

## **We all have a role to play in rehabilitating our degraded forest ecosystems in our counties**

An ecosystem is a self-sustaining and self-regulating community of living organisms and its non-living environment. Forest ecosystems are dominated by trees that can mature to at least 2 metres in height and provide a canopy of at least 20% cover, together with all the native wildlife, including birds, mammals, marsupials, amphibians, reptiles, insects, plants as well as moss, fungi, micro-organisms and non-living things such as water, soil and air interacting within the same area.

Forest ecosystem rehabilitation refers to actions aimed at re-stating ecological processes, which accelerate recovery of forest structure, ecological functioning and biodiversity levels towards those typical of climax forest. Climax forests are relatively stable ecosystems that have developed the maximum biomass, structural complexity and species diversity.

A community of organisms living in a forest ecosystem depend on each other through a complex series of interacting relationships called **food webs**. Forest ecosystems play a crucial role in **sustainability** through the efficient capture and conversion of energy from the sun and its storage into plant material. It's out of this process that the forest ecosystems are able to provide ecosystem goods such as food, timber, fuelwood, and ecosystem services such as air, climate change regulation, recreation, cultural values among others. However, forests must be managed properly to support the sustainable long term capture and supply function.

Large area of the world's forests have been lost or degraded and landscapes everywhere are being simplified by current land-use practices. For instance, agricultural expansion and intensification have decreased the overall area of forest and woodland, simplified the structure of the remaining forests and broken up forest areas into smaller and more isolated fragments. The consequences of these changes are: reduction of forest productivity because of increasing losses of nutrients and soil resulting from soil erosion, downstream impacts such as reduction in water quality through increased sedimentation and changes in water yield and widespread reductions in biodiversity and supply of various ecological goods and services.

Kenya's closed canopy forests are currently estimated to cover 2% of the country of which over 88% (representing 1.24million ha) of the Kenyan forest is indigenous forest.

Although Meru and Tharaka-Nithi Counties are among top ten counties as per the forest cover, the rate of deforestation is very high and therefore, there is urgent need to carry out serious rehabilitation and sensitize the community on the importance of protection and conservation of the forest resources. A number of forests within the two counties are greatly degraded. A perfect example is Lower Imenti Forest in Meru County that has been reduced to a lantana bushland.



The degraded Lower Imenti Forest

The threats to forests ecosystems have induced changes that have negatively affected the ecological and socio-economic values and services derived from forests. The underlying threat remains lack of recognition of the importance of forest ecosystems.

What the future holds for our forests depends on how we choose to utilize our forests resources and the impacts of the activities on these special environments. We should all be worried by the rate at which our forests are being degraded. Let all join hands to rehabilitate and restore our degraded forests!

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