocarpus* is favoured for this purpose.

Firewood collection is rampant, loads of firewood leave the forest every day. Most of this is sold at the markets along Kapsabet-Kisumu Road.

Yala Nature Reserve

Yala Nature Reserve (about 1000 ha) has a high closed canopy and a more open understory. It is relatively similar to Buyangu Reserve and Kisere. However, large numbers of cattle used the glade to the North. This has affected tree regeneration.

The latest development in the glade is the return of the "Shamba System". In late 1996, locals were being allocated plots in the glade for cultivation. This system, whereby farmers are encouraged to grow crops on clear felled land in return for protecting young trees planted by the Forestry Department, was tried in the late 1940s-1985. This failed and further eroded the forest. One wonders if it will succeed this time.

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SIGHTINGS OF GOLDEN CAT *FELIS AURATA* IN THE ABERDARES

Over the years there have been several sightings of golden cat *Felis aurata* in the Aberdares. Some of these have been reported in this bulletin. Ian W. Hardy in the Sept./Oct., 1979 issue wrote of a sighting on 14 July, 1979 and more recently A.M.D. Seth-Smith in the March 1995 issue of his sighting on 1 Dec., 1994. The following two reports were received in late 1995. Nearly all of these reports were made of daylight sightings by experienced naturalists and seem to firmly point to the presence of golden cat in the Aberdares. Your Editors felt that it would be interesting for members to read about the recent ones as well as much earlier letter from Rupert Watson to Mike Clifton which was unearthed from old files of our former Editor, the late Mrs. Daphne Backhurst.

Dear Sir,

On Sunday, 7th October, 1979, at around 3:00 PM, I and Mr R. O'Miora of Nairobi were driving along a small forest track near

the Kinaini River in the southern end of the Aberdare Forest when we both saw, very close to, what could only have been a golden cat *Felis aurata*.

We had actually driven up this track some three hours previously and on returning my companion saw the cat sitting on its haunches in the middle of the track, perhaps twenty to thirty yards in front of us. In fact, I only saw it after it had jumped up and was dashing into the forest.

It was very reddish-brown in colour and the most prominent feature of the animal was its stockiness.

The cat was not in view for long enough to confirm whether it had spots on its abdomen nor could one be certain if it had tufts on its ears or not, but Dorst and Dandelot in their *Field Guide to the Larger Mammals of Africa* are adamant that the Caracal *Felis caracal* is found "never in dense forest" and the animal was most certainly much larger than the African wild cat *Felis libyca* which would seem to be the



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