

Project Update: April 2011

After years of false starts and unfulfilled promises, the Kenyan Government has finally taken steps to protect and save Kenyan wetlands, among them Ondiri Swamp. The national environmental watchdog, the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) last month (March 10th 2010) ordered everyone encroaching on wetlands to vacate them immediately or face prosecution. NEMA has written to the Lands Ministry, asking it to revoke all land allocations in these areas within the next 3 months. The Water Resources Management Authority (WARMA) has also been directed to peg and mark all riparian areas clearly within these three months. The NEMA acting director-general, Dr Ayub Macharia, said priority would be given to urban wetlands, Ondiri Swamp, Lake Olbollossat, Sabaki Estuary, Lake Kenyatta and Lake Naivasha as they were the most endangered. "NEMA therefore warns the public to avoid any form of encroachment or human activity in riparian areas. A minimum of 6 m and a maximum of 30 m is to be maintained for all rivers, be they seasonal or perennial," said Dr Macharia. He added that statistics show that 6.8 % of Kenya's land mass had been classified as wetlands, but this had been reduced to 2.6 % by last year. At a meeting on April 8th, the WARMA regional manager for Kiambu County, Ms Julia Kiruri, confirmed these sentiments and said that because of the serious encroachment that has been taking place in the swamp over the years, the riparian area at Ondiri would be the maximum which is 30 m. She was speaking to Ondiri Swamp riparians and abstractors when they gathered to write a new constitution that will see all groups and organisations working in the upper Nairobi River basin become one Water Resource Users Association. The representatives of the groups agreed that the new WRUA would be called Ondiri, Nyongara, Kabuthi and Rungiri water Resource Users Association (ONKARU-WRUA). This would replace the earlier Ondiri, Nyongara and Rungiri Water Resource Users Association (ONRU-WRUA) which had been formed earlier. I was elected as the project coordinator for the Ondiri Riparians and Abstractors Resource Users Association. We have already submitted a project proposal to the Community Environment Facility (CEF) of the Community Development Trust Fund for the conservation and rehabilitation of the swamp. Following NEMA's directive on the riparian area, WARMA has ordered riparians who had planted eucalyptus trees along the swamp's edges to cut them down and this has already started. We are lobbying the riparians to also control soil erosion by terracing their land and some have already taken this up.

I have noted an alarming decline in the number of grey-crowned cranes in the Ondiri Swamp and currently there are only two of these birds left. My observations indicate that the bird may be headed for extinction in the swamp and various factors may have contributed to this. The extensive harvesting of swamp vegetation is causing serious habitat loss for this bird. This is coupled with the disappearance of trees that have in the past been felled for fuel. This crane is the only one that roosts in trees and this means that there has been a drastic reduction in roosting sites. The other suspected cause of this precipitous decline is the conflict between riparian farmers and the cranes. I have observed that the cranes feed on maize planted in the riparian area and the farmers could be trapping and killing them though this has not been verified. I hope to undertake a small study on measures required to stem this loss as well as lobbying NEMA and WARMA to ban harvesting of vegetation.

