Communities Invest in Nature-based Businesses

In essence, what we are doing is tantamount to teaching the communities how to fish instead of giving them fish," says Ms. Munira Bashir, head of KWS’s Community Enterprise Development Department. **By JOE OMBUOR**

While wildlife occupies the heart of a business, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) has demonstrated that human beings who share their land and other natural resources with wildlife are very much within its radar in matters of planning. That is why two years ago KWS came up with the newly-named Community Enterprise Development Department to systematically invest in nature-based businesses by communities.

This critical change is championed by Ms. Munira K. Bashir, and has adopted a sustainable participatory approach to win the public's appreciation of wildlife as an asset that must be preserved for the present and future generations while supporting livelihoods.

"Our mandate is to make people who share their land with wildlife to look at this heritage as an alternative land-use option to crops because the two are not compatible," Ms. Bashir says. "We have gone out of our way to support communities hosting wildlife through public education (conservation awareness and community study tours to learn from others), health and support for medical camps, provision of clean water by way of shallow wells, hand pumps, water tanks and boreholes as well as emergency and other assistance. Provision of wholesome water in particular has helped reduce the distance to water areas and drastically reduced human contact with wildlife."

Ms. Bashir says corporate social responsibility (CSR) has helped strengthen community-based wildlife conservation and eco-tourism for wealth generation and poverty alleviation.

"As an extra step towards their general welfare, we are encouraging communities with land frequently encroached by wildlife to set aside for wildlife conservation upon which KWS comes in with capacity building initiatives such as the training of community rangers to guarantee standardized operating procedures that give tourists the feel of Kenya, regardless of where they access the animals."

It is a win-win arrangement that has benefitted both the communities and wildlife conservation through eco-tourism. KWS has trained about 180 community rangers at the Manyani Law Enforcement Academy in Tsavo West National Park. The rangers are equipped with requisite skills in habitat monitoring, security for wildlife and the security of tourists.

**Approach**

"In essence, what we are doing is tantamount to teaching the communities how to fish instead of giving them fish," says Ms. Bashir.

"The participatory approach is on the right path, with many communities coming forward to be assisted to set up conservancies. All that remains is legislation to have these conservancies registered to give a legitimate and better platform for wildlife management governance."

"Before that legislation is passed, there exists a clause that allows the minister to use his powers to encompass emergent issues in the spirit of Vision 2030 that recognizes tourism as a key pillar of development. We can have a subsidiary legislation in the meantime."

She describes archaic wildlife laws still in use as unenviable to humans and wildlife conservation. "What is the rationale behind compensation by the law for damage and injury caused to humans by wildlife, yet no compensation is given when citizen’s livelihoods such as livestock and crops are destroyed? These laws are creating a negative feeling against wildlife, hence the urgent need for new legislation," she says.

**Investors**

Ms. Bashir regrets that enactment of the new legislation has dragged on since 2006, when the process of revising the current Wildlife Act started, adding that if high time Kenya were the path of Namibia where non-governmental organizations (NGOs) overseeing community conservation have been a success story.

"Whereas investors are welcome to put up infrastructure such as hotels and lodges in community conservancies, KWS wants to scrutinize agreements reached to forestal exploitation as has been the case in the past," Ms. Bashir says. "Benefits ought to be shared equitably, says Ms. Bashir, giving the example of the Menengai Crater Sanctuary in Nakuru County where investors and the community have enjoyed mutual benefits."