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On the Banks of the Tana River

Jambo! That welcoming call I have missed for so long! I have come back to Kenya again after a considerable interval away.

Back in 1991 and 1992 I took part in the national farm construction project in Kenya's Tana Delta. I was in charge of environmental impact assessment (EIA) at the pre-construction stage. The aim of this project was to develop the delta at the mouth of the country's largest river, the Tana, in order to start mechanized rice farming there. The project was to support the Kenyan authorities in various aspects related to this delta development, i.e. not only the construction but also the management of the farms, as well as the conservation of the surrounding environment. The target area is an important habitat for wild birds and animals, and it was crucial to carry on the development project while ensuring co-existence with the wildlife. Therefore, the pre-construction EIA team consisted of specialists from the University of Nairobi, the National Museum, as well as wildlife conservation NGOs. On-site visits and planning of the monitoring scheme were conducted in cooperation with the Kenyan Wildlife Services and UNEP.

Last summer El Nino caused floods in the Tana basin, and the farm construction project, which had been almost completed, was badly damaged. Therefore, it was decided that another on-site assessment is carried out to plan restoration of the project site, and this summer I was given another opportunity to visit the Tana Delta as part of the assessment team. The farmland on the project site today is perfectly arranged, with a nice management office, rice mills and workshops for agricultural machinery, which made me feel that a long time had passed since I had been here last. The local people seemed to have just overcome the hardships of the flood, and I could hear them singing cheerfully in every corner of the village. However, the remains of the incident could still be found in many places. Part of the surrounding forests had been destroyed in order to repair broken houses or to make canoes which served as the only means of transport during the flood, and there were concerns about the negative impact on the wild life. Also in areas where floodwaters don't recede for a long time, forests and fruit farms are beginning to show signs of partial damage. Furthermore during the floods cholera spread and the death toll of livestock due to drowning and disease was significant.

In minimizing the damage caused by the flood, not only the local clinic built under the project but also cars and boats belonging to the project played a significant role by transporting relief goods and medicines. Under the project there are some divisions specialized in different aspects of the project such as environment monitoring and tree plantation, which have been carrying out their tasks from the beginning. Some NGOs are also starting plantation activities in order to restore the forests destroyed by the flood, and the project is now considering support for such activities as well. I hope that this Tana River Delta development project, which has been promoted with support from Japan, can carry on developing activities with much consideration for the environment, so that it can present a good example of environmentally friendly agricultural development.

(By OHNUMA in Kenya)



Making canoes



Inundated mango field