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## **Pride in harmonising the relationship between man and nature**

### **Eco Ethics International Kenya World Wetlands Day 2013 Report**

By Eco-Ethics International – Kenya

Wetlands are highly productive ecosystems being only second to the tropical rainforests. They perform many functions that maintain the ecological integrity of the systems and also provide many goods and services. The functions and benefits provided by wetlands are especially important for the local and global populations as they support agriculture, tourism, industry, biodiversity conservation, social economic and cultural activities. For the majority rural populations, wetlands serve as the lifeblood for both their livelihoods and social livelihoods and structures.

The Ramsar Convention defines wetlands as: areas of marsh, fen, peat land or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters. These areas may incorporate riparian and coastal zones adjacent to the wetlands, and islands or bodies of marine water deeper than six meters at low tide lying within the wetlands.

Eco Ethics international Kenya has been working towards sustainable management of Kenya's coastal and marine wetlands, protecting their ecosystem integrity as well as promoting sustainable exploitation of their goods and services. Marine and coastal wetlands, which include include coastal lagoons, rocky shores, and coral reefs, form the basis for fisheries, agricultural and tourist economic activities supporting the majority of households in coastal Kenya.

Eco Ethics International Kenya runs a formal fisheries program that seeks to reduce problems associated with artisanal fisheries in the region. This includes capacity building and training of fisher groups, infrastructural and technical support and advocacy for improved policy environment. This program has also improved coordination among stakeholders in the fisheries sector and improved environmental awareness besides promoting conservation initiatives.

The organization also runs a school-based program christened the Eco-club Program which aims at enabling young people to solve contemporary environmental problems and contribute to local and global conservation goals. The program has established 60 Eco-Clubs in schools within the coastal region with over 800 membership in such clubs. The program organizes demonstration projects such as town or beach clean-ups; organizes environmental talks by practitioners and experts; distributes information materials aimed at promoting sound concepts of environmentalism and sustainable development and; organizes celebration of days of significance to the environment. The program is therefore the single largest platform of environmental activism and learning for young people.

In preparations for this year's World Wetlands Day, Eco Ethics International Kenya received information materials from the Ramsar Convention secretariat. The information materials's copies were produced and disseminated through the already established Eco-Club Program networks. In addition we also put up a brief write-up in line with the theme; "Wetlands take care of water". This was most apt in the context of our constituents and target groups since coastal wetlands act as buffer zones between saline and fresh water in areas where they are found or sometimes provide the only fresh water around. We received overwhelming feedback from the pupils and teachers that we communicated to. This includes tapping into the full potential of wetlands' potential to provide fresh water to the residents of cities in coastal Kenya without degrading them. It is worth noting that fresh water is quite a scarce commodity in parts of this region. We also received unsolicited artworks from students depicting their understanding of the wetland environment, ecosystem functions and challenges.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2013, which was a weekend, we held a forum at the Star of the Seas Hall, a venue offered by a local primary school in Mombasa. We had unstructured discussions facilitated by Eco Ethics International project officers and attended by students from schools that included Ganjoni Primary, MM Shah school, Kongowea primary school, Sacred Heart primary school, Star of the Sea Primary School, Aldina Visram Boys secondary school, Star of the Sea Girls and St Charles Lwanga Secondaries. The participants actively exchanged ideas on the different facets of wetlands management.

The peak of the event was an informative yet very interactive session led by Mr. Muumin Ndege, a renowned environmentalist, and scholar. The experienced facilitator took the young environmentalists through the history of World Wetlands Day, the importance of wetlands particularly to economic development and other services, and why participatory and community based approaches should be adopted. Mr. Muumin argued that the problem of externalities in the water sector should be dealt with head on if the rural communities are to benefit from wetlands and wanton destruction of the same avoided.

The day also marked support for a planned trip to the Gazi mangrove forest in the south coast of Kenya. This will further enrich the understanding of the school going young people on wetlands.

### **Conclusion and next steps**

Despite having many functions, discussion and debate on wetlands is often shrouded in disjointed and unfocussed arguments since wetlands affect different sectors of the economy. Policy reviews and discussions in Kenya tend to be sector-specific. This has resulted in a growing list fragmented laws and other pieces of legislation that affect wetlands, with some being contradictory (mostly with agricultural policies that promote conversion). Thus the stakeholders neither pull together nor in the same direction.

Eco Ethics International is working with the wide spectrum of stakeholders within different forums to promote sustainable use and fair distribution and access to wetlands benefits alongside agreed on standards and principles. Eco Ethics International Kenya will continue to work towards promoting cooperation, adopting the integrated approach for continuous improvement of policy to address specific challenges in conservation of coastal wetlands while incorporating the voice, contributions, and effort of the youth, women and other stakeholders in promoting awareness and proactive action.