

## Project Update: December 2019

### Exchange Visit to Dabaso Creek Mangrove Conservation Group in Watamu

#### Introduction

The exchange visit to Dabaso Creek Mangrove Conservation Group in Watamu (Kilifi County) was arranged after the group's activities on ecotourism were identified to be similar to those of Gazi Women Boardwalk Group. The Dabaso ecotourism venture dubbed "crab shack" is considered to be more successful and a good case study to learn from. The visit was made up of six members from Gazi Women Boardwalk Group (officials) and three members from Gazi Ecotourism Ventures (RSG project team). Also, we made a stopover afterwards to a local ocean conservation organisation, an NGO working to protect and rehabilitate turtles and their nesting sites. Recently, they have ventured into mangrove conservation work and we had a chance to visit their mangrove nursery area and learnt on best ways to establish mangrove nurseries. Specifically, the exchange visit aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To identify good practices and opportunities in the ecotourism venture.
- ii. To identify barriers and challenges facing ecotourism and how to overcome them.
- iii. To develop a sense of self-motivation, ownership and inspiration from other community members engaged in similar activities.
- iv. To share experiences and lessons especially on project management, conflict resolution and marketing.



A group photo with the officials of Dabaso-Mida creek conservation group

## **The Exchange Visit**

After a 4 hour journey to Watamu, the group arrived to a warm welcome from the Dabaso crab shack team. The team from Gazi was invited to a sumptuous lunch at one the crab shack restaurant which is situated adjacent the Dabaso mangrove forest system. It was very clear from the onset of the visit to the end that a warm welcome, paying attention to customers, the mode serving food, the delicious food itself and conservation of the mangroves are items that are well paid attention to in Dabaso. Benjamin (current chairman) and Dickson Miziga (organising secretary) gave us the history and overview of Dabaso crab.

## **History of Dabaso-Mida Creek Mangrove Conservation Group**

According to Benjamin, Dabaso group started as a conservation initiative in 2000 with 33 members and the overall aim of conserving mangrove forests in Mida creek. They later up scaled the project to hunting crabs and selling them to generate revenue, which gave birth to crab fattening project in cages. The group was initially composed of men only mainly due to their cultural beliefs that women were not supposed to work around the ocean. They put the crabs in cages after fishing them so that they can increase in size thus fetching a higher price at the market. This activity generated enough cash, which led to construction of the first section of the boardwalk. The boardwalk was to support the feeding of the crabs in the cages and later received financial boost from Toyota Japan.

Members would take turns in feeding the crabs, which was not efficient because some members would either forget or leave the crab's unattended leading to the death of some crabs. As a result, they built a tent to serve as an information centre to teach their members about crab farming. Surprisingly, they started receiving visitors/tourists asking if they could have taste of the crabs, which gave, rise to the current crab shack restaurant cum ecotourism business. Through division of labour, some members would be teaching the tourists about crabs while others would preparing the crab for a meal to the tourists. With time, they got additional funding and support to build the other sections of the boardwalk to enhance the face value of the venture. The Kenya Coastal Development Project (KCDP), a World Bank-funded project, came in and assisted them the group to put up a conference facility on site which they use to generate extra income to sustain mangrove conservation work while improving their wellbeing. Currently, comprises of 48 members (33 men and 15 women).



Left: Crab fattening in cages. Right: Tourists enjoying canoe riding.

### Highlights of the group's success story

- They started as a group to conserve mangroves. So anybody (men) could attend and be registered in the group and get a certificate.
- Their knowledge on mangroves has increased due to support from KMFRI, which has helped them to successfully conduct mangrove replanting.
- They work in close partnership with Kenya Forest Service to manage and protect mangrove forests.
- They operate canoes, which they use to take tourists around the mangrove channels.
- The boardwalk and crab shack restaurant operates independently from the conservation group and has employed skilled members to work as catering staff, tour guide, marketer, accountant and manager. This has created direct and indirect employment opportunities to the community.
- They have social responsibility policy in form of a school feeding programme and supporting the renovation of nearby school structures.
- They have expanded their business over time to include selling mangrove and other trees' seedlings, canoe riding, Mpesa business (mobile banking) and KCB bank community agency.
- They receive ~150 visitors per day both local and international.
- They market their project through word of mouth and also via social media platforms.
- They have started a youth mentorship programme as part of their successional plan when the older members of the group retire.
- They operate within a strict code of conduct where membership can be terminated for failure of attending three consecutive meetings without apology. Members pay a fine for coming late in the weekly meeting plus a punishment to take up an activity without pay the following Monday.
- Their charges are Ksh. 500 for visiting the boardwalk and come with a glass of juice and two crab samosas. For tourists who want additional fun, they pay Ksh. 3000 for a maximum 4-hour canoe ride and bird watching.

## Lessons to Gazi Women Boardwalk Group

On what they had to advise the Gazi Women Group, this is what they had to say:

- The Gazi women should consider building a shade on the edge of the ocean to give tourists a panoramic view of the ocean while eating.
- The group should consider including men and youths as members of the group to bring about group dynamics in order to strengthen efforts.
- They should make use of the ancient building famously known as “Jumba la Mbaruk” and use as a tourist attraction.
- They should consider organising events in line with national public holidays and cultural weekends as a unique avenue to generate extra income.
- The group should consider having clear signage giving clear directions from the main road (Mombasa-L/Lunga road) to their boardwalk.

## Challenges

- The high land tenure ship-licensing fee, which demotivates the Dabaso-Mida group.
- Conflicts with private developers who want to take up their business.
- Low education levels especially of majority members, which denies most of them of the leadership opportunity. A member is eligible to vie for chairmanship if they have a tertiary level of education.
- They still use charcoal to cook. They would like to start using another form of environmentally friendly fuel.
- Main challenge to their conservation work being illegal mangrove harvesters and poachers



Benjamin (far left) addressing the Gazi women group officials during the exchange visit.



Presentation on the lessons and experiences from Dabaso.



Agnes and Nelly (RSG project team members) enjoying crab samosas.



Crab shack restaurant in the mangrove forest overlooking Mida creek.



"Conservation farming pays"~ in reference to crab farming initiative of Dabaso conservation group.



group photo session at the entrance of Crab Shack restaurant.





A visit of the mangrove nursery site established by Local Ocean Conservation organization in Watamu.





A sumptuous meal served at Crab Shack restaurant. One of the main source of income of the group.