



the Mpingo Conservation Project

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How important are Tanzania's forests in terms of helping its people eliminate hunger and poverty, and what challenges do they face?

Tanzania's forests are very important to rural people as the source of a variety of forest products: timber, charcoal, firewood, fruits, gums, grasses and fibres. Forests are also important for their catchment function, which helps agriculture and fisheries, as well as their effects in increasing rainfall and building soil nutrients. In addition Tanzania's forests are important on a global scale for their outstanding biodiversity and on a local scale for their deep cultural significance to many tribes. It is often the poorest people who depend most on forest products, and have the most to lose when forests are badly managed, but Tanzania's urban middle class are also highly dependent on the forests of the Eastern Arc mountains to supply water for hydroelectricity generation.

Proper management of forest resources for certain outputs such as beekeeping or mpingo for carvings can provide a good living for those involved, especially if well marketed, but these are skilled jobs supplying relatively limited markets (compared to staple agricultural produce). For most poor people forests do not offer a way out of poverty, but instead provide an important safety net when times are bad. Education, improved agriculture and better infrastructure are the surest route out of poverty, but proper management of forests is essential so that these benefits obtained are not undermined. The problems of land degradation in northern Tanzania are a good example of how everyone suffers from wholesale deforestation.

It is inevitable that forest cover in southern Tanzania will decrease as the region develops and population increases. How that transition is managed is critical to the successful alleviation of poverty. Logging and land clearance can provide significant one-time bonanzas, but in the absence of good education the capital so realised is rarely invested wisely, and so fails to contribute to long-term poverty alleviation. The challenge for Tanzania's people is to decide which forests it wants to keep, and then manage them wisely and sustainably so that environmental degradation does not cancel out gains made from investment in other sectors. We believe that properly regulated, sustainable logging of mpingo and other high value timber species in Southern Tanzania could play a major role achieving just this.

Steve Ball
Project Coordinator
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