

Kenya's Tana River Delta under siege

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The Tana River Delta in Kenya's north coast is under unprecedented threat as corporations and foreign agencies scramble to exploit its riches for export crops, biofuels and minerals. The projects are proposed in an area where no development project has succeeded for the last fifty years. Tens of thousands of people would lose their livelihoods, and globally endangered birds and primates and crucial wintering sites for migratory birds would be lost, if the rush of schemes in the Delta goes ahead.

The Tana River Delta is a vast patchwork of palm savanna, seasonally flooded grassland, forest fragments, lakes, woodland, mangroves, beaches, sand dunes, coral reefs, seagrass beds and the river itself. This ecosystem supports several communities and enormous numbers of livestock, wildlife and water birds.

Large assemblages of water birds qualify the Tana Delta as an Important Bird Area. A 1992-3 study recorded 22 different species of water birds occurring in the Tana Delta in significant numbers – 1% or more of the biogeographic population – including pelicans, storks, egrets and terns. In seasons of heavy rains, some five thousand water birds, representing over 16 species, nest in the Delta, and the young fly off to populate wetlands all over the country. The great numbers of water birds – more than 15,000 recorded in a recent water bird count covering only a third of the Delta – indicate the Delta's importance for conservation of migratory species, and for tourism. In addition, the Delta hosts the endangered Basra Reed Warbler, vulnerable Lappet-faced Vulture and near-threatened Malindi Pipit, and 13 of Kenya's 30 East African Coast biome bird species.

The Tana Delta has a history of poor environmental management and planning and failing development schemes. Attempts to grow irrigated rice, cotton, maize and shrimp on a commercial scale met with little success, although local farmers continue to grow rice, maize and other crops by traditional methods. Most recently, a rice scheme in the 1990s left a legacy of poverty and environmental damage. There are a number of worrying development projects that are currently proposed in the Delta:

1. Large-scale sugar cane plantation and ethanol co-generation

There are 2 proposed sugar cane projects. One is proposed by Tana and Athi Rivers Development Authority (TARDA – a government agency in the Ministry of Regional Development Authorities) and Mumias Sugar Company Ltd. – a public company, with the government having a large proportion of equity shares. TARDA and Mumias intend to convert about 20,000 ha of the Tana Delta into a monoculture sugar cane plantation. The project came to public knowledge in 2007, and advocacy and awareness campaigns, including a court injunction, temporarily stopped this project from taking off. However, in June 2009, Kenya's High Court ruled in favour of the developers on a technicality, with costs. Now the government has given tenure rights and ownership of 40,000ha of

Delta land to TARDA, ostensibly to grow rice and maize as a response to Kenya's recent drought and food shortage.

The second sugar company, Mat International, is in the process of acquiring over 30,000ha of land in Tana Delta and another 90,000ha in adjacent Districts. The company has not carried out any environmental and social impact assessment.

2. Large scale farms and factories to produce biofuels

Bedford Biofuels Inc, a multinational company reported to be incorporated in Canada, is in the process of acquiring land through 45 year lease agreements. Its intention is to transform over 90,000ha of land in Tana River District into biofuel farms, mainly growing *Jatropha curcas*. The land is currently owned by five local group ranches. Large tracts of this land is either at or adjacent to the delta.

3. Titanium mineral mining in the sand dunes

Extraction of Titanium from the sand dunes of the delta has been proposed by Tiomin Kenya Ltd, a company which was originally incorporated in Canada, but now the local subsidiary has been bought by the Chinese. The Tiomin Company is set to operate in Kwale and Msambweni districts on the south coast of Kenya. The Tana Delta was identified to have huge titanium deposits which could augment Tiomin's Kwale production. The company is in discussions with the local government authorities at the Tana Delta.

4. Port for land deal between the governments of Qatar and Kenya

Qatar has asked Kenya to lease it 40,000 hectares of land in Tana Delta to grow crops in exchange for support for a major new port in nearby Lamu town. The port-for-land deal is still mysterious. However, the plans to construct the port at Lamu are still on.

5. Allocation of beach plots and other prime land

The Tana Delta area was declared to be a land adjudication zone. However, only the beach plots and other prime land were allocated, allegedly to influential people, while local people remained squatters on the remaining trust land held by the county council.

Conservation interventions

The Tana River Delta is the largest of several critical natural areas threatened by development in Kenya. Nature Kenya (the BirdLife partner in Kenya) is working with communities in the Delta who share our opposition to these plans and who have positive proposals for enhancing their livelihoods through community-owned initiatives. Nature Kenya's activities in defense of the Delta include submitting comments to the EIA report for the Mumias sugar project, commissioning a cost benefit study and the production of an advocacy film, *Is Tana Sugar Really Sweet?*, and mobilising funding for advocacy towards the conservation of the Tana Delta.

The Kenya Wildlife Service is spearheading efforts to get the Delta listed as a Ramsar wetland of international importance. It will take time to compile ecological, hydrological and socioeconomic

data and to map the delta. Meanwhile, the current development proposals put the people, biodiversity and ecological functions of the delta in great jeopardy.

An economic study has already shown that a master plan, which integrates better and more sustainable management of existing activities with a conservation-focused future development, could generate more income and better livelihoods than these large and ill thought out developments.

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Other partners that support the campaign to conserve of the Tana Delta include the Kenya Wetlands Forum, the East African Wild Life Society, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife Partner in UK), BirdLife International, Schweizer Vogelschutz SVS/BirdLife Schweiz (Swiss BirdLife partner), DOF (BirdLife in Denmark), the Jensen Foundation, and the Community Biodiversity Conservation Films project of the Darwin Initiative.