

International development

Biofuel threat to Kenyan delta

Tana river wetlands to be drained for ethanol despite local protests

Xan Rice *Nairobi*

Kenya has approved a biofuel project that could destroy some of its most pristine wetlands. More than 160 sq km of the Tana river delta will become a sugar cane plantation, with much of the crop turned into ethanol in a purpose-built factory.

The area is home to lions, hippos, reptiles, primates, rare sharks and 345 bird species, and sustains thousands of farmers and fishermen whose protests have been ignored. Paul Matiku, executive director of Nature Kenya, a Nairobi-based conservation group, described the development by Mumias Sugar, a locally listed firm, as "an ecological and social disaster" that would cause heavy drainage of the delta.

Biofuels cause acrimonious debate in east Africa, where vast tracts of open land in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania are attracting the attention of local and international agriculture firms hoping to cash in on the demand from the US and the European Union for clean energy sources such as ethanol. While local governments welcome investment and job creation, there is strong opposition from environmentalists and development campaigners who say that arable land should not be used for non-food crops, especially in a region susceptible to food shortages.

The Tana delta, 240km north of Mombasa, drains Kenya's longest river, and is a mix of savannah, mangrove swamps, forest and beaches. Its fresh water has made the area much coveted by sugar companies who must rely on variable rainfall on their plantations in other parts of Kenya. Mumias Sugar,



Displaced ... the fishermen of the Tana delta *Michel Laplace-Toulouse*

which will run the \$380m scheme with the Tana and Athi Rivers Development Authority, insists the net effect will be positive, with thousands of jobs created and improved infrastructure. It employed two private consulting firms to produce an environmental impact assessment report showing that the ecological damage will be limited.

Kenya's National Environmental Management Authority (Nema) approved the scheme last month, subject to conditions. But villagers and fishermen, who treat the land in and around the delta as communal, say that their concerns about the loss of their livelihoods have not been addressed. Pastoralists who bring 60,000 cattle from Somali and Ethiopian border regions to graze in the delta during the dry season are also angry, and have disrupted public hearings.

Local groups that have campaigned to stop the factory being built and to have the most sensitive parts of the delta declared a protected area say that their objections have been ignored both by Mumias and the government.

A letter from Nature Kenya to Nema in December has never been acknowledged, said Matiku, who blames local politicians for pushing ahead.

A report commissioned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds claims that Mumias's projections overestimated the potential profit and ignored fees for the use of water and the effect of pollution from the factory. The study concluded that the delta's ecological benefits, including flood prevention, the storage of greenhouse gases and food provision "defied valuation", and warned of grave environmental consequences if the project went ahead.

Among the rare birds that shelter in the delta's forests are the southern banded snake eagle, the Malindi pipit, the Tana river cisticola and the Basra reed warbler. "This decision is a very serious blow to Kenyan wildlife and to wildlife worldwide, since many migrating species use the Tana delta in internationally important numbers," said Paul Buckley, an Africa specialist with the RSPB.