

Project Update: March 2009

Despite forecasts by the Meteorological Department that rains would come in the month of March, Kenya has continued to be dry and the country is now in the grip of a severe famine. It is currently estimated that more than 10 million people are under the threat of starvation and the country has sent out an international appeal for food aid. This has meant that planting of bamboo and indigenous trees has had to be postponed as we wait for the rainy season to start in earnest. However, there are signs that the rains may start in April although the Meteorological Department warns that the rains may fall below the normal average.

This protracted drought has impacted negatively on the swamp. The main impact has been the accelerated harvesting of macrophytes and other vegetation for feeding livestock. My investigations have established that on average, more than 30 sacks of vegetation are harvested from the swamp every day. This has led to large swathes of the swamp being laid bare (See pictures). The sack full's of green vegetation are sold to livestock farmers and it has become a commercial activity that will hopefully come to an end with the onset of the rainy season.

As a result of the drought, many farmers have started pumping water illegally from the swamp to their farms, especially at night when they can not be spotted under the cover of darkness. This has led to a crackdown on this illegal water abstraction by officials of the Kikuyu Water Company, a subsidiary of the Athi Water Services Board that is the custodian of the swamp.

On a positive note, a meeting of the major stakeholders of the swamp was held last Saturday, 28th March. Most of these were members of the community that derives direct or indirect benefits from the wetland. It included farmers from both upstream and downstream sections of the swamp. They expressed their support for the conservation efforts and gave their views on the way forward.

The downstream community called on the upstream riparians to cut down on the water abstraction, especially during this period when the swamp is under severe pressure from the ongoing drought. Some of the women said that in the past, they used to make artifacts such as mats and baskets but due to the lack of a market, these activities have since lapsed. They welcomed the conservation efforts and said they were ready to resume their activities if a market for their products was forthcoming. The meeting was held at the Kikuyu Resort Club, a new hotel that has opened along the swamp. Formerly a private residence, the resort club caters for individuals, families, conferences and special occasions like wedding parties. One of the directors of the club attended the meeting and contributed to the deliberations. He informed the other stakeholders that the management of the club was committed to the conservation of the swamp and its development into an ecotourism site, noting that this would be beneficial to the club. He informed the gathering that the management had formed the Ondiri Swamp Conservancy Trust which was committed to the conservation of the wetland and that it would work with all stakeholders to make it a success.

As a result of the renewed interest in the swamp, a student registered at the Moi University in western Kenya has registered for a PhD and will conduct his studies in the swamp. He will be looking at the economic and social dynamics of the wetland.

Plans to publish an article on the work being undertaken are still underway but have been delayed by inability of the publishers of the *Environmental barometer* to publish the magazine in time. It is hoped that they will be able to publish soon.

Efforts to develop posters and fliers are at an advanced stage and these will form part of the community information resource centre that is scheduled for later in the course of the project.

