

The Fever Tree of Naivasha.

By Mary Mwendwa.

Believed to be the biggest single source of breathable oxygen in the atmosphere and a major source of food and medicine, trees are an important component of biodiversity which have other hidden treasures that people are not aware of. One such tree is acacia, commonly found in the Rift Valley of Kenya.

Known to many as the “yellow barked acacia” or the “fever tree,” a name that dates back to colonial times when explorers associated it with Malaria. Its wide branches, yellow barks, tiny thorns and small green leaves are attractions that cannot pass the eye. The tree naturally grows together with other trees in woodlands around Lake Naivasha. But its shallow roots make it susceptible to falling if the waters are high.

Water levels at Lake Naivasha have varied over time and as lake levels decline, left behind are the lakes banks colonized by grasses, shrubs, and then acacia trees. Currently the water levels are very high, such levels were seen some thirty years ago, according to residents here. People here enjoy fish delicacies, most common being Tilapia, crayfish and an alien species - common carp. Hippos are another wildlife attraction at the lake, as one navigates through, their heads are seen peeping through the waters.”Boating is a lucrative business here, many tourists are flocking in to enjoy the waters ", says Simon Mbugua, a boat operator at Kamere Beach.

The acacia tree has several values and uses, some that benefit the lake directly, and some that benefit people. It provides wonderful shade when the sun becomes too hot and Acacia forests provide a beautiful landscape enjoyed by visiting tourists and locals alike. The trees also reduce soil erosion.

Due to increasing population seeking employment in the growing flower farming industry around Naivasha, many settlement schemes like Kamere have come up. Many of whom benefit from the acacia tree.

Margaret Makongo, a mother of three in her mid thirties confirms to me that acacia tree is beneficial to her in several ways. She has been living at Kamere settlement scheme for the last six years and most of the time she has used firewood from fallen acacia tree to cook for her family. "The tree also gives us good shade, as you can see I am washing clothes under the acacia shade just on the riparian land of Lake Naivasha."she adds.

Next to her is Cecilia Muthoni a mother of two in her early thirties, from Kamere settlement scheme."Here at Kamere beach, we have a bee hive of activities, fishing goes on here and also we use this beach for various activities like local tourism, all benefit from the acacia shades as we dont get burnt by direct sunlight. I get firewood from acacia too, I also see birds nesting on the trees" she concludes.

The acacia tree is known to be a habitat of different bird species and insects, that form the entire ecosystem of Naivasha Basin. Flamingoes and pelicans and some of the water birds

found at Lake Naivasha. Water birds only comprise 28 per cent of the bird population around the lake. The rest depend on trees like acacia as their natural habitat. Timothy Mwinami, assistant researcher from Naivasha Basin Sustainable Initiative (NBSI) says, many bird species depend on acacia trees for nesting and foraging. The fish eagle, a bird commonly found along Lake Naivasha shores, nests on the tree. The fringing acacia woodland is a natural habitat to birds of different kinds, some rare species only found in Rift valley in Kenya for example the grey crested helmet. The commorands, sacred ibis and kingfisher, cattle egret and yellow billed stock are some of the other bird species which benefit from acacia. He further adds, insects found on the acacia act as food for the birds and this helps facilitate an increase in the breeding process of birds. "when birds have enough food, they breed more and this means that all ecological activities that are done by birds will be effective, one of them being pollination." He further explains about food production around Naivasha relies on Acacia tree during flowering season, more pollination takes place and therefore increased food production is witnessed.

However, lack of knowledge among community members on the ecological importance of the acacia tree is still a challenge. Many don't understand processes like pollination and how it works. In Naivasha some people can't relate birds and insects to their day to day livelihood or activities. Timothy emphasizes on the need for practical trainings where people need to be taught on the importance of biodiversity and how they can relate to it. This will help in boosting on their knowledge and understanding of conservation of their ecosystems.

Antelopes, giraffes, waterbucks, and zebras are just some of the animals that benefit

from this wonderful tree. Due to increased population pressure around the lake, natural resources around it are facing a serious threats due to competition from communities, many of whom are in need of energy, such as fuel for cooking. They resort using trees like acacia for firewood and charcoal hence reducing their numbers around the lake.

To avoid loss of acacia tree through this, communities should consider energy saving methods of charcoal burning. Kiln method is one such method. It covers wood with earth dug from where it fell and burns it slowly without oxygen for several days.

Also old acacia trees of over 20 years can be harvested for charcoal as long as more seedlings are planted to replace them.

Conservation of Lake Naivasha not only lies in protecting the lake from encroachment by people and industries but also protecting and restoring the fringing woodland of acacia and all wildlife that depend on them.