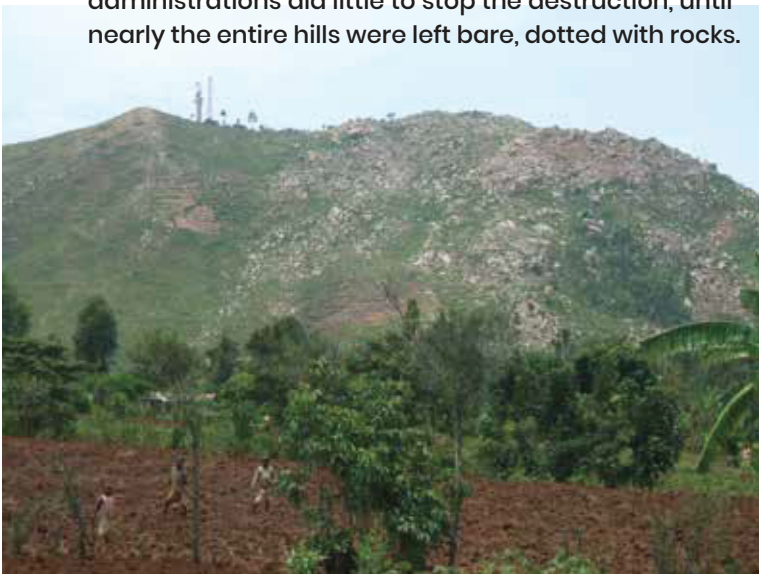


FAITH BASED ORGANIZATIONS CONTRIBUTING TO RESTORATION OF MARAGOLI HILLS ECOSYSTEM

Coordinated by the Catholic Diocese of Kakamega, Faith based Organizations (FBOs) in Vihiga county have come together to support rehabilitation efforts of Maragoli Hills. With support from UNEP Faith for Earth through WWF Beliefs and Values Program (BVP), the FBOs are bringing on board spiritual motivation and contributing their own land for restoration through tree growing. So far, 15 faith groups have committed to growing trees on at least 20 acres of their land – including in their schools and places of worship.

Background Information

Maragoli Hills form a dominant environmental feature in Vihiga County, covering an expansive 469.3 ha of degraded land with near-bare rocks. Until the early 1990s, the Hills were a healthy natural forest, rich in biodiversity and a source of many springs and streams feeding into Lake Victoria. In the years leading to 2000, a lot of destruction occurred in the forest – with more than 300ha of the forest cut down – largely due to compromised administrators and pressure from local communities for firewood and timber. Over the years that followed, successive administrations did little to stop the destruction, until nearly the entire hills were left bare, dotted with rocks.



A scenic view of the Maragoli hills

Rich Cultural Heritage and Tourist Attraction

The Maragoli Hills ecosystem has numerous caves, most significant of which are the Mungoma Caves, believed to be the original homestead of Mulogoli – the father of the Maragoli sub-tribe that is dominant in Vihiga County. The caves are a site for cultural rituals by the Maragoli community, linking the past and the present. It is here that Maragoli elders bless their leaders, besides being a popular tourist attraction. To many Christians the Hills are called “the prayer mountain” – because some sections at the top of the hills were popular for religious activities such as observing quiet time, prayers and retreats. With the massive destruction of the sites, this function has nearly vanished. The hill-tops in the ecosystem are also strategic for hiking, bird watching adventures and offer panoramic scenic viewpoints to the Nandi Hills, Miwani Plains, Ndere and Maboko Islands on Lake Victoria.



Culturally, the forest provided a site for such important activities as circumcision and other initiation ceremonies. Young men lived in the forest after circumcision, awaiting “graduation” after a couple of weeks. While in the forest, they depended on wild game, fruits and herbs for food. With the depletion of the forest cover there are now fewer and shortened passage ceremonies. The ceremonies were important for transmission of indigenous knowledge on environmental care as well as pass on the cultural heritage of the local community – as the elders spent time with the younger generation.

Past Rehabilitation Efforts

In the last 2 decades, there have been numerous interventions by different stakeholders (such as civil society organizations and government agencies) to restore Maragoli Hills, but most of them yielded limited results due to:

a) Inadequate Consultation and Involvement of the Local Community

Local community was largely left out during the planning, and only got involved at the implementation stage, when they were invited to participate in tree planting events. This led to hostility against the interventions, and little could be achieved in the long-term, largely because the local communities had no ownership of the initiatives.

b) Tree Planting instead of Tree Growing

Initial interventions did not adequately consider after-care activities for inclusion in the entire tree growing cycle. Practices such as weeding, watering and protection against damage were not carried out – leading to low survival of trees. The young trees either dried up during dry seasons, were damaged by livestock through deliberate grazing by local communities, or were uprooted by locals who wanted land for agriculture.

c) Land Ownership Disputes

The local community members claimed ownership of some sections of the hills, and demanded compensation if they were to release their land for rehabilitation. The government on the other hand held that some title deeds had been acquired irregularly, hence evictions were inevitable. This fueled hostility and resistance between the community and government.

d) Disagreement on Species of Trees to Grow

The government proposed planting indigenous tree species to restore the hills, while the local communities within and around the hills insisted on fruit trees (such as mangoes, papaws and avocados) – but it was not clear who would harvest the fruits or benefits shared out without conflicts arising.

Current Rehabilitation Efforts

There are already some efforts by various stakeholders (including the Kenya Forest Service (KFS), Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), the Kenya Water Towers Agency (KWTA) and Equity bank) – all working with the community forest associations (CFAs) within the ecosystem.

These efforts are bearing some positive fruits, after the county government of Vihiga facilitating involvement of the local community throughout the entire tree growing cycle. For instance, at Angoya site, the local community took an active role in the planning and implementation of restoration activities – leading to 85% survival of some 40,000 seedlings planted in May 2021.

The County government has also put up an office facility at Gilwatsi to coordinate restoration activities – which include promoting on-farm forestry.

The county government of Vihiga is encouraging and supporting the local communities to establish and manage tree nurseries, from which seedlings will be bought, thereby serving as a source of income to them.

Faith based Approach to Rehabilitation of Maragoli Hills

The Catholic Diocese of Kakamega has signed an MOU with the County government of Vihiga to restore 5 acres of the Maragoli Hills. With support from UNEP Faith for Earth through WWF Beliefs and Values programme, at least 15 faith groups have been mobilized into forming a faith network to support the restoration through tree growing.

The KFS, the county department of environment and the CFAs within the hills have joined forces with the FBOs to ensure success of the initiative. The county government of Vihiga, through the forestry department, is supporting awareness raising efforts through public meetings with the local communities on the need for conservation, in line with Vihiga County Environment Action Plan (CEAP) 2021 – 2025 – which pledges to improve environmental governance by ensuring involvement of all stakeholders – including local communities, NGOs and private sector.

The restoration efforts are being guided by the Maragoli Hills Sub-catchment Management Plan (SCAMP) developed by the local Water Resource Users Association (WRUA) and CFAs, with support from the Water Resources Authority. In this regard, the Diocese is mobilizing and coordinating other faith actors within the diocese to collaborate in the restoration of the Ecosystem, under the Kenya Faith Tree Growing Initiative (KFTGI) – a national network of faith actors committed to ecosystem restoration through tree growing, with the Catholic Diocese as a member. So far, the following FBOs have been mobilized: Muslims under the Supreme Council Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) and National Muslim Leaders Forum (NAMLEF), Friends Church of Kenya, Anglican Church of Kenya and Anglican Development Services, African Nineveh Israel Church, African Divine Church,

The Salvation Army, Pentecostal Assemblies of God, Church of God, and Kaimosi University of Science and Technology

In order to ensure success of the rehabilitation initiative; the Diocese has put the following measures in place:

- i.) Leveraging her leadership structures present at the grassroots (parish and Jumuia level) to bring on board other faith actors on board, and to work closely with the local communities, as opposed to the top-down approach that was previously adopted by the state.
- ii.) Promotion of on-farm tree growing as a strategy to ease pressure on the hills, as members of the local communities can meet most of their wood (such as firewood) and none wood products from their farms.
- iii.) Incorporation of fruit trees on farmlands around the targeted site to support livelihoods Some of the harvested fruits will be consumed at home hence contribute to nutrition of the family. The surplus will be sold locally thus contributing to household income, from which funds can be used to support education and other needs).
- iv.) Adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, bringing together state agencies, other faith communities, private sector, technical NGOs and local community groups.

Key Outcomes

The following are the key outcomes of the on-going project:

- i.) A multi-faith network has been formed – comprising 15+ faith actors from the county, working within the existing structures of the grassroot interfaith council. Although initially comprising groups from around Maragoli Hills, it is set to grow into a county-wide network.



Representatives of FBOs from the interfaith network on environment and other stakeholders



Tree planting by faith actors in Maragoli Hills



Community Tree Nursery launched and established

ii.) Capacity building in ecosystem restoration – at least 30 faith leaders from key faith groups, 10 teachers from primary and 5 teachers from secondary school environmental clubs have been trained on sustainable tree growing using the Faith Tree Growing Guide developed by WWF BVP, UNEP Faith for Earth and Trillion Trees (can be accessed here https://www.fint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wwf_trillion_trees___tree_growing_for_conservation_and_ecosystem_restoration_guide_d.pdf).

Participating faith leaders committed to growing at least 500 trees in each of the schools (as small woodlots and hedge-grows) they sponsor or have influence, as well as within compounds of their places of worship for shade, beauty and other benefits. The schools will serve as model centres for tree growing within their localities.

iii.) Tree nursery establishment – a central tree nursery has been established at Ideleri Friends School to supply at least 20,000 seedlings per year for the restoration work. The seeds were sourced from the Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI), which collaborates with the Diocese closely, offering technical support such as on site-species matching. Two teachers, 5 faith leaders and 30 pupils (the youth) of the host school's eco-club are already undergoing a skills-transfer hands-on training in nursery establishment and management, as a sustainability measure.

iv.) Governance – shared roles among stakeholders – the County environment department is creating awareness and building capacity of the faith network and general public on the link between creation care and climate change, as pledged in the County Environment Action Plan (CEAP) 2021 – 2024.

This flyer was developed in August, 2023, following the launch of the Faith-based Maragoli Hills Rehabilitation flagship project. For more information, please contact the WWF UK Head of Beliefs and Values Programme at CElkin@wwf.org.uk

The county government is also fencing off the gazetted Maragoli ecosystem for purposes of protection, and implementing community policing on the forest. Faith leaders resolved to use their regular meetings at places of worship to raise awareness on environmental conservation through mainstreaming conservation messages in their sermons, and rally the local community to support the restoration efforts. Based on the Vihiga County Climate Change Policy (2018 – 2022), the county environment department is creating awareness on climate change – the causes, effects/impacts, resilience, and adaptation.

Voices from Maragoli Hills

The following were key sentiments from religious leaders: *“We must conserve the hills because its degradation has affected our religious practices. As Pentecostal Christians we believe in baptism by total immersion in running water. That is no longer possible here because the water levels in our streams and rivers are very low most of the year; it means going far to look for deeper waters”* – Rev. Derek Wawire – Word of Faith Ministries.

“Water is essential for Islamic worship; we need it every time. But as a Muslim I have never taken deep thought about growing trees to enhance its availability until today. I will rally my fellow Muslims to grow more trees” – Shiekh Ali – Chairperson, Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya – Vihiga County.

“The environment is our Mother and we must take care of Her; otherwise, she will turn back on us with unpleasant repercussions” – Fath. Boniface Mmbwanga – Coordinator, CJPD – Catholic Diocese of Kakamega.