

Dead wood collectors turn to be illegal loggers in Tanzania's top conservancy

By Jenifer Gilla

It has been a routine for a 41-year-old Holiness Marko to wake up early in the morning to go and collect dead wood in the Kilimanjaro National Park (KINAPA), one of the country's 22 parks managed by the Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA).

Being rich in flora and fauna, the conservancy protects the largest free standing volcanic mass in the world and the highest mountain in Africa.

Holiness is one of women in Msiri Village, Marangu East ward in Moshi Rural District, Kilimanjaro Region who is allowed by authorities managing the park to only collect dead wood as a cooking energy, a move which is important for sustainable management of the park. Women like Holiness are living adjacent to the park and they are in-charge of family chores including cooking. In African perspective, women are responsible for ensuring that there is firewood in the house.

When they started things were easier as dead woods were found few meters from the park's boundary, but now they have to go inside the protected area, the situation that makes them to spend more time to collect 50 pieces of firewood.

"That's why we're waking up as early as possible so that we get into the park and get what we want on time," says Holiness who spends two hours collecting bunch of 50 pieces of firewood, unlike in the past where she spent 45 minutes on the same amount.

Holiness represents hundreds of women in the village, who rely on park, when it comes to getting firewood.

Msiri is one of 92 villages surrounding the conservancy and park management allowed women from those villages to only collect dead wood for firewood.

But, after a while, dead wood becomes scarce, the situation that pushes women to go deeper and deeper into the park, and some women are claimed to have

turned to be 'illegal loggers' as they cut down fresh trees, which is against the law.

"Women were allowed to only collect dead wood, but they cut down fresh trees, something which is unacceptable as the act poses a serious threat to the park's biodiversity. The law is very clear on this. What we did was an offer and what they do is strictly prohibited," said Imani Kikoti, KINAPA chief conservation officer.

According to him, women have been the main loggers in the park as opposed to the agreement of collecting dead wood and cut grasses.

"When we do our patrols among the 10 people we arrest, eight are women, this is sad because we're trusting them very much as compared to men," he said.

Reason for cutting trees

A 31-year-old Elinayike Mtui said that, although she has never cut wood in the conservation, she thinks that lack of access to energy leads some women to cut down trees in the area.

"In order to get enough wood you need to walk miles up the hill because there is no wood is available up there, that's why some women are persuaded to cut trees," said Mtui.

While Robson Mtui (35) claims that not allowed to enter the park all days of the week might be the reason for some women to cut down trees in the area.

According to the mother of three children, two days a week is not enough to collect wood for cooking the whole week.

"Woods you collect on Monday will not be enough for cooking until Saturday, livestock owners use the remains of dried grass for cooking when the firewood runs out, but how do those who do not have livestock survive?" she said.

Business

Mamba village Executive Officer, Charles Minja, reports that the situation is worsening in the months leading up to the festival as many cut firewoods and store them inside to sell.

"For example, logging is very common in September, they cut loads of woods and hide them inside and sell them in December where the demand is high due to festivals and confirmation ceremonies."

"September last year we arrested 5 women for the crime and handed them over to KINAPA conservation officers who took them to the police station," said Minja.

The leader thinks that some of those women are collaborating with men to achieve the goal as a woman alone cannot cut and carry a load of raw wood.

Committing crimes away from home

Msiri Executive Officer, John Mtui, admitted that women have been logging in unidentified villages to cover up for their crimes.

"It's true that women are cutting down woods and are often caught by conservationists and their pictures are shown in our meetings with KINAPA, but surprisingly you are told that they were found in your village when you have never seen them."

"If you ask me I will tell you that I have never caught a woman in this village with a raw tree, so it is possible that women from this village are also going to cut trees in other villages," he said.

Using mud

KINAPA senior conservation officer, Mapinduzi Ndesa said that sometimes women smear mud on fresh trees after cutting them to avoid being caught.

"When they smear the mud on woods it is not easy to see that they are raw, and they believe that if you see the mud you will know that it was on the floor for a long time, so you need to be very careful to fight this scourge" he explained .

Impact

Deforestation in the park allows climate change to affect Mount Kilimanjaro and recent data shows that ice on the mountain has fallen to 1.76 square meters due to global warming.

According to Kikoti the fauna are also disturbed by destroying their habitat, many decide to relocate in search of places that are friendly.

"If you visit deforested areas you will find that animals like monkeys are no longer there, because they prefer to live in wooded areas, so unless we stop them from cutting trees, all the animals will disappear from the park", he added.

Kikoti also said the crime is also affecting tourism as he explains; "Trees in this park is what motivate tourist to visit, so cutting them means we are destroying its nature and tourist will have nothing to come for".

How they stop the crime?

Education

Theonest Kagwebe, KINAPA public relations officer said: "We provide education to 92 villages in the park with an emphasis on women."

"In our good-neighborly meetings every month we provide education to women, the main reason is to convince them that this park is theirs and they are allowed to enter and collect firewood so they should not abuse their freedom."

"But there are also some mistakes that if we catch them we do not send the suspect to the police educate them instead, for example, if you find a woman with a small raw wood for the first time we educate her," said Kagwebe

Renewable energy on the way

Environmental officer in Moshi District Peter Tungu said that in collaboration with KINAPA public relations department they have developed strategies to deliver renewable energy.

“We have also conveyed affordable gas energy and in collaboration with Florest Company we trained women to make charcoal from farm waste,” said Tungu.

However, some villagers complain that the gas has not reached them.

"We only hear there is cooking gas in other villages but we don't have access to it, perhaps it could end the problem of park invasion," said Holiness.

Supporting projects

In addition to providing education, the department has also been supporting women's group projects, from the profit of the park.

"We have also funded various entrepreneurial groups to undertake development projects including providing mushroom and avocado seeds to women's groups, and we often tell them that this support is based on the benefits of the park," said Kagwebe.

Method of maintaining a culture

“The education also includes urging women to plant trees in their homes to have a clean environment but also to have natural vegetation,” he said, adding:

“You know a woman is the caretaker of the house, so the biggest influence we do on them, every time we meet is to give them seeds of plants such as apricots, coffee, cassava and we see good results.”

24 hours Patrol

KINAPA through the Department of Defense and Rescue has also set up patrols around the park to prevent illegal activities including deforestation and commercial activities within the park without permission.

The senior Conservation Officer in charge of the department, Mapinduzi Ndesa, said that a team of park rangers is working around the clock in collaboration with villagers to ensure no-poaching continues.

"We believe that by controlling deforestation activities in the reserve, we are allowing natural trees to grow well and thus control the effects of climate change," said Ndesa.

Taken to court

Women arrested in the park are referred to law enforcement agencies in accordance with the Forest Conservation Act 2002 and other related matters.

Rose Lyimo is an independent lawyer from the Moshi Resident Magistrate's Court who confirms receiving to 5 criminals a month from conservation offenses.

"Currently the number of cases of encroachment on the reserve has decreased compared to previous years, due to the sentences that have been given to people who have been violating the law.

"Here we receive no more than 5 defendants for minor offenses, not those for commercial logging, those that have been completely abolished and we usually punish them according to the Forest Conservation Act," said Rose.

The Forest Conservation Act of 2002, section 26- (a, b, s), and section 84-5, provide for a penalty of not less than Sh.30,000 and not more than 1m/-or imprisonment not exceeding two years or for both fines and imprisonment.

Challenges

As they say, good things have challenges, just as in the fight against deforestation in the park; they face a number of challenges including overcrowding.

"You know this park is surrounded by 92 villages so 'controlling' all the residents not to invade the park is a big job, so the soldiers have to do extra work," said Ndesa.

However, Ndesa is grateful to some of the villagers surrounding the park who work closely with them by informing them they see signs of forest invasion, making it easier for them to work.

According to conservationist Kikoti, climate change has affected the park, as so far the ice on Mount Kilimanjaro has decreased to 1.76 square kilometers, so enough native trees are needed to combat the situation.

Ends