

TOUCHWOOD

- Story by Sarah Markes, WCS-Tanzania

On 11 January 2019, [Wildlife Conservation Society \(WCS\) Tanzania](#) launched a new book entitled '[Touchwood - The beauty and biodiversity of Tanzania's Southern Highlands](#)' (pdf, 5.45 MB) by Tim Davenport & Sarah Markes. The book was created with support from the [CEPF Eastern Afromontane Hotspot Programme](#) through a small grant facilitated by [BirdLife International](#). It was produced along with a series of community awareness materials, highlighting the value of biodiversity, to be used in schools and communities across Tanzania's Southern Highlands. This area is part of the [Eastern Afromontane biodiversity hotspot](#).



Tim Davenport from WCS at the launch of "Touchwood" (c) Studio Native, Mbeya

Southern Highlands

Tanzania's Southern Highlands sit between Lake Nyasa/Malawi and Lake Tanganyika on the junction of the eastern and western arms of Africa's Great Rift Valley. Comprising a unique

mosaic of plateau grasslands and montane forests, dozens of species of flora and fauna are endemic to the area, and many are globally threatened. The area is home to over two million people, most of whom rely on natural resources for food, medicines, building materials and income. The mountains and forests are also vital to national and local economies through soil conservation and water catchment.

WCS has worked across this landscape for the last 20 years, carrying out extensive biodiversity surveys, monitoring key species, designing and managing protected areas, and implementing a variety of community conservation initiatives including environmental education, habitat restoration and nurturing, sustainable natural resource based livelihoods. WCS biodiversity surveys have led to the discovery of several new species to science, including a new genus of monkey - the kipunji, found on Mount Rungwe in 2003 and classified as Critically Endangered.

Sadly, the Southern Highlands are severely threatened by unsustainable land-use practices and inappropriate resource exploitation. Natural forests and grasslands have been cleared for commercial agriculture, trees felled for timber and charcoal production, unmanaged burning has been widespread. Hunting of mammals and birds has been common for food in addition to collection of many species for the growing and unsustainable trade in wildlife, which focuses on reptiles in particular. In addition, declining forest cover poses serious threats to the region's vital water supplies and carbon stocks, as well as cultural heritage. Management of this crucial habitat has long been hampered by limited financial and technical resources, and demands for ecosystem services and natural resource extraction are increasing with a growing human population. Proximity to large urban markets, combined with the increasing costs of charcoal and timber, mean the potential for illegal degradation of forests looms large, with those areas under no or partial protection at greatest risk.

Key Biodiversity Areas

The book covers six [Key Biodiversity Areas \(KBAs\)](#), of which five have been defined as Priority KBAs: Mt Rungwe, Kitulo Plateau, the Livingstone Mountains Forests, Njombe Forests and Mbeya Range (and Mporoto Ridge). Showcasing the unique and important flora and fauna of this area - including many animals and plants found nowhere else on earth, the book features original photos, infographics, drawings and text explaining the origins and breadth of this biodiversity and its importance to livelihoods, culture and the nation. The book also publishes for the first time, full species lists of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies, hawkmoth and plants for the entire Mt Rungwe-Kitulo-Mporoto landscape.



Antony Minazi using Touchwood materials in the classroom (c) WCS-Tanzania

Highlighting the value of the Southern Highland ecosystems and KBAs to communities, local authorities and national government is crucial to their survival. The package of educational materials developed by WCS and funded by CEPF, includes posters, banners and stickers featuring key species and their role in ecosystem survival. They also explain the array of benefits provided by a healthy ecosystem as well as the negative effects on human lives and livelihoods as a result of ecosystem degradation. These materials will reach thousands of school children and community members through WCS's extensive environmental education program. This will support ongoing conservation initiatives and hopefully nurture a new generation of conservationists to protect this beautiful and important part of the world for many years to come.

Launch

During the [launch of "Touchwood"](#), the Mbeya Regional Commissioner gave enthusiastic support for the book, along with District Commissioners for Rungwe and Mbeya. The event was well attended by representatives from TANAPA, Tanzania Forestry Services (TFS), local government, NGOs and the tourism sector – all keen to work together to protect and promote this unique and beautiful area.

Please download this wonderful product here: [‘Touchwood - The beauty and biodiversity of Tanzania’s Southern Highlands’](#) (pdf, 5.45 MB).

Previously published on the BirdLife International website on 21 January 2019

Note: Some hyperlinks may no longer be active

BirdLife International is the Regional Implementation Team (RIT) for the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) investment in the Eastern Afrotropical Hotspot (2012 -2019). The investment supports civil society in applying innovative approaches to conservation in under-capacitated and underfunded protected areas, Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) and priority corridors in the region.

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan and the World Bank. A fundamental goal is to ensure civil society is engaged in biodiversity conservation. More information on the CEPF can be found at www.cepf.net.