Afrotheria News

Conservation concerns for Afrotheria in northern coastal Kenya

The biodiversity of northern coastal Kenya up to recently has remained poorly understood because security problems and poor infrastructure have discouraged access to the area. However, the wooded areas in the region have great potential for harbouring unique and rare species, including several Afrotheria.

Recent improvement in security has allowed systematic camera-trap surveys in the largest forest patches of over 2,000 km² within the Boni, Dodori and Lunghi reserves, which are between the Tana River and the Somali border. Among the Afrotheria documented so far are elephants (*Loxodonta africana*), the aardvark (*Orycteropus afer*) and, in coastal waters, dugongs (*Dugong dugon*). Three species of sengi (*Macroscelides*) are also found in the area. The ranges of the rufous sengi (*Elephantulus rufescens*) and four-toed sengi (*Petrotomus tetradactylus*) have been expanded into the region.

Although the golden-rumped sengi (*Rhynchocyon chrysopygus*) of coastal Kenya south of the lower Tana River was assumed to occur in the Boni forest region, this now appears to be incorrect. The *Rhynchocyon* east of the lower Tana River rather resembles taxa found hundreds of kilometres to the south (Andanje et al. 2010; Fig. 1).

The Boni-Dodori forests also have perhaps the largest population of the critically endangered Aders' duiker (*Cephalophus adersi*) (Fig. 2) (Andanje et al. in press), in addition, to important populations of African wild-dog (*Lycaon pictus*) (Fig. 3), cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), lion (*Panthera leo*), and hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*). The coastal strip is an important nesting site for three species of marine turtles. The region is also home to the indigenous Boni people, which today only number a few hundred.

Despite their conservation importance, these coastal forests are being degraded. Now that security issues are improving in the area, there is an urgent need to instigate more active protection, which has been largely absent until now. Land clearance for agriculture, and unsustainable use of forest resources such as tree felling for charcoal, are ongoing problems. This is likely to increase significantly if massive development plans for a railway, a new deep water port and an airport in near-by Lamu island proceed.

The new Kenyan constitution is devolving power and decision-making to local authorities. The current two types of reserves are administered under different authorities, with Boni and Dodori national reserves enjoying Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) protection, while the Boni and Lunghi forest reserves are administered by the county councils of the Lamu and Isiolo districts, and thus are less protected. As a result, the forest reserves seem to endure the brunt of deforestation, degradation and mismanagement, which is all too widespread in Kenyan coastal forests. There is also significant risk from agricultural development, including proposed land acquisition by foreign governments for maize production. There is also a serious threat to forest habitats from the clearance to make way for *Jatropha* 'bio-fuel' plantations, despite the likelihood that *Jatropha* will not grow well here.

Figure 1. Potential new species of giant sengi (*Rhynchocyon*) caught on camera traps

Figure 2. Aders' duiker caught on camera traps during recent surveys by the team

Figure 3. An important wild dog population occurs in the Boni-Dodori Forests

The KWS and key stakeholders are in the process of initiating an integrated ecosystem-based management plan that is crucial to ensure agreement, stakeholder support and participation in protection, restoration and conservation of these remaining northern Kenyan forests, which support a significant number of afrotheres.

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