

ON SAFARI

CATS, SAND & STARS:

COMMUNITY CONSERVATION IN TANA DELTA

BY STORM STANLEY



The boatman manoeuvres a motorised canoe into an inlet. It is still cool at 6.30 a.m. and the tidal creek is a pale blue coiling through mangroves to a receding point in the distance. We are surrounded by mangrove forests. There are eight varieties, according to our guide and ranger Kazungu, who has lived in this area for over 20 years. Flashes of bright vermilion wings and coral-coloured beaks sparkle in the waves of green as Carmine Bee-eaters and Mangrove Kingfishers catch insects and fish. Our boat ride takes less than 20 minutes, and then we are dropped off with Kazungu. We are in the Tana River Delta Conservation area, a joint initiative between local people and the private sector owners of the Delta Dunes lodge.

In 1997, a parcel of 150,000 acres (60,700 ha) of land below the fresh water zone - including riverine forest, grasslands, woodlands,

bush land, lakes, salt water creeks, mangroves and dunes - was formally handed over to the inhabitants of the Lower Tana Delta for conservation. In December 2005, the Lower Tana Delta Conservation Trust (LTDCT) was registered to ensure official custodianship by the local community. The LTDCT holds a 20% share in the Delta Dunes Lodge. The European Union loaned the LTDCT several million shillings to pay for their interest in the lodge and provided funding for a community lodge, recognising the importance of boosting this economically peripheral area while at the same time sustaining the Delta ecosystem.

We remove our shoes and sink into soft mud as we squelch across the mudflats. Fresh tracks crisscross

in front of us - Civet cats, buffalo, bushbuck, leopard, baboon and pelican. We can also see older elephant tracks. The mudflats give way to a crescent of sand dunes. Hidden in the dunes and surrounded by Doum palms, Dwarf palms, Screw pines and trailing Ipomoea is a dinky oasis, only two metres across yet a vital source of fresh water for wildlife and birdlife. Fishermen used to rely on it too, but due to some of the less savoury habits, particularly of baboons, they have been encouraged to use their own small well, dug a few metres away and kept covered to deter wildlife.

We continue our walk. The distant hum of waves breaking on the shore - there is no reef here - grows louder as we near Ungwana Bay. An exhilarating scene lies before us: there has been a storm out at sea and the waves crash wildly onto

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the beach. Fishermen bravely wade into the surf to cast their nets. We pause while they bring in their catch - several large Parrot fish, weighing at least several kilos each, flop about and the largest prawn I have ever laid eyes on, at least 20 cm long, is gently extracted: it rightly eyes me warily. A pair of Fish Eagles lingers in eager anticipation of possible rejects. The fishermen say that Somali piracy has deterred some commercial trawlers from fishing the East African coast, resulting in bigger and better catches. Kazungu adds that they no longer find dead turtles. As many as 10 a week used to turn up on this stretch of beach alone, having been caught, stranded and drowned in drift nets.

Offshore, to one side of us, dolphins leap in shimmering swells while on the other, Tana River bushbuck forage

in the brush and grasses, which have colonised the dunes. This is one of the only places along the Kenyan coast where the critically endangered Dugong have been seen. Half an hour into our walk, we come across a pair of fresh lion prints in the sand just above the high-tide mark - iconic and perfect indentations. Kazungu comments that the lions were likely to have been hunting on the beach at dawn only an hour earlier. We follow their tracks along the shore for a kilometre before they disappear; I imagine that they are watching us, camouflaged in the sand dunes.

Half an hour later, we arrive back at our starting point: the Delta Dunes Lodge situated high on a promontory. Where we are now

was once the main mouth of the Tana River, which begins its journey in headsprings on Mt Kenya and in the Aberdares, and stretches some 1,000 km in length. The river arcs to the northeast

through arid and semi-arid lands, before coursing southwards to meet the sea. Like many delta casualty stories, Tana River Delta has been adversely affected by human intervention. The Kenyan government sanctioned the building of hydroelectric dams near Mwea -- first Kindaruma (1968), then Kamburu (1975), Gitaru (1978), Masinga (1981) and most recently Kiambere (1988)¹. This changed the main course of the river, so that the new mouth is at Kipini, 26 km further northeast. In 1988, the Pokomo damned the main channel, Kalota Brook, for fresh water irrigation, entirely blocking the complex system of channels and distributaries to the south. As a result, the Orma pastoralists have



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had their dry-season grazing further diminished.

Deltas have delicately balanced ecosystems. The Tana Delta is a vast wetland complex characterised by high species richness and a variety of eco-regions. There are more than 350 species of birds, over 20 wildlife, 24 reptiles, 16 amphibians, untold marine life and crustaceans, and several rare or endangered species in each of these groups². Additionally, 300 plant taxa exist here. For at least three centuries people have been fishing here, harvesting mangoes and grazing their cattle. With their lives in balance, the indigenous

Orma and the Pokomo have lived alongside each other in harmony. An important cycle in the Delta's natural rhythm is the twice annual flooding, which takes place in April/May and November. Changes and disruptions to this finely tuned floodplain ecosystem result in challenges for all of the inhabitants.

There has been much discussion about plans for the cultivation of sugar cane and biofuel in the Delta. However, the conversion of virgin land to farmland not only affects people's lives and nature's balance, it also poses a severe threat to biodiversity. In order for human and non-

¹ IUCN website; (2003)



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beehives: they are conical in shape and made of grass thatch readily available from the surrounding marshes. A dozen huts lie on one side of a deep but dried-out furrow, a dozen more on the other. Prior to the dams being constructed, the houses lay on opposite banks of one of the Tana River's tributaries, but the water ceased to flow here two decades ago. Since then the women in the village have had to walk two kilometres every day to get water from the nearest source.

Damning the Tana resulted in water scarcity, which was further exacerbated by a prolonged drought in 2003. The government's response was to provide famine relief. The people still receive a monthly supply of food aid – 10kg of maize meal and five litres of oil per family – but what they really need is their water source back. Recently the area sustained heavy flooding, a consequence of riverine deforestation and sheet erosion from intensive agriculture further into the Tana River basin. Many of the Orma's cattle died from disease after the flooding. In Africa, and among the pastoralists, cattle represent the unit of negotiation and consequently much of their communal wealth was lost. "Before 1980," said Goricha Kuno, "the grass was rich and our cattle healthy. Now I can only afford to keep a small number of cattle, and I do not have enough to sell in times of need."

Abaguyo Algi tells me that the community is aware of the conservancy project and pleased with the new initiatives. Discussions with the lodge owners resulted in funding being gifted by a private donor to build a nursery school, and additional sponsorship money is being sought through a guest philanthropy programme. The lodge offers training and employment and one of the community elders is a trustee of LTDCT, but the principal benefit of conservation and ecotourism (by ensuring that the ecosystem remains intact) is the compatibility with traditional livelihoods such as pastoralism and fishing.

The Pokomo agriculturalists are the predominant tribe on the lower stretches of the Tana. They cultivate rice and maize after flood waters recede and harvest mangoes and bananas. There is a potentially lucrative trade in mangoes:

human species to survive, ecosystems – dynamic, self-organising systems humans have evolved within – must remain healthy³. How does this fit with the intentions of the government to meet its 2030 vision by opening up this fragile area to large-scale agriculture? To answer this question, we decide to seek out the community members themselves.

The first community we visit are the Orma pastoralists at Darge Galge village. Their eco-friendly homes resemble

² Nature Kenya website
³Norton (1992)

350**No. of bird species****20****Wildlife species****24****Reptile species****16****Amphibian species****300****and plant taxa species
found in the Tana Delta**

8,000 tonnes are harvested per year⁴. However, there is a lack of affordable and reliable transportation to reach external markets, and much of the mango harvest is used for juice. Unlike monoculture crops, fruit trees are economically productive and sustainable.

At Semikaro village, a group of 20 people readily join in discussion. Habudi explains that there is a greater dependence on seasonal rains now that the main river is not close by. "There are intruders nowadays – the Giriama are settling here looking for arable land, consuming out our wildlife," he says. Gawawa comments that they are worried their small tribe will be assimilated by

the more dominant Giriama, affecting ethnic diversity.

Mwanatiti, a lady in an attractive double kitenge outfit, tells me that in the 1960s elephant and eland were plentiful; there were even rhino in the area. The villagers agree that conservation is helping local employment. Delta Dunes employs 45 people. Direct benefits are returned to the Orma and Pokomo communities from bed night levies, and conservation fees paid into LTDCT and distributed by the trustees. Moreover, Delta Dunes is providing technical assistance to the LTDCT to secure funding for a mobile clinic, additional schools and a trading centre, answering some of the socio-economic needs. But although a board of trustees is in place, the community complain that there has not been an AGM for three years, fuelling distrust.

When we motor gently back on an outgoing tide, the sun has already slipped over the western horizon and the air is filled with birdsong, intricate melodies, repeated notes and descending chirrups. A flock of egrets takes flight as a crocodile slips from a sandbank into the river, Sand Pipers fossick for a last few morsels of food in the mudflats and Sooty Gulls head off purposefully to their roosts. Twilight softens the contours and the first smattering of stars, like fairy dust, are visible in the apricot sky. On hearing the boat's vibrations, a pod of hippos

pop up like corks to survey the scene and then disappear under the water again. All is well in their world. But for how much longer?

At the time of writing this article, a group of influential elites on the former committee of the Kondertu Group Ranching have signed over the rights to begin a biofuel plantation scheme in the northern Chara region. This is completely against the wishes of the Orma and Pokomo, who say there has been no stakeholder analysis. Implementation of the scheme will result in forced eviction for many of these people. Where will they go? There are no relocation plans.

One doesn't have to look too far around our planet to note that human intervention – for human expediency – often upsets nature's finely tuned equilibrium: the Tana Delta is an example of this fragile balance, and it too is under threat.

**Bookings for Delta Dunes Lodge can be made through
Bookings@africanterritories.co.ke or visit www.deltadunes.co.ke**

⁴Retief, Swara, Vol 2008:3 and Becha, Swara, Vol 2009:2