

"The Tana River Delta – Kenya's sweet secret that could go sour"

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"Tana Delta ready to share its secrets"

Not the usual destination on a typical safari. In fact, very few people have heard of the Delta. And maybe that's good because some things should be hidden, but not anymore. We need to know. The Delta is paradise packed with tremendous potential for ecotourism, and its unique environment is home for many endangered species of birdlife and wildlife. But now they are about to be evicted.

The secret's source, the Tana River, bubbles into being somewhere on Mt. Kenya. Powerful rivulets mature then meander through national parks, game reserves and dehydrated landscape like a vein coursing beneath ancient skin. After hundreds of miles, the river flows into coastal countrysides offering hope. Finally, floodplains, swamps and rich wetlands of the Delta and Tana amalgamate into the Indian Ocean north of Malindi.

As another day rises, hues of golden orange wash over the Delta. Tropical air is fragrant in fresh cut green. Tree frogs hush their rhythmic belch and birds burst into joyful song in as many different symphonies as there are species. Large pods of hippo welter, crocodiles drift and rare fish reel in mangrove swamps and lakes. On their banks an occasional elephant drinks then flings mud over his back. Sandbanks along waterways are speckled with stilt legged storks, ibis and herons. Fuchsia billed mangrove kingfishers and orange beaked hornbills perch high in mangrove trees. Fish eagles zoom low over the water in pursuit of breakfast. Overhead, flocks of pelicans loop around like aerobatic biplanes.

Multicolored topis, Tana River bushbucks and buffalo graze across acacia studded savannahs. Young boys herd cattle toward the river to drink. Women tend mango and banana trees, and cultivate gardens of peas, beans and melons near villages tucked among mangroves.

In the Tana River Primate Reserve, the Tana River red colobus and the Tana crested mangabey blissfully leap among branches of rich riverine forest – their only home. Both primates have been protected here since 1976 and are on the endangered species list.

Lion paw prints weave in and out of neighborhood networks and around clusters of doum palms that randomly flourish throughout the Delta. In the distance, the thatched main house of Delta Dunes Lodge overlooks coastal sand dunes.

New African Territories - owner of the lodge, together with the Pokomo and Orma tribes have created a community conservancy program for the Delta's exquisite environment and its inhabitants.

The area is so crucial for birds that it has been designated an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International. Approximately 350 species are residents or visit seasonally to take advantage of

the Delta's abundance. Many rare and endangered birds seek sanctuary here like the globally threatened yellow breasted Basra reed warbler whose breeding grounds in Iraq are under fire and the endangered Tana River cisticola. Every season, thousands of waterbirds wing into the Delta's many marshes and channels to breed. Several birds that inhabit limited regions in East Africa such as the violet winged golden breasted starling and the noisy long-tailed fiscal are hosted by the refuge as well.

I was stunned to learn what could sour such a pristine ecosystem - two sugarcane companies. The pair has obtained permission to dig up the Delta, divert waterways and plant thousands upon thousands of acres (hectares) of sugarcane to sell for biofuel production. How could my beloved Kenya, a country so committed to conservation consider this?

There is a sense of urgency to globally produce biofuel, but in our haste to create we would destroy the very environment and species we are trying to save. It is alarming that the Delta's rich wetlands, swamps and thick forests, which aid in keeping the earth cool and green by absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing life giving oxygen would disappear.

When birds and wildlife start to drown in pollution and their habitat destroyed from erosion and sedimentation will they wonder why? Refugees and relocation won't be possible. All will be gone forever in favor of sugar.

Floods of protest from conservation and environmental groups succeeded in obtaining a temporary injunction against the sugarcane production plan. Even Kenya's Nobel Peace Prize winner, Professor Wangari Maathai has expressed concern and backed the legal action.

Kenya's vice president recently said, "Let us not shy from making laws that impose heavy and deterrent penalties against those who engage in wanton destruction of our forests and pollution of our rivers even if such actions may not be popular with our voters. There is a need for political leadership to lobby the business and manufacturing sectors to engage in environment friendly production processes that do not endanger the environment."

Tourism and conservation in the Delta could be a sweet deal and can only bring Kenya joy. Paul Matiku, executive director of Nature Kenya, a conservation group in Nairobi, says, "That a master plan needs to be instituted for the Delta incorporating conservation and development that is ecologically friendly for all involved with the most critical portions of the Delta and Tana River floodplain designated as national community conservation areas."

A recent press release from the Royal Society for Protection of Birds states that a large scale rice production scheme in the Delta during the 1990s failed due to flooding. Flooding is part of the natural ebb and flow of the Delta. Studies indicate Kenya has more to gain financially from tourism than sugar.

A safari to the distant Delta is an once-in-a-lifetime experience. Visitors fly from Nairobi by private charter plane direct into the Delta's airstrip or by scheduled air into Malindi or Lamu, then driven to the lodge.

Delta Dunes Lodge is positioned to become a model for emergence of responsible tourism in the area. Nestled among sand dunes and canopied by doum palms, the rugged main building soars over six open air double-bedded cottages dressed in all the amenities and built out of driftwood

and mangrove then topped with thatch. Stays are more personal because only 12 people can overnight at any given time.

A myriad of activities can be arranged. In the morning, guests can walk with an armed tracker through labyrinths of lush swamps and tree shaded grasslands. Afternoons are free to bask on secluded white beaches, sandboard on the dunes, paddle a kayak up one of the channels or fish for red snapper and rock cod. Visit local villages then crown the day with a sundowner cruise.

Village visits are an opportunity to experience tribal life of two intriguing ethnic groups: the Orma, from Ethiopian descent, are pastoralists who take their beehive shaped huts with them wherever the best grazing is found. The Pokomo fish, and grow subsistence and cash crops near the river where cyclical flooding aids in irrigation of their crops. Both tribes depend on the Delta for their livelihoods. During the dry season, thousands of cattle, goats, donkeys, sheep and camels from surrounding villages and towns drink from the Delta's abundance.

If sugarcane cultivation is permitted, not much pure water and productive land can survive. Tribes will lose land and grazing rights. Rare species of fish will disappear. Fishing will be nonexistent due to farm chemicals and silt. Thousands of livestock will dehydrate and die. Crops will wither into dust.

This controversy has created a necessity for partnerships and open communication among everyone involved. Kenya has always set a superb example for its stand on wildlife conservation issues. The Tana River Delta should be no different. Biofuel production in the right place may be a good idea, but if it replaces birdlife, wildlife, aquatic life and vital ecosystems, then what have we become?

For further information please contact:

RSPB, The Royal Society for Protection of Birds www.rspb.org.uk

Birdlife International www.birdlife.org

Delta Dunes Lodge www.tanadelta.org

Nature Kenya www.naturekenya.org

Kenya Tourist Board www.magicalkenya.com