

Adopt a plot: The strategy that helps to save forest

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Some of the farmers involved in the rehabilitation and conservation of Marang'a Forest in Embu East Sub-County.

On a quarter of an acre in the hilly Marang'a Forest in Embu East Sub-county, a few tree stumps stand, evoking a past the local community wishes it could forget.

But on the same plot, the leaves from rows of thriving trees, known colloquially as muu (Nile tulip), munywukwe (Siena siamea) and mikinduri (Croton megalocarpus), gleam as a gentle breeze stirs the fresh air.

The flourishing young trees, alongside several other species, co-exist with dying stumps on several similar plots across the 219.50 hectare (542 acres) Marang'a Forest.

They tell the tale of a forest that was almost decimated by human activity, but that has now been reclaimed through a cost-effective approach.

"In the past, this forest teemed with indigenous trees and was the source of our water. However, over time, illegal logging for timber, firewood and charcoal degraded the forest so much that water springs dried up. Bouts of rains also reduced," said Elias Muriithi, a resident of Marang'a village.

Mr Muriithia, who is the vice chairman of the local community forest association involved in the forest's reforestation, says the forest was back then owned by the community. However, in 2013 it was gazetted as a government forest in Kenya's bid to attain 10 per cent forest cover by 2022. In 2015, Kenya's forest cover was estimated at 7.2 per cent based on national projections from the 2010 forest cover data, according to the Global Forest Resources Assessment Report, 2015.

Faced with dried-up springs and rapidly encroaching desertification, the Marang'a community was left at the mercy of groups that would once in a while visit to plant trees, but the plants' survival rate was dismal.

It was not until 2017 when the Adopt-a-Plot Strategy was trialled in the forest. And it has succeeded in its reclamation efforts. The forester in charge, Rose Njiri, says the strategy entailed allocating a quarter-acre plot to a person in the community who would take care of the trees there. The plan roped in the community, the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and the Upper Tana Natural Resources Management Project (UTaNRMP).

Ms Njiiri said UTaNRMP provided the indigenous tree seedlings, where 100 trees were planted in each of the 100 plots.

In total, they rehabilitated 30 hectares at an estimated cost of Sh500,000.

In the last rainy season, the forest management partnered with Green Zones Development Support Programme.

In the spirit of Article 69 of the Constitution, which urges citizens to co-operate with State organs and other persons to protect and conserve the environment, the farmers were involved in planting the trees and each required to tend to his or her plot.

"Farmers were to benefit from using the growing grass as fodder for their livestock. Farmers are also allowed to put up beehives on the trees so that they can benefit from beekeeping. They also collect the fallen firewood," said Njiiri.

"The concept aimed at improving their livelihoods, and it has worked well."

She added that the forest had 29 springs in the past, which dried up, but they project they will have regenerated many of these within the next 10 years as the trees continue to grow.

"You can see a lot of wetness in those areas as a micro-ecosystem is being built up, an indicator of the springs' revival. The frequency of rain has also increased," said Njiri, adding that the concept has only been piloted in Marang'a Forest.

Ann-Leah Wangari, who was allocated a plot, said she is sold on the benefits of the strategy.

"I use the grass to feed my grandmother's goats. I sell the excess fodder and I make some money. I can make a sale of Sh500 at once. The grass grows fast due to sufficient water," she said, adding that she also gets a reliable supply of firewood, which she collects from the forest floor.

Peter Njagi and his wife Margaret are also grateful for the initiative as it has made feeding their three cows easier. The increased income from milk sales has helped educate and provide for their children.

Muriithi added that residents are motivated to keep caring for the forest because it helps them, too.

He has put up beehives in his plot and hopes to get his first harvest later this year. According to Muriithi, tens of farmers arrive at the forest each morning to cut grass and keep an eye on the trees.

This puts off illegal loggers as they know they are being watched.

Njiri added that KFS and the community are seeking more partners to extend the project, as more farmers are willing to join in.

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