

Project Update: April 2024

Summary

This conservation project focuses on the Sokoke scops owl (*Otus ireneae*) and Usambara eagle owl (*Bubo vosseleri*). These two species are endemic to the coastal forests of Kenya and Tanzania and Usambara mountains in Tanzania respectively. The Sokoke scops owl is listed as Endangered by IUCN, while the Usambara eagle owl is among threatened species due to habitat loss caused by climatic change and human activities. The two species prefer natural forests that are less disturbed by human activities, but an increase in human population and encroachment in their suitable habitats poses a threat to their existence. The two species also face a problem of bad cultural beliefs that are associated with superstition, in which people associate owls with bad omens or death. Communities that perceive higher negative interactions with particular species of wildlife would likely want a reduction in their population. It is therefore crucial to educate the communities on the importance of these endemic and endangered species, in order to enhance conservation efforts through collaborating with local communities. This project has been focused on assessing the population and distribution of these two owl species using the call-playback method, and raise local people's awareness in the east Usambara Mountains' forests.

Activities Implemented

(i) Project start

The project began in March 2024, which is the start of the rainy season in Tanzania and east Usambara. Two mountainous forests found in East Usambara, which are Amani nature reserve forest and Kambai forest reserve were surveyed in this project. The forests were surveyed to familiarise us with the terrain and identify trails that will be used for nocturnal surveys. The villages around the forest reserves were also identified for awareness raising and capacity building programme.

(ii) Survey Highlights

Amani Nature Forest Reserve: The Usambara Eagle Owl was surveyed across 50 plots with varying elevations and vegetation covers in Amani nature forest reserve. Out of these, vocal responses were recorded at seven plots. It was noted that the owls were less vocal and active during adverse weather conditions, including rainy, foggy, and cold nights. They are also expected to be more vocal during mating season in dry season.



Photo: The Usambara eagle owl at Amani Nature Forest Reserve

Kambai Forest Reserve: The Sokoke scops owl was surveyed at 50 plots within the lowland forest of Kambai. Responses were recorded from six pairs of owls between 187 – 500 m asl, indicating their presence in the area. These owls were also less vocal in cold and rainy nights, and they are expected to be more active during the dry season.

(iii) Community Awareness:

Residents near the Amani Nature Reserve were generally aware of the Usambara eagle owl's presence, due to its loud unique call. However, there was a noticeable lack of awareness regarding the Sokoke scops owl among the inhabitants near the Kambai Forest Reserve.

(iv) Awareness and Education:

Community Engagement: The project team assessed the local community member awareness and perception on owl species, then conducted awareness programmes through village meetings, targeting communities surrounding the forest reserves.



Photos: Village meetings for awareness raising at Kambai and Kweboha villages

School Programs: Educational initiatives were carried out in local schools to inform students about the importance of owl conservation.



Photos: Education program for Primary school students bordering the forest reserves.

Radio Broadcasts: The local radio station (Pangani fm Radio) was utilised to reach a broader audience and raise awareness about owl conservation status and importance.



Photo: Radio Broadcast Program for Owl and environmental Conservation Education

(v) Environmental Concerns:

The Kambai Forest Reserve has been facing environmental disturbances such as forest clearing for agriculture, illegal logging, and the use of fire for clearing vegetation. These activities pose a significant threat to the habitat of the Sokoke scops owl and other biodiverse species.



Photos: Clearing of the natural vegetation for timber, charcoal and new farm plots at Kambai

(vi) Next Moves:

- Continue monitoring the population and distribution of the two owl species with collaborative efforts from local guides and the community members.
- Continue to provide conservation education to local communities and improve their perception toward the owl species.
- Engaging the local authorities to facilitate consultations aimed at identifying alternative economic opportunities for the communities surrounding the Kambai forest reserve, with a goal of improving their livelihoods and reduce over reliance on forest products.
- Prepare for the next owl survey in the dry season from September 2024.