

Ecological impact of African cities

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African cities are growing faster than anywhere else in the world. This is having a major impact, but few ecologists are studying the urban environment and effect of cities on rural areas. One of the most important ecological changes in Africa's history is being over-looked.

Joy Clancy from the University of Twente has reviewed the problem in the current issue of the *African Journal of Ecology*. She says "A hundred years ago 95% of the African population was rural, today 38% live in cities with about half the population expected to be urban by 2010."

This rapid growth is resulting in huge changes in natural resource use, but the effects are highly controversial. "Some environmentalists say that demand for fuel wood and charcoal from cities are causing deforestation, but in fact it is change in land use that is the main driver" continues Joy. "The real change is around cities – the 'peri-urban' areas – where woodlands are cleared for agriculture to feed the new centres of population." She points out "When this is added to the effect on water demand and waste disposal on aquatic ecosystems, then African cities can have an ecological footprint much larger than their actual extent."

But there is little research on the ecology of cities "Africa is famous for its wildlife and the ecology of places such as the Serengeti are familiar to people all over the world, but remarkably few ecologists are studying urban environments" says Jon Lovett, associate editor of the *African Journal of Ecology*. "Although we know a lot about lions and wildebeest, the real ecological challenges are in the cities and these are being ignored" he continues. "We need a massive shift in focus to tackle the

most urgent environmental issues".

Source: Wiley

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