

By Mary Mwendwa.

Birds of prey: A key component in Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism

Birds have been integral to humans since prehistory. Perhaps the most famous environmental pollinator. Their eggs have been an important human food source since humans evolved.

However, in recent decades, human activities and settlements have brought unprecedented change to their habitats.

One of the greatest challenges to Kenya's rich wildlife heritage is that, concentrations of high biodiversity often overlap with the places where people prefer to live as well.

Raptors (birds of prey) are known to be "ecological barometers," which simply means they help us gauge how healthy a habitat is. Birds of prey are extremely sensitive to many environmental changes in an ecosystem. They can even sense chemical and pollutant levels that can give people an early warning of any impending airborne threats. Raptor populations face threats due to birds ingesting prey riddled with toxins, which in turn signals scientists that a possible problem exists.

Some of the most common raptors that are worth breath taking are: Martial Eagle, Black Kite, Osprey, Golden Eagle, Haypy Eagle, African Crowned Eagle , Peregrine Falcon ,Eurasiab Eagle Owl and vulture.

According to Dr.Munir Z.Viran , Ornithologist : “Birds of prey have a role to play in ecotourism and sustainable tourism, Africa is a critical place of birds of prey”, he notes. He refers to the African Fish Eagle commonly found around Lake Navaisha , as an indicator species (Barometer) for ecological occurrences.Lake Naivasha is a Ramasar site in Kenya , rated among

kenya's top bird watching sites .Africa has 111 diurnal species of raptors and 48 species that are nocturnal. Therefore, Africa is a critical place for birds of prey”

During a recent Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism forum in Kenya, some of the recommendations were pointed at promoting conservation of raptors among communities and tourists who visit some of their habitats. It was cited , their key population have declined , only 300 species remaining. Some of the less known species need a lot of attention and care to avoid distinction. Dr .Munir Virani, who has done a lot of studies on birds , pointed out how many people did not have basic biology and ecology of birds. This has resulted in destruction of their habitats and poisoning of their foraging places.”Vultures are the most threatened birds of prey on the planet, poachers use poison to pour on dead animals so that vultures do not send a signal of poaching .“He said.

Some African communities attach cultural beliefs to birds of prey, hence making them so vulnerable .In Kenya, owls are believed to bring bad omen of death whenever they are seen in a homestead. They are chased away with a flame to scare them completely.Margaret Akalwa, a mother of six from Elukongo Village, Vihiga county , western Kenya:”Owls are very satanic, one came on top of my house, it dint take long before I lost my husband”. Such beliefs have contributed to a decline in the owl's population. Whenever they are seen, they are chased and even killed.

Through responsible tourism, conservation can be achieved by helping and promoting activities that would allow raptor populations to increase. Ecotourism activities can help by helping in research, promoting citizen science and supporting local capacity .They also have a role of increasing public understanding of birds of prey.

So next time you travel, remember birds of prey need your support and care!

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