

2021 WORLD WETLANDS DAY:

CONSERVE WATER FOR BETTER HEALTH

UPSTREAM OR DOWNSTREAM; WE ARE ALL CONNECTED

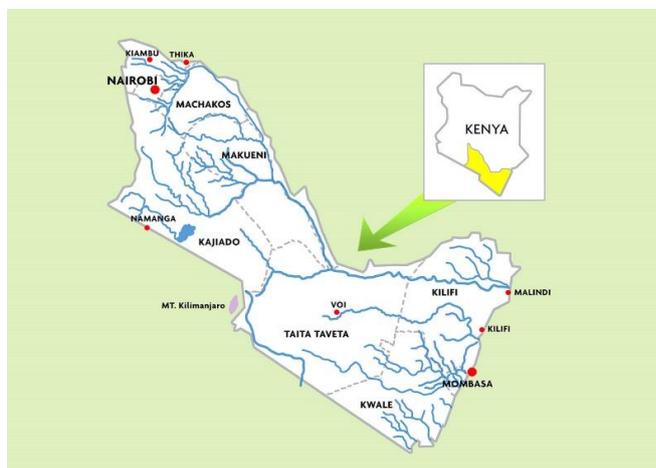
The 2021 World Wetlands Day will be celebrated at the Sabaki Estuary in Kilifi County. What has that got to do with people in Kiambu County upcountry, many miles away? You may ask.

During an exchange visit between Kiambu and Kilifi County, community representatives from Kikuyu learnt how their actions upstream affect the people who live downstream. Residents upstream have converted the river into a dumping ground with the effluent finding its way to areas that are hundreds of kilometers downstream. Similarly, due to poor farming methods upstream, tonnes of soil are swept into the rivers only to end up as heavy silt that clogs the Sabaki estuary and destroys fish spawning grounds.

Fig. 1: Map of Kenya showing the River Basins



Fig. 2: The Athi River Basin



Even more harmful are the copious amounts of dangerous farm chemicals that farmers apply upstream. These chemicals not only adversely affect the farmers and the people who consume their products, but they also cause mysterious diseases linked to heavy metal poisoning and cancers. Turtles in Kilifi suffer from soft tissue cancers linked to water pollution and often ingest plastic, mistaking it for jelly fish.

The Mbagathi River that forms the southern boundary of the Nairobi National Park provides much needed relief for thirsty wildlife especially during the dry seasons. Regrettably it also carries chemicals and silt from farms along its banks. A zebra at the Nairobi National Park was recently treated by the Kenya Wildlife Service after it was discovered to be suffering from cancer – most likely as a result of consuming chemically-polluted water.

Farming using large quantities of agro-chemicals is a key livelihood for communities in the upper catchment of the Athi River. The Millennium Community Development Initiatives (MCDI) conducted organic farming training sessions for the farmers, with support from the UNDP Global Environment Facility Small Grants Program (GEF SGP). The trainings were held at the Karinde Village for farmers along the Mbagathi river, at the Ondiri Wetland and along the Nyongara River. These rivers form part of the Athi-Galana-Sabaki watershed.

The farmers were first informed about the harmful effects of the chemicals they apply on their farms, including some like Round Up which has been ascertained to cause cancer through several civil lawsuits in the United States of America. Data from the Pesticides Control and Products Board (PCPB) indicates that in 2018, of a total of 15,600 tonnes of chemicals were imported into Kenya. It is shocking that a staggering 78 active ingredients of the imported chemicals have been withdrawn from overseas markets or are heavily restricted in their use due to their potential chronic health effects, environmental persistence or high toxicity towards fish or bees. Therefore, while food that our farmers produce for export is subjected to strict measures to ensure that it does not contain any traces of harmful chemicals, the same cannot be said of the food we consume locally.



Organic Farmers training session at Ondiri Wetland, Kiambu County.

The switch to organic farming is slow but steady. A giant step taken recently by the farmers (with support from MCDI and the Kenya Organic Agricultural Network (KOAN)), is the launch of the Kikuyu Organic Farmers Market (KOFM) on December 12th 2020, to facilitate the direct sale of produce to consumers. It is with much optimism that the farmers face the future, hoping that the growing demand for organic food products in Nairobi will spur interest among local farmers, and sustain local initiatives such as these.

As the official celebrations for the World Wetland Day are underway at the Sabaki Estuary in Kilifi County, farmers in Kiambu County will be celebrating because they are now practicing farming that does not contribute to the pollution of their local rivers. And that they have reduced the quantities of harmful agro-chemicals that travel a journey of almost 400 kilometers via the Sabaki and Galana Rivers, to end up in the Indian Ocean.



The Kikuyu Organic Farmer's Market