

## **Mau's Dilemma**

### **TRAILER**

*It's one of Kenya's most important water towers. But now, it is on the brink of collapse, so are the many rivers and livelihood that it supports. This is the dilemma of the sprawling Mau forest, a once pristine forest block but which is now shrinking as logging companies and illegal settlers chop off its trees.*

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### **SCRIPT**

Located some 17 kilometers north of Narok town, near the picturesque Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya's Rift Valley, the Maasai Mau forest is the largest indigenous forest block in East Africa. It is also one of Kenya's only five water towers, aside from the Cherangany, Mt. Kenya, Aberdares and Mt Elgon.

Besides being Kenya's largest water catchment area, many rivers originate from the forest, including Ewaso Ng'iro, Njoro River, Sondu River and the famous crocodile-infested Mara River. These rivers feed the fish-reliable Lake Victoria, the flamingo friendly Lake Nakuru and the salty Lake Natron et all.

This circus just but gives a glimpse of the enormous lease of life this montane of indigenous forest supports. However, over the years, the forest has been suffering the full wrath of human encroachment, as it has become the unfortunate subject of illegal land allocations resulting in unprecedented and wanton destruction.

The forest has traditionally been occupied by the hunter-gatherer Ogiek community whose lifestyles are relatively sustainable. However, immigration from other communities has meant that Mau's incalculable ecosystem has been stretched to

unmanageable limits. Powerful individuals within government ranks are among the people owning large chunks of the forest cover. The allocations, which started in 1996 with the intention of resettling the Ogiek community and families displaced in ethnic clashes only started as the beginning of the destruction of a vital resource.

More than 60,000 hectares of forest cover was destroyed and thousands of trees are still being felled, never mind that an environmental disaster in Kenya is looming and reduced rainfall has been witnessed over the last three years.

Intensive farming, timber sawing and charcoal burning are the order of the day in the Mau, while illegal sale of the forest land by unscrupulous persons is the genesis of the problem. In 2005, the government took action against further destruction of the bird life, games life and human life supporting forest, only to be tied by a court ruling barring any further action against the encroachers.

But as Kenya faces a water crisis, the country which relies on the resource for electricity generation, fishing, farming and other agricultural activities is literally sitting on tenterhooks as its leadership tries to strike a delicate balance of saving a rain forest and remaining relevant in the political arena. The latter seems to be edging the former as little, if not nothing is being done to conserve the water tower.

The big Multinational companies are having a good time logging down the trees in the presence of government forestry officials. Meanwhile the rivers are dying, Lake Baringo being a fine example of the effects as it is all dried up with hundreds of crocodiles in it.

Kakau Malankei is an Ogiek elder. He says they have lived in Mau since time immemorial. "It was forbidden in our culture and community to cut down trees and especially the indigenous trees. We use the dead ones for firewood," he says. "The indigenous trees helped in production of quality honey but now that honey is no more due to cutting down of indigenous trees," he adds.

For along time the Ogiek community has put on a struggle to protect the Mau forest, using their own traditional knowledge in general management to conserve their

forests and biodiversity but all this has been harbored by the government's efforts to evict them from the land. Suddenly the Ogiek have found themselves squatters of the land and they are actually feeling the effects of deforestation, of which they have denied claims that they are the ones who do the illegal logging blaming forestry officials and government of carrying out the unregulated, uncontrolled harvest of both timber and non timber products with little regard for replanting or regeneration.

“We have stayed here for a very long time, we use to eat honey. The bees survive well in indigenous trees which are twelve types in number but all are gone. The Shamba system by the government has caused all this destruction together with multinational companies like Timsales, which continue the indiscriminate destruction of trees,” says Joseph Chemaina, a Mau resident.

Chemaina decries the Kenyan government's refusal to recognize the indigenous people in the Mau. “Instead of the government recognizing us the indigenous people it brought other communities in the shamba system. The bamboo plant stores water during the wet season and then distributes it to the rest of the plantation during the dry season which goes to the water catchment areas but they have been destroyed,” he observes.

The worst causes of water loss in the water catchment areas and also climate change is the replanting of the exotic trees that have been replanted mostly at the edges of the water catchment areas. The exotic trees project is a sham since they take up most of the water and do not release any water to the atmosphere. According to the elders the only solution to saving the Mau forest is planting more indigenous trees.

“These exotica trees have played a role in drying up of the water catchment areas. They take up all the water and release none. The government should do away with the trees once and for all,” notes Joseph Barngetuny.

The destruction of the forest, scientists say, is reducing humidity and rainfall and increasing erosion, all of which are having a cascading impact on East African rivers and lakes, the region's renowned game parks and farming and threatening the supply of drinking water for millions of people. Kenya's tourism is also taking a hit as

witnessed by the reduced enthusiasm on the migration of the wildebeest, a world wonder. Loses are also most likely to be witnessed in the energy, horticulture and tea farming sectors, all of which play a vital role in the GDP growth of East Africa's biggest economy.

The Kenyan government must take decisive action to protect the country's wetland areas, irrespective of the political stakes involved. Playing politics in such a vital resource will in the long term adversely affect her citizens, wildlife, rivers, lakes, agriculture and eventually, the economy.

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