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Community participation

An economic initiative that's also green

The Kakamega forest is the last remaining Guineo-Congolian rainforest in Kenya. A community-based group has worked out alternative incomes from the forest in a bid to save this ecosystem. They grow a tulsi variety native to the region, from which essential oil is extracted and marketed helping the community, reports Keya Acharya

In western Kenya, deep in a dark forest called Kakamega that echoes with the raucous calls of silver-casqued hornbills, 50 year-old Benjamin Okalo speaks with passion of their richness and his community's efforts to save them. Kakamega is the last remaining Guineo-Congolian type of rainforest left in Kenya.

In 1800, Kakamega was over 240,000 hectares of rainforest; today it is less than 23,000 ha. Yet it still holds over 400 species of plants, has over 70 per cent of Kenya's butterflies, over 400 species of birds of which 200 are purely forest species, and 40 species of snakes, 18 of which are endemic.

Okalo is the chairman of the Kakamega Environmental Education Program (KEEP), with 300 members from the villages surrounding the forests. The group, with activity-leaders who were once deft poachers in this very same forest, has banded together to form a successful community-based organisation that has worked out alternative incomes from the forests in a bid to save this fragile ecosystem.

The education programme has a host of income-related activities: butterfly farming, nature tourism huts, a tree-nursery, beekeeping, manufacturing herbal drugs from forest plants and the successful growing and marketing of ocimum kilimandscharicum, a species of tulsi native to Kakamega. Each activity has a different user-group set up, with a leader in charge of the operations.

Serving as a role model

"Maybe we can become a role model," says Okalo, "so that the community can change for something better."



Skirting through tiny mud tracks bet-ween the bushes of tea bordering the forests, an expanse of cultivated green, the ocimum kilimandscharicum opens up. The plot belongs to 55-year-old Meshack Akweyu. "I get 90,000 shillings (one Kenyan shilling is about 57 paise) per year from this crop. I harvest every four months and get 30,000 Ksh," he says. The plant needs no extra watering, irrigation or external fertilisers, taking six months from seed to

first harvest.

The plant's essential oil is extracted and used for medicinal and aromatic purposes. The programme has another group within the community that runs the oil-extraction factory, a method that uses distillation for extracting the essence. The factory has been set up with the help of Swiss NGO Bio-Vision, based in Zurich. The oil is used in traditional medicine for coughs, colds and chest congestions, as mosquito-repellent, pesticide and flavouring agent. In the field, Akweyu removes old plants every fourth year and re-plants seedlings. The plots are fairly labour-intensive, needing weeding and harvesting, but with the money earned, hiring help is an affordable chore. Being an indigenous plant, soils have remained healthy. No external inputs like fertiliser and watering are needed.

"Before this, I was always being arrested for taking firewood and grass from the forest," says Akweyu. "Now I am rich enough to afford three wives," he says proudly.

Signs of progress



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another village, Marita Elawa Lumiti sits with two small children who help her remove the leaves from harvested branches. "My daughter studied upto Form IV thanks all to this plant," she says. Most rural Kenyans are both literate and English-speaking, the latter due to the several Christian missions in the Kenyan countryside.

Lumiti has a one-acre plot, earning 7000 Ksh every harvest. She sells the leaves to the distillation

factory.]What is significant is that the factory and the entire process is run by the community's Mulira Farmers' Conservation group, one of the several that KEEP has divided itself into. The leaves are first sorted according to size, weighed and the farmer paid accordingly. A log book meticulously notes down the farmer's name, amount of leaf, payment and date.

The leaf then takes four days to dry, spread out on trays much like in a tea factory, but without electric blowers for drying. The leaves are then packed into 30-kg sacks.

The distillation room can handle 10 kgs of leaf per process, extracting 200-300 gms of essential oil from the leaf. The entire process, from steaming to decanting takes three hours. An ideal economic initiative that is happily environmental; one that would stand us in good stead too in India.

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Movie Guide



Ullasa Utsaha, a Kannada film starring Ganesh and Hindi TV actress Yami Gautam. Thyagaraj is the producer of the film.

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