

The fight is on to save Kenya's green lung

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Poverty and climate change are threatening one of East Africa's most valuable forestry areas. Researchers from the University of Copenhagen, including researchers from the Faculty of Life Sciences and the Faculty of Law, have therefore just started a promising partnership with the Wangari Maathai Institute of Peace and Environmental Studies at the University of Nairobi as well as the grassroots Green Belt Movement, which has planted more than 40 million trees in Kenya.

"If the Mau Forest is destroyed, Kenya will die." This is the stark message of the scientist and Nobel Peace Prizewinner Professor Wangari Maathai from the University of Nairobi. Poverty and climate change are threatening one of East Africa's most valuable forestry areas that supplies vast natural areas, metropolises and [agricultural land](#) with water. Therefore, LIFE - Faculty of Life Sciences at University of Copenhagen - is now participating in an ambitious research initiative.

The Mau Forest in Kenya supplies a land area ten times the size of Denmark with water. The forest is by far the most important water reservoir in a country where only a tenth of the land is suitable for cultivation. Unfortunately, in just ten years, up to one third of the forest has been destroyed by uncontrolled felling. The reasons for this can be found in widespread poverty, poor local planning and management, inadequate law and order, corruption and now increasing climate change.

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Institute of Peace and Environmental Studies at the University of Nairobi as well as the grass-roots Green Belt Movement, which has planted more than 40 million trees in Kenya. The ambition of the interdisciplinary research work is to suggest concrete solutions to the conflicts that threaten the livelihoods of the local population without destroying the natural basis for coming generations. The university partnership aims to strike a sustainable balance between the needs of the local population and the forest. These needs are, in principle, the same, but, according to the former Assistant Minister for Environment in Kenya, Professor Wangari Maathai, in their fight for survival, Kenyans have forgotten how important it is to look after the natural environment.

Holistic solution that will benefit the local population

"We believe that the research partnership will make a big difference to the local population. With the new Wangari Maathai Institute as the driving force, together we will create new and useful knowledge about how the vital forest and nature areas can be protected and managed in the best possible way," says Senior Adviser Peter Furu from LIFE, and adds: "Through an application-oriented, interdisciplinary research approach to the difficult problem complexes concerning people, the environment and poverty, we will work on solutions that are holistic and which contribute to improving the health of both the local population and the forest ecosystems. At the same time, the project will actively focus on conflict-handling, environmental management and climate issues."

The initiative is carried out under the auspices of the two universities' Strategic Partnership Agreement, STRAPA:

"It is our hope that this will serve as a role model for interdisciplinary, solution-oriented research between partner universities in the South and North," says STRAPA manager Per Rasmussen.

A specialist in forestry and conflict-handling at LIFE, Associate Professor Jens Emborg highlights the need to attract further resources: "The Mau Forest needs intensive care, and the task now is to extend the network of international donors who will support this exciting research initiative so we can muster sufficient funding to make a real difference for people and the environment in Kenya," he says.

Background

[Climate change](#) is primarily caused by countries in the northern hemisphere and very likely results in improved growing conditions there while in, for example, Africa, the change has catastrophic consequences for what is already a very vulnerable continent. The negative consequences of the rich countries' resource consumption for the poor countries were hotly debated at the UN climate summit COP15, and there was general consensus that the rich countries must provide compensation. "Consequently, Denmark will spend DKK 1.2 billion of its foreign aid funding to counter this," declared the Danish Minister for Climate and Energy and Minister for Gender Equality Lykke Friis together with the Danish Minister for Development Søren Pind at a recent meeting at the University of Copenhagen's Faculty of [Life Sciences](#).

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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