

mainfeature / - WITH GARDY CHACHA

Why Kenya ought to work hard on forest conservation

The United Nations requires that each country achieves at least 10 per cent forest cover.

Going by this threshold, Kenya still has a long way to go as the most recent data from Kenya Forest Service (KFS) indicates our forest cover is at 6.6 per cent.

The exact numbers are not available but many environmentalists believe that Kenya's forest cover was well above 10 per cent at independence.

Clearing land for agriculture, uncontrolled lumbering and charcoal burning are among human activities that have been blamed for deforestation.

The result of deforestation over the years, offered Professor Bridgitte Nyambo of International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) in an interview last year, is climate change, "which now threatens food security and livelihoods."

Trees hold soil structure together and contribute humus content in the soil making farming possible.

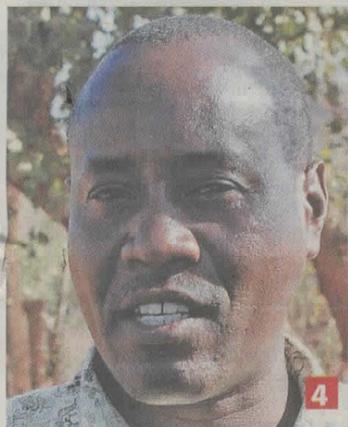
"Trees provide a huge carbon sink for greenhouse gases. The more trees we have the better for the planet and human survival. Less greenhouse gases in the atmosphere would mean less possibility of global warming and hence less erratic climatic patterns," offers Nyambu.

When teaching his students, Festus Ngau, of Muthwani Primary School asks his students to plant trees within their homesteads.

"Our land is arid. We don't get as much rain as other places in Kenya where forest cover is good. And so we suffer from constant water shortage. A good tree cover will improve our chances of being water secure. Everyone therefore has to plant trees for our communities to survive," he says.

In previous interview with Alex Lemarkoko of Kenya Forestry Service (KFS) it became apparent that destruction of trees in Kenya led to extinction of unique plant and animal species.

"The environment grew harsh by the day and that needs to change," he said. "It will be a difficult journey. But for the future of our communities we have to work hard to achieve the desired forest cover."



4. Julius Mwanjai, a tree specialist who is part of the afforestation project.

5. Hellen Mwaniki, head teacher at Mashamba primary school

6. Pupils of Mashamba Primary in Embu stand next to one of the trees they planted.

[PHOTOS: GARDY CHACHA/STANDARD]

because of complacency. If we all did, the tree cover in Kenya would be fairly high," she says.

When she was a young school going girl, Hellen recalls, tree cover in Embu was impressive. But that was probably because forest areas were used as sacred shrines, she points out.

"Today people want to satisfy financial demands. People want to sell charcoal and timber. Or do something else with trees to make money," she says.

The result is evidenced in many parts of Kenya: bare land with nothing much than struggling shrubs.

Hellen looks at the pupils involved in GIC as change makers; the ones applying the first ink in changing the narrative of deforestation.

"Attitudes have to change regarding how trees are used. As the population grows so does the impact humans have on trees. If we don't plant more trees than we are cutting then it becomes difficult to maintain economic activities directly linked to trees," offers James Mwaniki, of Bet-

ter Globe Forestry.

For Patrick Kyeli, the teacher running the project at Masukanoni Primary school in Kitui, the trees currently being nurtured will impact the lives of coming generations.

"If I won't be here when the trees have grown to maturity, those who benefit will be our children and their children. What I hope that this proj-

ect achieves is to change how the whole community looks at trees," he says.

GIC aims at improving forest cover in the three counties with five tree species: three wood varieties and two fruit species. One hundred and twenty schools are involved with each receiving at least 300 seedlings.

Largely arid or semi-arid, Eastern Kenya suffers the ravages of a hot climate. The scorching sun above barely allows any plants to flourish. It is not shocking that trees have a sparse pattern with some places having no trees at all.

And so we were pleasantly shocked to find schools where pupils genuinely engage in tree-planting: watering, tending to and mulching them to ensure survival.

Scanning over the landscape all one sees is a hue of brown: scorched leaves that somehow blend with earth. "We want greenery all around. It will be so good to come to school and walk on green grass and play around healthy green trees," Mutunga says.

