



## **Eco-mapping and intergenerational knowledge transfer for conservation of kaya forests**

Kayas are sacred forests of the Mijikenda people who reside along the Kenyan coast. The forests are considered to be an intrinsic source of ritual power and the origin of cultural identity. They are also a place of prayer and traditional rites and are regarded as the ancestral homes of the Mijikenda people.



*Community-led tree planting at Kaya Fungo*

In 2019 the Institute for Culture and Ecology (ICE) supported by the Global Environment Facility, Small Grant Programme (GEF-SGP) of UNDP, embarked on a project that harnesses indigenous knowledge for rehabilitation of the Mijikenda Sacred Kaya Forests, which are not only a vital element of the beautiful Coastal landscape, but also a cultural and national heritage. The project's long term goal is to enhance biodiversity conservation through participatory community initiatives targeting three Kaya forests namely; Rabai, Fungo (Giriama) and Jibana, which collectively cover about 924 hectares. The three sacred forests are located in Kilifi County and are recognized internationally as World Heritage Sites (WHS). Kaya forests face a number of challenges which are a threat to local communities' livelihoods, as well as the critical biodiversity they host. The threats largely emanate from erosion of traditional and cultural attachment and indigenous knowledge; encroachment on Kaya forestlands for farming; illegal logging for

timber and charcoal burning; subsistence quarrying or sand scooping in kaya vicinities; and commercial bio-prospecting leading to forest degradation.

Harnessing and validation of indigenous knowledge is achieved through introduction of eco-cultural mapping processes. This is a community mapping process that brings together cultural custodians of the target Kayas and community members, including women and youth, to engage in dialogue and to draw maps that capture community indigenous knowledge, local resources and community aspirations of the past, the present and the future.



*Elders, Women and youth participating at an eco-cultural mapping exercise in Kilifi County*

The process of developing the eco-cultural maps fosters a collaborative reflection by community on their resources, indigenous knowledge and biodiversity and are able to recognize how they have been affected over the years. In addition, the process encourages community members to strategize on the rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems and diversification of livelihoods, while intergenerational transfer of knowledge among elders and youth occurs. Tapping into traditional indigenous knowledge augurs well for the conservation efforts as well as upholding cultural practices.



*Map of past of Rabai Kaya developed by community members through participatory process*

In response to the challenges occasioned by COVID -19, elders from Kaya Fungo conducted a ritual at the Kaya to pray for the community, for Kenya and for the entire world. This was part of an annual ritual ceremony, that brings together elders, women and youth to pray and to conduct religious activities. However, due to the pandemic, the timing of each activity and the number of attendants were regulated, and supervised by the local administrative office. The event ended with the planting of indigenous tree seedlings in degraded areas.



ICE is a national non-governmental organization registered in Kenya in 2006 under the NGO Coordination Act. ICE was founded out of a visible need to promote the inherent and natural role of culture in environmental and resource management in Kenya. For over 10 years, ICE has been implementing similar projects across 7 counties in Kenya through supporting community-led conservation initiatives and promoting agro-ecological farming practices.

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