

Kenya Prepares to commemorate the World Day to Combat Desertification at Huluhula, Marsabit County 17th June 2017

Report by Francis Inganga, Science and Technology Correspondent for Kenya

The proposed venue for this year's national (Kenya) commemoration of the World Day to Combat Desertification (WDCD) on 17th June is Huluhula Catholic Church grounds, located in Saku Sub-county of Marsabit County. The area is semi-arid and has all the characteristics of an emerging desert, with prolonged dry spells and short erratic rains. The Chalbi desert is located in this county. The proposed site has enough land where tree seedlings will be planted and protected by members of the church and surrounding community to maturity. Already members of the church have planted a number of trees which have matured and can be used as shades during the commemoration. The local Steering Committee headed by the NEMA County Director of Environment Mr Simon Tonui proposed this site because it is accessible to the community in the area who are mainly Christians and Muslims.

The preparation for WDCD commemoration, has involved two Steering Committees at the national level (so far 4 meetings have been held) coordinated by the National Environment Management Authority an institution under the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, and at the County level the Local Steering Committee under the County Government of Marsabit. The composition of these committees covers all relevant government and Civil Society organizations. The county committee has identified various activities to be undertaken during the commemoration. The main activities will include tree planting, a procession, exhibitions, media talk shows, newspaper supplements and a visit to selected rehabilitated areas in the county near the venue (if possible a visit to the Adaptation Funded project area at Waldaa under the Red Cross). The climax will be the various messages by dignitaries headed by the Cabinet Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Prof. Judi Wakhungu. Others statements will be given by the Director General of NEMA Prof Geoffrey Wahungu and the Chairman of the Board of Management of NEMA, John Konchellah. The sponsors and partners who have supported the efforts will give their statements and also the representatives of the UN Agencies in Kenya namely: UNDP and UNEP (they have always been part of the celebrations over the years).

Marsabit County falls within the arid and semi-arid climatic zones. It is located on the Eastern part of Kenya. The county's total land mass is 66,923.7 Km². Marsabit Town is the capital town of the county, while Laisamis is also a major trading centre in the county. The County is bordered by Ethiopia Republic to its northern border, Lake Turkana to the west (70% of L. Turkana is in Marsabit County), Samburu County to the south-west, Isiolo County to the south-east and Wajir County to the east (Figure 1). Temperatures range from a minimum of 10.10°C to a maximum of 30.2°C, with an

annual average of 20.10°C. Rainfall ranges between 200mm and 1,000mm per annum with its duration, amount and reliability increasing with altitude. For instance, while North Horr (550masl) has a mean annual rainfall of 150mm, areas around Mt. Marsabit and Mt. Kulal receive rainfall amounts of 800mm. Moyale receives a mean annual rainfall of 700mm. Rainfall is seasonal and is bimodal. The main community groups in the county are the Bujis, Boranas, Samburus, Gabras, Rendiles and Turkanas.

There are varied geological soil forms, texture and moisture holding capacity, salinity and fertility. This variation in soils means that saline soils are barren while others support vegetation ranging from grass and bush-land to evergreen tropical mountain forests of Mt. Marsabit and Mt. Kulal.



Figure 1: Map of Kenya showing location of Marsabit County

The county has one gazetted indigenous forest in Mt. Marsabit forest, with a size of 152.8km². There are two non-gazetted forests, Mt. Kulal and Hurri hills, with a total acreage of 750km². The forests form an important catchment of springs from which the communities living around them draw water both for domestic purposes and livestock. Open cast quarrying for dimension stone and aggregates is practiced at Gof Choppa,

Manyatta Dabba and adjacent areas in Marsabit Central district. Oil exploration on block 9 that partly lies in Marsabit County is currently ongoing. Other areas in the County that have been subject of oil exploration include Maikona, Kargi, and Laisamis areas. Sand harvesting takes place in Segel, Kargi, Ilaut, Korrr, South Horr and Bubisa. Other minerals include: Chromite in Moyale, blue quartz and mica in South Horr albeit at very low scales.

Most parts of the County are water stressed and experience acute shortage of water. Only 4% of the households use piped water while majority rely on boreholes, springs, water pans and shallow wells. There is no permanent river in the County, but ephemeral sources of water flow briefly during the wet season. Rain water harvesting and storage in sand dams, subsurface dams, and water pans, underground and above ground tanks is effectively practiced for various geographical scenarios in the County.

The major livelihood types are Pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihood zones. All-pastoral livelihood production system accounts for 81% of the County population and is practiced on more than 90% of the total land mass (ASAL) while agro-pastoral livelihood is practiced by 16% of the population on approximately 3% of land that is arable. Other livelihoods include formal employment, casual waged labor and trade carried out by 3% of the population (Marsabit County Agriculture Sector Plan 2013-2017) (plate 1). Where agriculture is practiced (highland areas mainly Mt. Marsabit and pocket areas of Mt. Kulal, and low land drainage areas at foot slopes of Dambala Fachana, Uran, Oda, Kinisa, Yabelo, Nana and Godoma areas of Moyale Sub-County) it is mainly rain fed. Low scale irrigated agriculture (established between 1972 around Marsabit forest (i.e. Karare, Songa, Badasa & Gabra schemes) and 1990 in Kalacha Springs), is practiced.

Some of the Community groups operating in the county are namely: Karare-Hulahula(KAHU), Jaldesa-Badasa-Dirib (JABADI), Saku friends of Environment, Sagante-Kituruni (SOKI), Qilta- Sangante (QISA) CBO, MONAJIDA, MECOG, Initiative for progress change(IFPC). The international organizations operating here are: CARITAS, PACIDA, CIFA, FH (Food for Hungry), GIZ, USAID-REGAL AG, RED CROSS, PISP and MIONET. Most of these operate in enhancing community livelihoods and relief in time of natural hazards. Most of them work towards improving and conserving the environment.

Another key economic activity with high potential for the county is Tourism. Apart from the attraction from the Big Five (Elephant, Lion, Buffalo, leopard and Rhino), the cultural practices can also be a major attraction if exploited through marketing by the county government. Marsabit is a gorgeous destination that is worth the visit for cultural tourism because of its rich cultural heritage.



Plate 1: Greenhouse farming (Merigo Group in Logologo)

In Kenya Marsabit County is the best for heritage tourism. The County has always carried a mystique of the remote and unexplored. It boasts six World Heritage Sites, a part of 981 properties forming part of the cultural and natural heritage which the World Heritage Committee considers as having outstanding universal value.

Sibilo National Park lies on the North-eastern shore of Lake Turkana in **Marsabit County**, about 800km from Nairobi. The 1570km² park was established in 1973 by the government for the protection of wildlife and the unique prehistoric and archaeological sites found there some of which are linked to the origin of man. This has made it famous internationally as 'The cradle of mankind'. Activities include Game viewing, Camping, Archaeological safaris, and Bird watching.

The 1,554Km² **Marsabit National Park** lies 560km north of Nairobi in Marsabit County encompassing Mt. Marsabit, an extinct volcano which rises to 1,707M (5,600ft). The height of the mountain creates a microclimate that supports the Montane forest which is supplied water by thick mist which forms overnight as the hot air rises off the desert and cools. The park comprises of the densely forested mountain and three crater lakes. Lake Paradise (Gof Sokorte Guda and Crater Lake (Gof Sokorte Dida) are the only permanent surface of water in the region and they provide the habitat that sustains the ecology of the park. The largest is Lake Paradise (Plate 2) and it is ringed with a scenic forest. The park is the only source of drinking water for Marsabit town residents and the main source of replenishment for other aquifers in the lowlands. The major attractions of this region include Land of Gofs (Craters), the great Elephant Tuskers, pristine forests, diverse birdlife, the greater Kudu, realm of raptors, and bird life.



Plate 2: Lake Paradise in 2014

Located on top of a hill, with the picturesque Lake Turkana as a backdrop, the Desert Museum in Loiyangalani was opened in June 2008. In a bid to promote local and international tourism in the region, The Kenya Tourism Board together with the National Museums of Kenya and in collaboration with other partners have been organizing the Lake Turkana Festival, a cultural festival held annually in Loiyangalani to celebrate the culture of the region. The Marsabit County government took over the festival organization a few years ago. The county government is ready to work with the Kenya Tourism Board and the National Museums of Kenya to promote heritage tourism. The Governor Ukur Yatani promising that his government will invest in infrastructure to make the sights easily accessible to both local and international tourists.

Marsabit County is faced with a myriad of environmental issues including: deforestation, poaching, droughts, desertification, declining biodiversity and ecosystem degradation among others. There are 11,000ha of Marsabit forest remaining (down from over 18,363ha in 1973). The primary drivers of deforestation are:

- (i) Conversion of forest to agricultural land (particularly to the east of the forest),
- (ii) Encroachment of Forest National reserve for human settlement near Marsabit town (Kofia Mbaya/ Karatina areas)
- (iii) Deforestation through over-abstraction of fuel wood (currently fuel wood abstraction rates are 16,382 tonnes per year) and sandal wood,
- (iv) Over-grazing by domestic livestock (Plate 3) (up to 50,000 heads of livestock entered the forest during the drought of 2009). If deforestation rates continue, the remaining 11,000ha will be lost within six decades.
- (v) Increasing human settlements and tree felling have reduced water catchment areas leading to drying up of natural springs. By end of 2010, all

wetlands in the forest, such as the famous lakes paradise and Lake Sokorte dried up completely as the natural springs feeding the lakes dried.

Over the past three decades, the ecology of important Marsabit ecosystems has been greatly altered, with reported reduction in wildlife numbers by about 50% (NKBCP 2011). This is attributed mainly to intense poaching during the 1980s and early 1990s. Illegal harvesting of trees has led to thinning of forests while livestock grazing has suppressed forest regeneration resulting into changes of the forests structure. Pressure from growing human population around Mt Marsabit forest and the Marsabit National Reserve have led to excisions of wildlife habitats to accommodate human settlements. Illegal settlements in wet season wildlife dispersal areas are threatening further excisions and consequent loss of wildlife habitat and resultant decline in biodiversity. Most recent illegal settlement is within Karatina/Kofia Mbaya areas bordering Marsabit Forest. The site is hilly and was initially covered by vegetation extending into the gazetted Forest Reserve.

There have been efforts to conserve the forest by multi-sectoral agencies, where NEMA, Kenya Forest Service and Kenya Wildlife Service have taken centre stage. Series of boardroom meetings and site visits have lately been done jointly by County Environment Committee (gazetted) and technical officers from multiple Government Agencies including the County Government of Marsabit, in a bid to save the forest by gazetting the site as an “Environmentally Significant Area”.

Another unique administrative challenge relates to Marsabit County being the biggest in terms of land mass in Kenya thus requiring additional resources in order to address environmental issues in all parts of the County. The County has two major towns, Marsabit and Moyale towns which are 242 Kilometres apart. There are furthest parts such as North Horr and Illeret which are about 500 Kilometres from Marsabit town. This may require that the government and NEMA allocate more resources for the government officers to be able to cover the county in their every-day operations and service to the people of Marsabit.

Marsabit County is a beneficiary of Adaptation Fund (Under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification-UNFCCC) where Kenya Red Cross is implementing projects aimed at coping with environmental challenges associated with aridity. This is an integrated programme to build resilience to climate change and adaptive capacity of vulnerable communities. Deliverables of the programme are:

- Construction of a fruit processing plant at Waldaa area
- Distribution of 1,000 fruit trees in Waldaa Location
- Irrigation of 64 acres in Waldaa farm

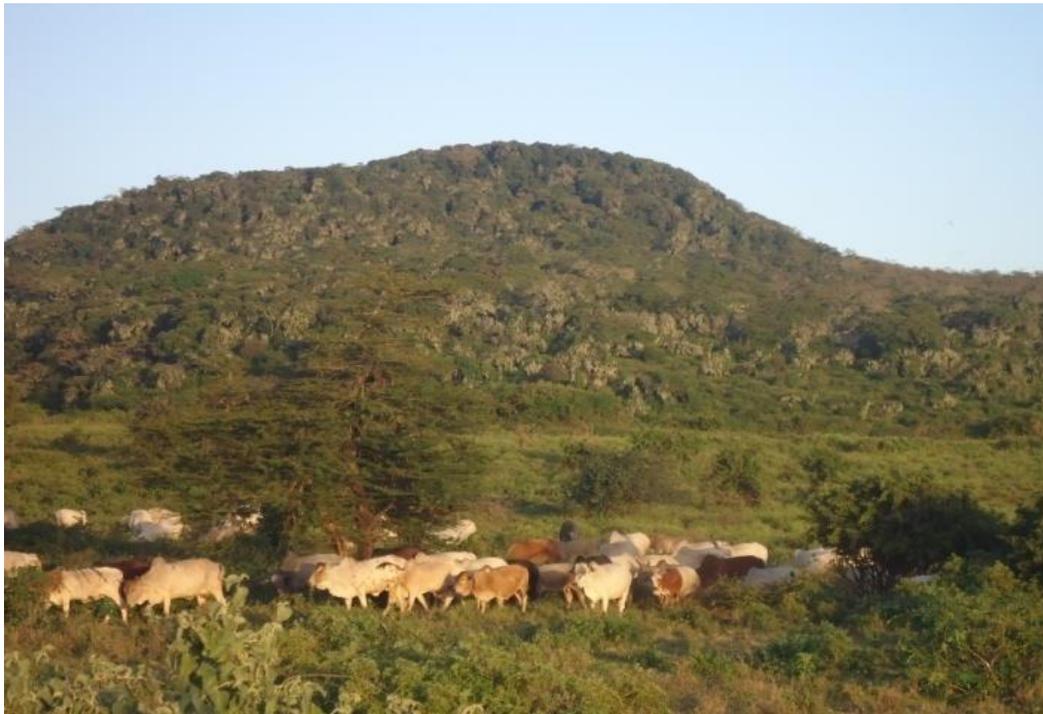


Plate 3: Livestock grazing in the Mt Marsabit forest

- Training of Waldaa farm committee and water management committee
- Provide post-harvest storage solutions and farmer support groups
- 5 solar pumps in Waldaa (irrigation)
- Construction of 2 water reservoirs for irrigation water
- Establishment of automatic weather station (AWS) in Waldaa farm

Another project is the NKBCP is a five year AFD funded project that commenced in 2013 and was launched in 2014. The overall goal of the project is to achieve sustainable use of natural resources while at the same time optimizing ecological service functions, particularly water, grazing and energy provision in an area of Northern Kenya that centres on Marsabit forest and its ecological and economic connections. The project has so far established 3 community conservancies of Shurr, Songa and Jaldesa conservancies, and is working to secure critical ecosystem service functions of Marsabit Forest. It's funded to the tune of € 12.64 million and is being implemented jointly by Kenya Wildlife Service and Kenya Forest Service.

The theme for this year's event as agreed upon by the National Steering Committee is **"Conserving Our Land for Sustainable Livelihoods"** and the slogan as put out by the UNCCD is **"Our Land. Our home. Our Future"**. These draw our attention to the central role productive land can play in turning the growing tide of migrants abandoning unproductive land into communities and nations that are stable, secure and sustainable, into the future. In this country the ASAL areas cover over 80% of land area with a population of about 15 million (this has been growing rapidly over the years). The national poverty level in the country is 54% while in the ASAL areas the

poverty levels stands at 84%. Over 50 % of the livestock and 70% of the wildlife is found in the dry lands indicating the importance of the drylands in the national economy. In Kenya just like the whole world, migration is high on the political agenda as some rural communities feel left behind and others flee their lands. Most migrations here in Kenya are due to search for pasture for the livestock. In Marsabit, the migrations involve Ethiopians moving to Kenya and at times Kenyans also moving to Ethiopia in search of pasture especially during droughts. The problem signals a growing sense of hopelessness due to the lack of choice or loss of livelihoods. Awareness needs to be created to emphasize that productive land is a timeless tool for creating wealth, therefore availing opportunities to conserve the land. That should form the basis all the awareness activities of commemorating this day in Kenya this year.