

Women in Conservation: de-mystifying the myth of ‘the weaker sex’

- By Maaïke Manten, Nelly Wangari and Lorna Turyahabwa



Ruth, one of the young women who have joined the group of local guides (Eco-Tourism group) clearing some of the nature trails in the Kikuyu Escarpment forest in Kenya © KENVO

In March and April 2015, we posted a series of articles about Women in Conservation (re-read them [here](#)). These stories were based on small grant projects funded by Conservation International and managed by BirdLife International, through the [Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies](#) (WHSS) opportunity. The projects, implemented by the Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation (ITFC), Fauna & Flora International (FFI), Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO), Kigezi Initiative for Women and Children Empowerment & Development Uganda (KIWOCEU) and Miriam Westervelt were so successful, that Conservation International decided to provide additional funding to each of these grantees. The second phase of these projects has now also ended, so here are a few more stories to share. (See also our first story in this second series [here](#).)

Project 3: Kijabe Environment Volunteers (Kikuyu Escarpment, Kenya) - “Taking down the gender barrier”

During the [first nine months of KENVO’s project](#), this BirdLife [Local Conservation Group](#) empowered local women to participate in environmental decision-making and management, and established new partnerships and networks to promote a more gender inclusive approach in the conservation of the [Kikuyu Escarpment](#) KBA. During the second phase of the WHSS-project, this empowerment continued apace, with various women moving into leadership positions at Community Based Organizations (CBOs) which form user groups for the

Community Forest Associations (CFAs). In the latest elections (late 2015), three women in CFA user groups were elected into chairperson positions, and one CFA now has a women vice-Chair!

At the same time, the focus of the project shifted towards more economic empowerment of the women in Lari Sub-County in Kenya.



A group of grass roots women and men interested in Eco-Tourism activities being taken through basic skills while dealing with visitors in the forest ©KENVO

- 46 people (40 women, 6 men) were trained in identifying and pursuing nature-based income generating activities. These included value addition of bamboo, agricultural products like bananas and vegetables, beekeeping, basketry, and eco-tourism activities.
- 48 people (34 women, 14 men) were then trained in marketing their products (better).
- Being inspired by these trainings, various women started training each other in home economics, like making tie-and-dye products and soap; another 3 women enrolled as members of a group of local guides who take visitors hiking in the forests (previously a men-only activity).

Thus, slowly but surely, some gender barriers are being broken down at the Kikuyu Escarpment, spearheaded by KENVO and the local women – and men! – in the area.

Project 4: Kigezi Initiative for Women and Children Empowerment & Development Uganda (Echuya Forest, Uganda) – “More men, more mushrooms”

KIWOCEDU used their [first grant from CI under the WHSS programme](#) to change the attitudes and behaviour of both men and women towards the role of women in natural resource use and conservation around the [Echuya Forest](#) KBA in Uganda.

More men

During the [WHSS exchange meeting in February 2015](#), KIWOCEDU learned about KENVO’s “men for women” approach (making men agents of change for women empowerment), and decided to adapt this to their own conservation work. As a result, during a “men for women” meeting in Bufundi Sub County, one of the male leaders made the following statement:

“When we started community forest management in 2004, we were not seeing women as relevant members on conservation committees because we thought their role was to cook, look after the home and children. But KIWOCEDU has opened our eyes on how much the women contribute to natural resource conservation, both directly and indirectly. Now that our eyes are opened, we shall work with them to ensure our Echuya Forest is sustainably conserved and ensure women issues are integrated in community development plans for action.”



Beneficiaries of KIWOCEDU's project at the Echuya Forest in Uganda (c) KIWOCEDU

More mushrooms

In the second phase of the project, KIWOCEDU also continued to support the nature-based enterprises of six women groups (three existing and three new groups), with a total membership of 159 members. The three new mushroom-growing groups have already harvested a total of 1125 kgs of fresh and 20 kgs of dry mushrooms, realising a total sum of UGX 5, 575,000 (about USD 1640). A handicraft making group had sold craft materials worth UGX 550,000 (USD 162). All groups participated in three Community Forest Management meetings on the conservation of Echuya Forest, and in three soil and water conservation meetings organized by NatureUganda (BirdLife in Uganda). By the end of the project in December 2015, mushroom production was still at its peak for all the groups. Based on the good testimonies of the beneficiaries, and the quick direct benefits of the WHSS-supported initiatives, there is no doubt that the different livelihood enhancement interventions will be sustained – and even scaled up - now that the project has ended. As another man at Echuya observed: *“While men are spending a lot of unproductive time drinking alcohol, women have lifted the banner of livelihood improvement, food security and natural resource conservation,”* challenging the perceptions that undermined women. He concluded that *“women are weak when unempowered, but with the opportunity that came with the WHSS project, women have proved they are not weak.”*

This is the second story in a second series of articles about ‘women and environment’ posted on www.birdlife.org/africa/project/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies. The BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat managed a small grants portfolio of five innovative projects at selected [Eastern Afromontane](#) Important Bird Areas / Key Biodiversity Areas in Uganda and Kenya, on behalf of Conservation International. For all previous stories, click [here](#). All projects were so successful that they received additional funding for a second phase, which has now also ended.