

Perspectives from the Field:

Local People, International Organizations, and the Politics of Mangrove Conservation in Kenya

by Amina Soud, MEdSc 2005

Introduction

My summer research entailed documenting the traditional conservation techniques utilized in mangrove forest areas in the Lamu coastal area of Kenya. As part of this work, I asked the harvesters to take me where they were currently working so I could take pictures. I was shocked by their reaction – the harvesters adamantly refused to allow my recording of the area. When I inquired as to why they refused, they told me a Swahili saying: “*ukiumwa na nyoka, ukitambawa na ungono huruka*” – when one is bitten by a snake, one becomes sensitive even to the slightest touch of a thread.

After a long argument with them, they proceeded to tell the story about how the global non-governmental conservation organization, WWF, had conducted itself in Lamu. They told me how WWF officers came to a local boat owner, Mr. Fumo Faruq, and requested a boat to be taken to where people harvest mangroves. The WWF staff members paid the charges, Ksh 3000 (US\$45), and proceeded on a guided tour of all the areas in which the forest grows. During the tour, they became interested in an area in which mangroves have never grown naturally. The harvesters explained to the WWF staff members how some

places in the forest have soil qualities that are incompatible with forest growth and showed the WWF staff members similar places as their interest grew. Little did the harvesters know that the WWF staff was going to use this information against them.

Based largely on this tour, WWF published on the first page of its Kenya report for 1999-2001 that mangroves were overexploited in Lamu, and that the government of Kenya had to act immediately to save the remaining forests. The government, which had already passed previous laws limiting exportation, subsequently enforced a complete ban on harvesting mangroves. Even breaking a leaf was a criminal offense. This policy, I argue, did not take into consideration the effects this would have on the community. It is a fact, for example, that all of Lamu's old buildings are cyclically repaired with new mangrove wood, that the economy of the district is partly dependent on mangrove trade, and that the health of the forest itself is dependent on harvesting old trees.

The Lamu case represents one in many where an international organization imposed policy on developing nations and their indigenous people in the name of “biodiversity conservation” (e.g. Chapin 2004). The Lamu communities had perfected a sustainable utilization system of their primary natural resource, but policies implemented by the government and international bodies to fulfill conservation goals have led to the communities' dispossession of natural resources, and thus a dislocation of livelihoods. This article examines the rationale and consequences behind WWF's designation of Lamu's

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mangroves as unsustainably harvested, drawing upon the ecological, social, and political history of the region. I also elucidate the complicated political line that the government has to walk between local and international stakeholders.¹

Lamu's Social and Ecological Context

The Lamu district has 80,000 people and its district headquarters on Lamu Island has a population of 12,000 (Kenya Census 1999). The local county council elects its chairmen every two years. There is only one local NGO, Tawasal Foundation, which works with many Lamu community-based organizations for their general welfare. Though lacking institutional structures, the people themselves actively participate in the political and subsistence economic issues in their communities.

The Lamu district's inhabited islands and adjacent mainland are estimated to encompass 70% of Kenya's total mangrove forest cover, which is approximately 50,000-60,000 ha (Kairo and Kivyato, n.d.). Lamu is also a World Heritage site, attracting domestic and international tourism. It has one marine park called Kiunga National Marine Reserve (KNMR) and a national reserve called Dodori (Figure 1).

The mangrove forests, which grow in river deltas where fresh water meets the sea, serve a variety of purposes for the Lamu people. The forest shelters the archipelago from harsh sea waves, supplies nutrients to fish and crustaceans, and controls water quality (Kairo and Kivyato 1996). The tree trunks, called mangrove poles, are used for building houses, *dhows* (sailing boats), and fencing; the bark is used for leather tanning; the dead parts are used as charcoal; the young leaves are used to make a common side dish; the seeds are made into medicine; and the flowers promote local honey production. Lamu people's culture and architectural skills are centered on these trees.

There has been clearly a trend in the kind

of ban, from an export ban to a complete or blanket ban. For over three decades, the Kenyan government has put mangrove forests under protection, due to their degradation through detrimental human utilization such as salt and aquaculture farming and charcoal making, by banning the exportation of mangrove products. Recently, a restoration program for mangrove forests was initiated south of Lamu due to the dwindling supply of building materials caused by clearing for aquaculture and salt farming (Kairo 1996). Then, in September 2001, as I have described, the government slapped a blanket ban on any form of forest harvesting.

UNESCO and WWF Involvement

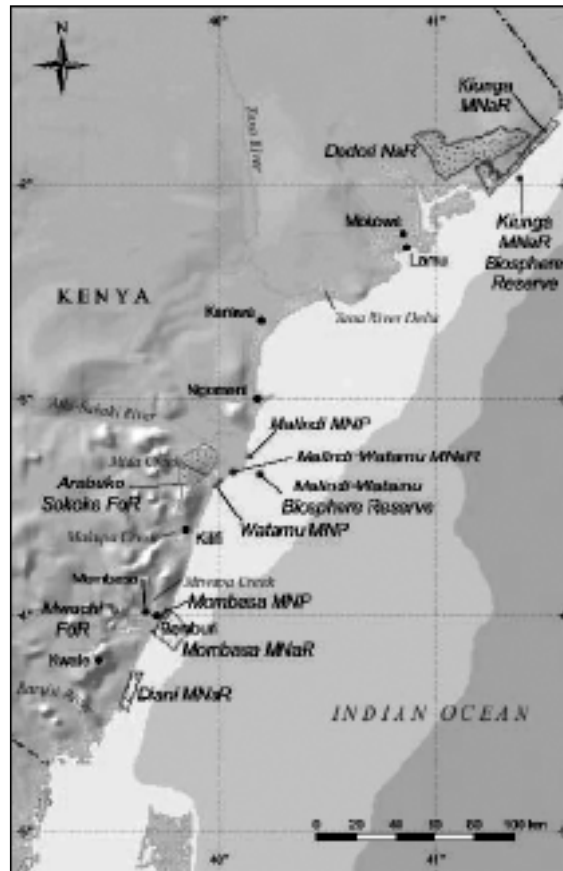
The Kiunga National Marine Reserve and Dodori Nature Reserve were designated as Biosphere Reserves in 1980 by UNESCO, as a product of UNESCO's initiative for "conserving nature," which was accepted by the government of Kenya. Since the Kenyan government is poor, UNESCO contributed beyond simply maintenance costs by proposing in the late 1990s that a world conservationist "expert" from WWF be in charge of management. The plan was attractive to a poor government with little financial means.

In 1999, WWF established its East African Eco-Region in Kenya. The organization was charged to work with the Kenyan Wildlife Service (KWS), the national agency responsible for reserves. Today, the current power structure leading to forest management relies mostly on government officers' reports to the forest headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya's capital, and the Eco-Region conservation report from WWF (KWS inclusive).

Reserves' Impact on Local People

The people that I interviewed in the area all opposed the existence of the Kiunga and Dodori National Reserves and the involvement of WWF. They complained that the existence of the

Figure 1. Distribution of mangrove forest along the Kenya coast line.



Source: UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre, World Heritage Sites (2003). http://www.unep-wcmc.org/index.html?http://www.unep-wcmc.org/resources/publications/UNEP_WCMC_bio_series.htm~main

national reserve in Lamu has disrupted their whole socio-economy. Originally, the local people divided the sea area into zones. The fishermen knew their fishery zones; the farmers planned their jetties for the transport of goods, and the mangrove cutters had their harvesting zones. But, according to the traditional knowledge of the area, the national reserves fall in the fertile agricultural lands, the fisheries' nutrient beds, and the healthy mangrove forest swamp, all of which were part of local peoples' utilization schemes. They perceived that WWF's management had set these areas off-limits to their traditional uses. The indigenous peoples who are most directly affected by the reserves are the Wandau mangrove harvesters, Bajuni fishermen and farmers, and Waboni hunters and gatherers. These people

have considerable knowledge of the medicinal and nutritional properties of many plants and trees. They were relocated to outside the reserve areas when the reserves were designated and were encouraged to undertake agricultural practices. It is believed there are only 500 Waboni left, most of these in the three villages along the Kiunga-Lamu road: Milimani, Mangai, and Basuba.

Although the government, WWF, and KWS have tried to alleviate the problems the reserve has caused to these indigenous groups through various programs, people are not happy with the management. They say that they are denied the benefit of using their land for agriculture, mangrove harvesting, and fishing, and that very little of the levies collected from tourism go back to them.

Politics and the Harvesting Bans

The conflict between UNESCO's and WWF's interest in conservation and the locals' interest in forest-based livelihoods created a management system that wavered between bans and reinstatements of the forest harvest between the 1970s and today. The issue became more complicated when political parties, the government, and the local people politicized it. After WWF's quick survey of the forest in 1999, the government supported WWF's idea of a complete ban in order to be in good rapport with those concerned with the condition of the world's environment. However, at the same time, the votes of the Lamu people, who wanted the ban lifted, mattered to the government.

This dual affiliation led to the series of bans and lifts. Harvesting was banned over fear of overexploitation, yet the reason for lifting the ban is less that people have changed their patterns of mangrove cutting than that local people have pressured for reinstatement of harvesting. This becomes clear when we see that, throughout the 1970s to 1990s, the Kenyan government did not have a reliable inventory of the forest. This changed with WWF's quick 1999 survey – yet even with the more reliable information, the ban was still re-imposed and then lifted.

The president was surely playing politics through the 2001 ban. I say this because the results of GIS and remote sensing research support the presence of sustainable harvesting in the mangroves in Lamu. The issue was obviously significant and politically delicate, as it involved, on the one hand, Lamu people's environmental, social, and economic conditions, and, on the other hand, the international conservation community's vision – and their financial assistance for the government of Kenya. The government needed to balance between the two. The Kenyan government, in its endeavors to meet the policy goals of creating

and maintaining systems of public order that embody human dignity, is weakened by its dependence on financial aid provided by the international world. However, the strong civil society in the form of organized, affected Lamu citizens used all means in their hands (national media, memorandums, politicians, and votes) to press the government to make a decision in their favor. Members of the opposing party (NARC) also used this ban as a political weapon against their opponents, the KANU government. They promised to lift the ban immediately if they were in power. Partly as a consequence of this promise, NARC won the national elections in December 2002.

WWF Reaction

WWF, seeing that it caused troubles in Lamu after the complete ban, decided to join hands with the government's agencies, Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute and the KWS, to conduct another survey of the mangrove forest adjacent to the Marine Reserve. The government did not have enough funds to do the survey, and thus asked for support from German, Norwegian, and UNESCO programs. The results affirmed that sustainable harvesting is possible in the area: "Given its high potential productivity and regeneration, mangroves forest within and adjacent to KMNR have excellent prospects for sustainable exploitation" (Kairo and Kivyatu, n.d.:14).

After this report, WWF openly supported a lift on the ban. They were then in the daily papers with other pressure groups in Lamu trying to persuade the new government to lift the ban. About a year after the NARC government was formed, in September 2003, it did so.²

Conclusions

Pressure from all sides helped to lift the ban. However, the actions of the WWF, which caused the complete ban, increased suspicion in

the Lamu people towards government agendas. It caused people to ask the government questions about their relevance as citizens. The citizens' anger towards the government was due to the exclusion of local people from decisions concerning their own areas' management issues while they included foreigners who did not know the land.

WWF initially did not pay enough attention to the people's and the forest's history and context – social, political, and ecological – in the mangrove area. In this case, the organization acknowledged that they had been wrong and changed their course. However, we must ask: if the people in Lamu had not been organized and mobilized enough to protect their interests, what would have happened?

This case is not an uncommon occurrence, and it is part of a larger problem in conservation projects. I cannot put the blame solely on WWF for the problems encountered in the management of the Lamu forest. While WWF is partly accountable, the deeper issue is a system where the politics and agendas of resource-rich, cash-poor countries like Kenya intersect with the large budgets and priorities of international institutions and conservation groups. In the collision and negotiation of these interests, it is the local people who too often continue to lose out.

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Endnotes

¹ This report is based on observations and interviews conducted from June to August 2004. Government officials interviewed included the following: Mr. Mwihiindi Kiilu Bernad (Deputy District Forest Officer, Lamu), Mr. James Njuguna Baatia (District Forest Officer, Lamu), Mr. Mohamed Omar (District Environmental and conservation Officer, Lamu), and Mr. Hussein Soud Elmaawy (Chairman, Council of Elders).

² Interview with Mr. Hussein Soud Elmaawy, Chairman, Council of Elders.

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