

Cultural and Biological Heritage at Risk; The Case of the Rabai Kaya Forests in Coastal Kenya

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ABSTRACT In this paper we give an account of the threats facing the kaya forests, sacred forests of the Rabai people, a sub-group of the Mijikenda ethnic group of coastal Kenya. In this area economic, social, cultural and political forces over the last 150 years have had profound effects on the institutional context of natural resource management. The decrease in economic power of the Rabai, coupled with population increase, has led to increased pressure on all natural resources, including the communally owned kaya forests. At the same time the indigenous institutions responsible for controlling access to the forest resources have been weakened by the impacts of colonial rule, Islam, Christianity and most recently the policies of the independent Kenyan nation state. Despite this, many Mijikenda still have considerable respect for their indigenous value systems, and our paper draws on interviews with community members and local elders to describe some of the beliefs and practices which have ensured the survival of the sacred forests to the present day. We conclude with some recommendations for initiatives that could improve the local economies, strengthen community-based institutions, and enhance the chances of survival of these valuable elements of Kenya's natural and cultural heritage.