

Kenya pens in trees to save water lifeline

East Africa drought

Fences are the latest tool being deployed to protect the forests vital for catching vapour, writes

Katrina Manson

A fence might not seem the most obvious solution to a water crisis, but it is among Kenya's hopes in a battle against a drought that is affecting more than 12m people across east Africa.

A 400km fence – the result of a 20-year fundraising effort by a charity in partnership with the Kenyan government – encircles the Aberdare Conservation Area, home to 3,000 elephants and some of the world's last remaining bongo antelopes. It is a favourite destination for thousands of sightseers, who come to see the treetop lodge where Princess Elizabeth became queen upon hearing of the death of her father George VI while she was visiting Kenya in 1952.

Aberdare's greatest value, however, lies not in tourism but in its role as one of Kenya's five "water towers" – forested uplands that "catch" vapour and help generate rainfall.

Millions of people rely on the water that flows from these green hills, including smallholder farmers, northern herders and families in Nairobi, as well as commercial tea and flower industries.

Hydroelectricity accounts for 58 per cent of national power supply. Scientists put the value of water from the forested hills at \$130m a year, according to an environmental assessment published by the UN environment agency this month.

The fence, which pens in trees and wildlife and keeps people and cattle out, is a key part of efforts to secure Kenya's water supply. Better management of the ecosystem by the use of fences such as at Aberdare is crucial to encourage rainfall and boost rivers in a region that faced alternate drought and flooding, say environmentalists.

"The condition of forests themselves can have an influence on... extreme [weather] events," the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation said in a report last month. It added that deforestation and poor management could increase flooding and landslides during heavy rains.

Colin Church, of Rhino Ark, a charity that started the project at Aberdare, said: "The fence is just a tool. The whole point is management. These water towers can't just be left."

The \$9.3m electrified fence has contributed to an increase in forest cover.

Despite a presidential ban on felling trees on state land, illegal logging has long depleted forests. Deforestation has caused severe degradation of watersheds, increasing erosion and silting, reducing river flow and



Highland corral: elephants at the Aberdare Conservation Area, where a 400km fence encircles trees and wildlife and keeps out people and cattle

Alamy

disrupting hydropower.

According to the UN-funded environmental assessment, the fence has allowed indigenous forest cover to increase by more than 20 per cent in the five years to 2010 by deterring loggers and farmers and allowing the land to regenerate. As a result, Aberdare's rivers are "more stable" than those

of nearby Mount Kenya. Stephen Kusero, who grew up amid bamboo forests that have long since disappeared, is one of about 40,000 farmers who have plots beside the new fence. He used to beat drums to scare off the elephants, monkeys and bushbuck that regularly destroyed his plot of cabbage, carrots and kale.

"The fence is a gift to the community all around. Formerly, we couldn't harvest anything – the animals were consuming the whole food crop. But [since] the fence came, no animals are coming to our farms," said Mr Kusero at a seedling nursery.

Now that it is better

protected for farming, local land prices have quadrupled. Mr Kusero's community, one of eight who helped to build the fence, has planted 92,100 trees in the forest in the past five years. Farmers have also been encouraged to take up everything from beekeeping to fish farming to take pressure off the forest.

Rhino Ark and the Kenyan government now want to build fences around Mount Kenya and at Mau Mount Eburu, another important water catchment area. The government has committed funds for these new fences, and last month pledged \$150m for

irrigation and rainwater harvesting throughout the north, where herders face a food crisis as livestock die and grazing pasture dwindle away. Kenya has already planted more than 455m trees as part of a Kenyan-inspired global effort that began in 2007 to plant a billion trees every year.

Long-term, however, environmentalists say Kenya will manage scarce water only when Kenyans pay more for it. "Water is one of those commodities that people have taken for granted. If the price of water reflected its value, then people would respect it," said Barney Barrow, director of

Eco Centric Kenya, an environmental consultancy. He said higher usage fees should be channelled back into protection of ecosystem services and the water they provide. He added: "The sad truth is Kenyans will not realise the value of water until they are fighting each other over it."

Long-term, however, environmentalists say Kenya will manage scarce water only when Kenyans pay more for it. "Water is one of those commodities that people have taken for granted. If the price of water reflected its value, then people would respect it," said Barney Barrow, director of

Eco Centric Kenya, an environmental consultancy. He said higher usage fees should be channelled back into protection of ecosystem services and the water they provide. He added: "The sad truth is Kenyans will not realise the value of water until they are fighting each other over it."

Long-term, however, environmentalists say Kenya will manage scarce water only when Kenyans pay more for it. "Water is one of those commodities that people have taken for granted. If the price of water reflected its value, then people would respect it," said Barney Barrow, director of

Eco Centric Kenya, an environmental consultancy.

He said higher usage fees should be channelled back into protection of ecosystem services and the water they provide. He added: "The sad truth is Kenyans will not realise the value of water until they are fighting each other over it."

VIDEO ONLINE

Katrina Manson visits a project in Kenya that aims to prevent deforestation. The mountain forests, or 'water towers', supply everything from hydroelectric power to Nairobi's domestic water

www.ft.com/towers

Somalia bars aid staff from rebel zone

Somalia has banned foreign aid workers and journalists from entering areas controlled by al-Shabaab insurgents after members of a Turkish charity took food to a famine-hit area under the Islamist group, reports Reuters in Mogadishu.

Nearly all aid agencies have already barred their expatriate workers from operating in Somalia as famine grips the country, because of the risk of kidnapping. Hardline militants linked to al-Qaeda control most of the south after retreating from the capital.

However, Somali security forces briefly detained two Turks last Tuesday who went to an al-Shabaab area to deliver food to famine sufferers, and prevented others along with a group of journalists from doing so later in the week.

"We want the starving Somalis in al-Shabaab areas to be fed but we do not want the foreign workers to meet al-Shabaab," Mohammed Ahmed Nur, Mogadishu's mayor and governor, said. "Let the foreign aid workers hand over relief food to local NGOs, which can deliver to the drought victims in al-Shabaab areas. The government is responsible for the security of foreign aid workers."

A large part of Somalia is suffering famine, which the UN says has put 750,000 people at risk of starvation, with hundreds of Somalis dying each day.

Al-Shabaab banned food aid last year in the areas it controls in the south and kicked out many groups.

Aid agencies say they have been unable to reach more than 2m Somalis facing starvation in rebel-held territories. Some local aid agencies are allowed to deliver aid to these areas, but that is not enough for all those who need it.

Sponsors of:

RETAIL BECOMING TAILOR MADE.



Retail signs that adjust to people's gender and age. Virtual catalogs showing entire collections. Innovations making shopping as personal as style. At Intel, we're working on technologies that will transform retail, as well as healthcare, energy, transportation and education. Because sponsoring tomorrow starts today.

intel.com/inside

Sponsors of Tomorrow.™ 