

Eco-cultural mapping of Kathita river



10th – 21st April, 2011

Tharaka South district,
Kenya.

Tharaka district



Tharaka District is one of the seventy-one districts of Kenya located in the country's Eastern Province.

It's ecosystem and culture is that of Kenya's semi-arid areas where people balance livestock keeping, cultivation and non-farm activities.

Drought conditions are a recurrent source of strain on the ecosystem and households.

The region is mostly low, hilly, with soils that are sandy and stony. There is some forest cover, but the landscape is widely covered by gullies and uncontrolled soil erosion. Rainfall is erratic and crop failure is frequent. Catchment areas have been destroyed as more land is opened to agriculture, charcoal burning, quarrying and sand harvesting. This has led to reduced water levels, increased pollution of water and human conflict with wildlife. The district also suffers from a history of government neglect, and the communities struggle with social and ecological challenges. It is in this kind of setting that community members converged at Marimanti Girls secondary school in the district for ten days in which they would be involved in mapping the ecosystem along Kathita River.

Why Kathita river?

Kathita is a river that is close to the heart of the people of Tharaka. It has over 10 sacred sites along its course and is a tributary of the larger Tana River in Eastern Kenya, which has its source in Mount Kenya and flows through Tharaka District. It provides irrigation for this rural community who depend on agriculture and livestock for their subsistence. Over the years however, catchment areas have been destroyed as more land is opened to agriculture, charcoal burning and sand harvesting. This has led to reduced water levels, increased water pollution and human conflict with wildlife. It is also a river with many sites of cultural, spiritual and ecological importance for the people of Tharaka.



The mapping exercise

Eco - cultural maps are a graphic representation of community land that is used to reconnect communities to the order of their territory, to draw out the ecological knowledge of the elders, to build a common understanding and to lay the foundation for community ecological governance. It is a simple visual tool used to engage the community in thinking about their ecosystem.

The mapping involved One hundred and twenty (120) community members who comprise the Eight (8) communities that live along the sacred sites of Kathita River. After dividing them into groups, they were given plain pieces of paper and coloured pens to map their territory. Each of the groups were asked to come up with three maps; that of the past, the present and the future.



They were led by the elders who are custodians of knowledge especially in drawing the map of the past. These three maps helps engage the community in critical thinking about the environmental challenges facing them.

As the maps came to life, so did their thinking. They probed the elders that came before them for the map of the past; and probed each other on what they visualized as the map of the future. Apart from the local community others involved were; mapping trainers, community mobilisers, trainers from Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa; Colombia and the UK

The response

Isabella Kaguna is an ICE volunteer working with a group in Tharaka that helps in conservation of Ntugi hill one of the sacred sites in Tharaka. Having been part of the process, she is fired up to go back and draw many more maps on their areas of interest that they deal with as a group. She was also enriched by the interaction with other communities from other parts of the world. Her biggest motivation was being able to truly appreciate that cultural values and practices are an integral part of people the world over.



"Now we learn that people all over the world have their culture too and we should never be embarrassed at our very own culture"

Isabella Kaguna
ICE Volunteer

The maps were then presented to the community members for a discussion among themselves. By looking at the map of the past and that of the present, the eco-system looked very different. Trees had been cut off; much of the vegetation that was in the past was no longer there, making the land bare. Also of note was that the wild fruits that used to grow along the river banks had completely disappeared. The map of the past also reinforced the respect that the young had for the elders and that the disconnect in the map of the present had been caused by this disorder. Without this ancestral connection they realized they could not reclaim their land. It is now up to the people of Tharaka, led by the knowledge of the elders to start reclaiming the lost glory of their land.



Community member presenting a map



Women dance to a cultural tune