

## **A freshwater jewel in the Kenyan Rift Valley.**

The unique biodiversity of Lake Naivasha helps improve livelihoods of people living around the lake through ecotourism.

Designated as a Ramsar site and an important bird area, Lake Naivasha in Kenya's Rift Valley has recorded its highest water levels in the recent past.



Such levels were only witnessed perhaps 35 years ago. The fresh water is famous for scenery, birds and other animal species and attract visitors and tourists from all over the world.

There has been deforestation in its catchment areas like the Ebburu forest which has rivers that supply water to the lake. According to Fanuel Mandela, a farmer and a tree nursery attendant 'Water levels in this lake were so low in the late ninties, the lake could only be seen as a small crater at the centre, things are very different now, the lake is so full, some flower farms and buildings are already submerged' he says.

The lake which is a source of livelihood to Naivasha's population of 250,000 who depend on the lake for fishing, farming and also making products from plants like papyrus which dot part of its waters.

The fishing industry is lucrative here, according to Daniel Onyango, a fisherman who has been fishing in this lake for over 20 years, the lake levels have varied over time. He noted that despite the high water levels in the lake now, they are still getting limited fish. Most common fish species are common carp, an alien species, and Crayfish, Black Bass and Tilapia.

Aquatic birds are also an important component around the lake and a great attraction for ecotourists. The lesser and greater flamingos which are also found in soda lakes such as Natron in Tanzania and Lakes Nakuru, Elementaita, Oloiden and Sonachi Crater lake in Kenya.

At Kamere beach, located on the southern lakeside, a beehive of activities goes on. Boats dot the area, fishermen with their motorboats are ready to navigate through the waters to get fish for sale, commercial photographers with their cameras hanging on their necks. An appetizing smell of locally caught fish cooking welcomes anyone visiting this beach. Tourists of all kinds are here, both local and international. Different rates are charged for boat rides depending on the duration on tours.

Several ecosystem services are available here and visiting Hells Gate National Park is another key ecotourism activity. All these help the people here in Naivasha in their day to day lives. At Hells Gate, many locals have been employed as tour guides, some sell curio products to tourists who visit the area.

As Kenya strives to achieve its millennium development goals, poverty alleviation still remains a challenge, this can only be achieved if its people are taught on how to manage their resources in a sustainable manner and at the same time improve on their livelihoods. Ecotourism being one of them.

**Article courtesy of Mary Mwendwa, Journalist**