

Project Update: August 2024

Summary

This conservation project focuses on the Sokoke scops owl (*Otus ireneae*) and Usambara eagle owl (*Bubo vosseleri*). The Sokoke scops owl is endemic to the coastal forests of Kenya and Tanzania and while the Usambara eagle owl is endemic to Usambara Mountains in Tanzania. The Sokoke scops owl is listed among the endangered species by the 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 pose 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 omen 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 focusing 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) Survey Highlights

Amani Nature Forest Reserve: Recent surveys at Amani Nature Forest Reserve have revealed exciting findings about the Usambara Eagle Owl. Due to the rainy season, the owls have been less vocal or active over the past two months. However, the research team has successfully located the first-ever recorded nesting site of the Usambara Eagle Owl at 1080 meters above the sea level, where a pair of owls resides. With the mating season set to begin in early October, these owls will become more active and vocal, providing an excellent opportunity for observation and study.



Photo: The Usambara eagle owl nesting site at Amani Nature Forest Reserve

Kambai Forest Reserve: The Sokoke Scops Owl survey at Kambai Forest Reserve has uncovered an unusual behavior of these insectivorous owls. Local people were educated on identifying the owls' calls and reporting sightings. Interestingly, several villagers reported that these owls forage on insects around human residences, particularly near light bulbs outside houses. This behavior contrasts with the nocturnal search efforts in the natural forest, as these small owls venture into open areas, including human farms and houses, to forage before returning to the forest at dawn. This discovery has prompted a change in the survey strategies, adapting night surveys to include these new foraging areas.

(ii) Awareness and Community Engagement:

After the project team assessed the local community members' awareness and perception toward owl species, it engaged the community members through village meetings and engaging them from the household level. The owls were deeply associated with superstitions, with local witch doctors attributing magical properties to owl products, such as eggs leading to owls' nests raiding by some people. However, the project has begun to shift these beliefs through dedicated community engagement and education efforts. There is a noticeable improvement in local attitudes, with many community members now showing a willingness to conserve these species. Remarkably, some individuals who had previously captured owls illegally have voluntarily handed them over to the project team, allowing for their safe release back into the wild. This positive change

highlights the project's impact in fostering a more wildlife-friendly mindset among the local population.



Photos: *The barn owls ready to be released from the cages*

School Programs: The project has successfully trained local guides who now play a crucial role in conservation education. Two guides conduct school programs, taking students on educational trips to the natural forests around East Usambara. During these excursions, students learn about the importance of conservation, the diverse habitats of birds, and, most importantly, the specific habitats of owls. This hands-on experience fosters a new generation of conservationists who understand and appreciate the value of protecting these unique species and their environments.



Photo: *School students during field excursion.*

iii) 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, to improve their livelihoods and reduce over-reliance on forest products.
- Prepare for the next owl survey in the dry season from October 2024.