Mini-Series: Natural Environments of Wetlands (1)

Part 1: Tana Delta, Kenya

Most of AAI's activities have been concerned with agricultural development and environmental conservation of arid or semi-arid areas ranging from West Asia to the Middle East and Africa. However, on a limited number of occasions we have also been involved in activities related to the natural environment of wetlands rather than dry lands. In this new Mini-Series we would like to introduce topics related to such wetlands.

As already mentioned in AAINews Vol.19, in the lower basin of Kenya's largest river, the Tana, there is a wetland called the Tana Delta. The delta discovered by forests, which are nurtured by regular flooding. Although biological diversity might be less when compared to that of rain forests, such riverine forests consist of very unique plant species. However, due to flood control in the development process of the Tana River basin and the exploitation of forest resources by local communities, today the riverine forests of this area are being depleted continuously. Therefore the survival of wild animals living in these forests is also being threatened. Particularly affected are rare tree-top dwelling primates such as the Tana River Red Colobus and the Crested Mangabey, both of which are listed in the IUCN Red Data Book as endangered species. The wetland ecosystem plays an important role not only for such primates but also for other large mammals, birds and aquatic animals. In other words the wetland provides a very precious environment for the conservation of biodiversity in the area. Rich fisheries resources from rivers and lakes serve the local communities as valuable sources of protein. Also, the riverine forests provide various resources for the life of local people, in the form of construction materials, fuel wood, foodstuffs or medicinal plants. For smoking fish, local people use branches of some special trees also taken from these forests. Apart from such direct uses as providing consumptive resources, the wetland has other important functions such as controlling floods and soil erosion and recharging ground water resources.

The wetland ecosystem around the riverine forests plays a key role in the survival of the wildlife and provides the local communities with various economic benefits. If the wetland resources were depleted, or the wetlands' ecological functions were damaged, it would bring about a significant economic loss or necessitate a huge economic burden in order to compensate for the lost benefits from the wetland. In fact, loss or damage of wetlands as a result of development activities is now perceived as a serious environmental problem all over the world, and in environmental guidelines of development project assessment, wetlands are described as ecosystems to be treated with special care. In developing countries where many people live in direct contact with, and are dependent on, wetlands, there are particularly strong economic relationships between local communities and their local wetlands. Today, environmental problems are placed high on the global agenda, but in order to grasp the special relationships between local communities and their surrounding natural environments, which vary from place to place, we hope to improve our methods of environmental assessment.

The Tana River and riverine forests

A great variety of bird species

Tana River Red Colobus living in the tree-tops

Grazing Waterbuck

Rich fisheries resources from lakes and rivers