

Evictees now join forest rehabilitation efforts

BY KEVIN TUNOI

As you scale the chilly, misty slopes of the Embobut forest you can hear thudding, whistling and humming from a distance.

As you near the source of the sounds, a burly silhouette figure appears. It is Johnston Labore.

Around him are men and women busily digging holes where some 14,000 indigenous tree and fruit seedlings will be planted.

The diggers are evictees of Embobut forest. They were forced out by the Government to pave way for the forest's reclamation.

It appears the evictees have accepted their fate and decided to offer their time and energy towards the forest's rehabilitation as they await the Government to resettle them.

Labore's team also comprises Embobut residents, Kenya Forest Service (KFS) wardens and scouts.

"This is not how the Embobut forest was in 2008. We have volunteered to restore the forest, which is part of the greater Cherangany hills, one of the five major water towers in Kenya, to its former grandeur," said Labore.

Changed livelihood

The former chief says the evictees finally realised that they were in real sense degrading an important natural resource.

"The people that have been expelled from the forest had initially been hunters and gatherers, but with the population explosion their activities changed to that of intensive farmers thus destroying the forest," he said.

With the number of the hunters and gatherers within the forest rising, the animals providing food and honey diminished leading to a change in food production.

"They started farming, cutting down trees and burning charcoal for survival. Over time, this led to the massive destruction of the forest," said Labore.

The evictees, some of who were forcefully moved out of the forests, have acquired permits and have resettled into the glades, outside the forest perimeter.

Glades are areas in the forest that do not allow any vegetation save for grass and shrubs to grow

on. There are seven of them within the Cherangany forest eco-system.

Labore said the evictees have now voluntarily moved away from the gazetted forest area to Kesom, Koropkei and Kapterwai glades, which are on the lower side, and Kamologon, Kapkok, Kabusien, Sinen and Kewabus, on the upper section.

Gabriel Kibor, a forest ranger in charge of operations in Embobut, says through dialogue and not force, the residents have accepted the Government directive to resettle them in the eight glades within the forest.

Indigenous trees

The residents of Embobut are now replanting indigenous trees on the land they formerly degraded.

Despite the progress they are making in the rehabilitation of the forest, Timothy Chebet, the head of KFS scouts, says there are a few people who still go back to forest.

"We have had to take stern action on some villagers who still go back to the gazetted area to burn charcoal or cut down trees for firewood," said Chebet.

He applauded the progress that he and his entire team have made as they try to curb destruction.

The KFS also owes its success to the help of Community Road Empowerment (Core), a non-governmental organisation, funded by Toyota motor company.

The organisation are at the forefront of the rehabilitation project and have sensitised the evictees on the importance of the forest to the Kenyan eco-system.

"Core is hiring labourers at between Sh250 and Sh500 per day. The workers, most of whom are evictees from the forest, dig holes and replant the indigenous tree seedlings," said Joseph Cheserek, a resident.

Long term project

He adds: "With the income, they refrain from going back to the forest for charcoal burning where a bag goes at a throwaway price of between Sh200 and Sh250."

Kiyoshi Kita, the chief executive officer of Core, says his organisation provides training, funds and materials like hoes, wheelbarrows, knapsacks and paper tubes for the



Members of Chebara springs and water conservation groups' tree nursery working on the tree and fruit seedlings. (PICTURE: KEVIN TUNOI)



Forest rangers oversee tree seedlings replanting at the Embobut forest. RIGHT: Former chief Johnston Labore with the head of operations in the forest, Gabriel Kibor. (PICTURES: KEVIN TUNOI)



labourers.

"This is a long-term project since before the seedlings mature it will have taken a lot of time but in the long run it will benefit the evic-

tees and maintain the eco-system," said Kita.

He added that with the sensitive issue of global warming, residents should conserve the water tower.