

Ewaso Ng'iro as a peacekeeper

Case study on wetlands, peace & security



The wetland and its people



The Ewaso Ng'iro river drains from the slopes of the Aberdares Ranges and Mount Kenya, passing through the Laikipia plateau and Archer's post, beyond which it crosses an undulating plateau where it changes in an ephemeral river to discharge its waters into the Lorian Swamp⁽⁶⁾. It then passes into Somalia and joins the Jubba River. There are several wetland areas around the river, more notably lake Ol'Bolossat, which is an important bird and biodiversity area and declared as a wetland protected area by the Kenyan government in 2018⁽¹⁾. There are several wildlife hotspots along the river, like in the Laikipia and Matthews range⁽³⁾⁽⁶⁾. It is also suggested that the Ewaso Ng'iro river and the Lorian Swamp are important for replenishing

the Merti Aquifer, the groundwater aquifer situated in the lowest part of the Ewaso Ng'iro basin⁽⁶⁾.

In the upper part of the Ewaso Ng'iro river basin, on the Laikipia Plateau, the communities who depend on the river are mostly supported by medium- and large-scale commercial horticulture farms that produce flowers and vegetables for export in perennial irrigation schemes⁽⁵⁾. In the middle and lower catchment of the river where Isiolo County is situated, people depend on the river mostly for their livestock and a source of water during dry seasons and drought periods⁽⁷⁾. Downstream, near the Lorian Swamp, and along the river in Laikipia and in the Matthews Range, land is mostly used for livestock production, consisting of a high concentration of cattle and camels. ⁽³⁾⁽⁶⁾.

Threats

The river is threatened by various factors. Climate change causes an increase of evaporation and a decrease of rainfall, which lowers the river's discharge⁽⁶⁾. Additionally, there are human impacts, water is abstracted from the river upstream, which perversely is even increased when there are severe droughts⁽⁶⁾. This leads to an increase of low discharge events into the Lorian Swamp, lowering the recharge of the Merti Aquifer in consequence, endangering the livelihoods of people who depend on boreholes into the aquifer for their water use⁽⁶⁾. Lake Ol' Bolossat has been experiencing massive shrinking as a result of human activity. In the last decade, the lake's water surface area has gone from about 10,000 ha to 3,000 ha, escalating human-wildlife conflicts as wild animals, particularly hippos, lose their habitat ⁽¹⁾. One of the most pressing threats to the hydrology of the river is the proposed Isiolo dam. Kenya's National Water Conservation and Pipeline Corporation has identified the construction of a dam in the Ewaso Ng'iro river as necessary to improve local livelihoods by providing water for domestic and livestock use, small irrigation activities, and in the future, for tourists in the proposed Isiolo Resort City⁽⁷⁾. However, dam construction could also expose herders downstream to drought, negatively affect endangered wildlife, and put the local wildlife-tourism based economy at risk⁽⁷⁾. Based on a negative EIA and local groups advocacy the original plan for the dam was put on hold but there are still plans for a dam elsewhere along the river⁽²⁾.

From environmental impact assessments, it becomes clear that the construction of the dam will have devastating effects downstream, eliminating seasonal flood pulses and reducing the amount of water available, which will likely mean long-term drought conditions for those who depend on the river as their major water source⁽⁷⁾. This will not only cost local herders 13 million USD per year, but will also negatively affect wildlife downstream and the wildlife-based tourism industry⁽⁷⁾. Kenyan youth leader Abdilatif Noor says if the water is reduced they will suffer, where he added that there will be conflict between the herders and wildlife⁽²⁾. Upstream, water availability will increase substantially, possibly creating a shift from livestock production to irrigated agriculture in Isiolo County, which may lead to activities such as livestock production and wildlife tourism struggling to compete economically⁽⁷⁾.

The river as a peacekeeper

There could be tensions between pastoralists downstream around the Lorian swamp, and horticulturalists upstream on the Laikipia plateau, since water abstraction for irrigation upstream affects the livelihoods of people downstream⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾. The perception of households in the Upper Ewaso Ng'iro North Basin is that there are already some conflicts in the area⁽⁷⁾. The commercial horticulture sector upstream is well aware of the risks of conflict over water resources in the study area. The highly visible large-scale farms are often blamed for declining river flows by other water users due to perceived inequality in water allocation⁽⁵⁾. This perceived inequality is important, since perceptions of exclusion and inequality often matter more in mobilizing people towards violence than measured inequality and exclusion⁽⁸⁾.



However, one crucial strategy to reduce this potential for conflict are water resource user associations along the river, which manage and allocate river water⁽⁵⁾. This especially since many commercial horticulturalists upstream participate in these water resource user associations⁽⁵⁾. Horticulturalists have been trying to diversify their water sources to save water for other users in the critical dry season and prevent conflict, such as catchment of rainwater or access to groundwater⁽⁵⁾. It is, however, important to note that the effect of using groundwater is yet unknown and could have its own negative externalities⁽⁵⁾.

The role of Wetlands International

Additionally, there are other associations that promote and facilitate peace along the river. One of these is facilitated by Wetlands International, where communities living along the Ewaso Ng'iro basin journey with camels to advocate for the conservation of the river while promoting a peaceful co-existence⁽⁴⁾. This initiative started in 2013 and is now held annually. During the most recent camel caravan on 14th of August 2018, more than 100 pastoralists and volunteers from Isiolo, Laikipia and Samburu counties and volunteers from Samburu, Maasai, Turkana, Borana, Rendille and Meru communities, concluded a 5 day trek along the Ewaso Ng'iro basin. Some communities started their walk at Ewaso in northern Laikipia through Odonyiro and Kipsing while the other group walked from downstream near the Lorian Swamp; both groups met mid-stream at Archer's post, in Isiolo county. Organized in conjunction with Partners for Resilience (PFR) Alliance Members in Kenya: Cordaid, Netherlands Red Cross, Red Cross Climate Centre and Wetlands International, the 2017 Camel Caravan provided a unique platform to engage with other stakeholders and create awareness about the need to conserve the Ewaso Ng'iro River. From initiatives like this, it becomes clear how rivers can create a dialogue between communities who depend on them, which makes them an important hub for keeping peace in the region.

Additionally, earlier this year, Wetlands International together with the Water Resources Authority, Mount Kenya Ewaso Water Partnership and local stakeholders developed a rational and acceptable framework for the allocation and abstraction of the water resources from one of the rivers that drain into Ewaso Ng'iro River. The Teleswani Sub-catchment Water Allocation Plan attempts to address the inherent tension in a water resource-limiting situation between the need to protect the environment, maintain the reserve and basic human rights of access to the water resources and consumptive use of the resource for economic development.

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