



Reaching out to communities: Ms. Munira K. Bashir

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 core of its 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 aptly-named Community Enterprise Development Department to



streamline investments in nature-based businesses by communities.

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

Says Ms. Bashir: "Our mandated responsibility 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.

Water

"We considered this approach most viable in a situation where boundaries between designated wildlife areas and human settlements remain porous and a land-use policy was passed only recently.

"We have gone out of our way to support communities hosting wildlife through public education (conservation activities 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 shorten 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 it aside for wildlife conservation upon which KWS comes in with capacity building initiatives such as the training of community rangers to guarantee standard operating procedures that give tourists the feel of Kenya, regardless of where they access the animals.

It is a win-win arrangement that has benefited both the communities and

wildlife conservation through eco-tourism".

KWS has trained about 100 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 unfavourable to humans and wildlife conservation. "What is the rationale behind compensation by the State for death 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 it is high time Kenya went the path of Namibia where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) overseeing community conservation) have been a success story.

"Whereas investors are welcome to put up infrastructure such as hotels and eco-lodges in community conservancies, KWS wants to scrutinize agreements reached to forestall exploitation as has been the case in the past".

Benefits ought to be shared equitably, says Ms. Bashir, giving the example of the Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary in Kwale County, where investors and the community have enjoyed mutual coexistence. ■

