

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP: KARURA FOREST

Title of Best Practice	Protecting an urban green space for the community
City/Town	Nairobi
Country	Kenya
Source	Friends of Karura Forest & the Green Belt Movement

Background

The remarkable Karura Forest Reserve is the second largest urban forest in the world fully within a city limits (second to one in Toronto, Canada). It covers 1,040-hectares and is a shining example of how individuals, governments and corporates can jointly serve to secure and protect natural resources. The forest offers a refuge from the bustling city of Nairobi for Kenyans and visitors who want to walk or jog, or simply to sit quietly and experience the serenity of nature in all its diversity.

Previously, the forest made headlines for all the wrong reasons: crime and land-grabbing. In the late 1990s the Green Belt Movement Founder & 2004 Nobel Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai led a spirited and sustained multi-year advocacy campaign to protect the forest from unscrupulous politicians and their greedy allies who had allocated land to themselves for palatial residences. Fortunately due to civil society engagement and the personal dedication of Wangari Maathai, Karura Forest was saved and became a symbol of transformative leadership and the struggle for environmental conservation. If not for Professor Maathai's determination and bravery, the trees and their ecosystem would not be there today.

Today, Karura Forest is slowly building a reputation that is spreading beyond Kenyan borders. It has become a success story that has inspired other cities and their environmental struggles. School groups and more than 8,000 individuals visit the forest every month.

History:

During the pre-colonial period, a private family owned Karura Forest. The family surrendered the forest to the British Government on condition that it remained forest land. Small experimental forest plantations using various Eucalyptus and Cypress species were made in Karura Forest in the early 1900s. When Eucalyptus was found to grow at extremely fast rates, the indigenous forest cover was reduced over the years and re-planted with Eucalyptus plantations.

The wood was used as fuel for the railways, poles to carry electrical wires, and for the construction industry.

During the independence struggle, the caves of Karura Forest were used as hiding grounds by the Mau Mau freedom fighters. The caves are now considered sacred and have become a unique feature for visitors to the forest.

Impact of Wangari Maathai's Transformative Leadership

Karura Forest has much to offer today and many who enjoy it know little about its history and the difficult journey, led by GBM and Prof Maathai, that led to its eventual protection. Some of the wonderful elements that make Karura special are:

Natural Beauty: Karura forest's landscape rolls gently between and through shallow valleys with amazing beauty: a 20-meter waterfall, several rivers, an archaeological site, caves, marshlands and serene groves of secondary and primary indigenous trees. It is also known to host a variety of animals. These include the Harvey's and Grimm's Duikers, Bushbucks, Bush Pigs, Genet Cats, Civets, Bush Babies, Porcupines, Syke's Monkeys, Ground Squirrels, Hares and the Epauletted-Bat and some 200 bird species have been seen in the forest.

Youth Education: More than 4,000 students visit the Karura Forest Environmental Education Center every month. At the Center, children have an opportunity to learn about environmental stewardship and sustainable development outside of the classroom. The Center is supported by the Karura Forest Environmental Education Trust (KFEET) whose founding members are: Kenya Shell Limited (Vivo Energy Kenya), Kenya Forest Service, the Green Belt Movement (GBM), Friends of Karura Forest Community Forest Association and the Oshwal Education & Relief Board. UNEP acts as an Advisor in the Trust.

Community Involvement in protecting the forest: In 2009, residents of neighbouring estates established the Friends of Karura Forest (FKF) - Community Forest Association to assist Kenya Forest Service in the management of the forest. At around the same time, the Karura Forest Environmental Education Trust was established by key stakeholders to convert the Shell Sport Club into a leading education centre on the environment. Thanks to the efforts of these stakeholders, over 8,000 people are now enjoying walking and learning in the forest monthly.

The Education Centre: Karura Forest has quickly become an example of the emerging Kenyan Green Economy. There is now a new facility to promote environmental education, conservation, and citizen engagement. There is a process currently underway, and with support from the UN Environment

Program (UNEP) to build a sustainable educational facility to enhance the educational experience.

Other Allies in Protecting Karura Forest

After Prof. Maathai's relentless effort to stop the illegal allocation of Karura Forest, she needed the support of others to make the final push. Some of those allies were critical to ensuring that the forest was eventually secured and enriched for public use. Some of these were:

Alice McCaire, the wife of the then UK High Commissioner got the key people concerned in government around a table; UNEP, bordering the forest, had a stake both as a neighbour and as the leading international governance body for environmental protection, **Achim Steiner, the UNEP Executive Director**; the **Kenya Forest Service** that gave this initiative a chance; the **2005 Forestry Act** which included a new legislation that for the first time allowed communities to come together and apply to manage the forests they lived around, and the local **residents associations** who came together to form a CFA. The resident associations around Karura Forest did not need much convincing that Karura was an important asset to the city of Nairobi, the **business sector in Kenya** had been doing well and raising the money to build the fence (all from Kenyan companies) wasn't too difficult – **East African Breweries offered to pay to fence the entire forest, and Barclays bank offered to pay for uniforms and salaries for new Scout/Rangers until the facility** broke even, the security firm **G4S**, stepped up to offer a further security backup and training, the **British Army** offered to **train the scouts** and at the same time do the ground works in Huruma Slum village> The work in Huruma almost overnight transformed a scrub area previously used to dump rubbish and as an outdoor lavatory into a **playing field**. The playing field is a valued community resource.

Initially very few people visited the forest – its previous reputation had been bad. Every day the Friends of Karura and GBM encouraged reluctant people to come on tours of the forest. Gradually the numbers grew and a large publicity campaign around our first public event in the forest drew approximately 1,000 people and enthusiastic press coverage. The then Prime Minister himself was Guest of Honour at the official launch of the initiative – the Karura Forest scout rangers mounted the guard of honour.

The Future: Success brings its own problems dealing with larger numbers of visitors every day. But the momentum is tremendous, and if those with stewardship of the Forest can navigate these challenges, Karura Forest will continue as one of the premier attractions of Nairobi, become self-funding, sustainable, greatly expand the areas with replanted with indigenous species, a site of education on forests and ecology for Kenya's schoolchildren and other visitors, and a source of revenue for local low-income communities.

Her Excellency, Margaret Kenyatta - Kenya's First Lady inaugurated (date) the initiative to build the Karura Forest Environment and Education Centre – using a combination of the old Shell Sports Club buildings and a new modern building now under design.

We continue to have a strong governance structure under the excellent Chairmanship of Professor Karanja Njoroge and with the various individual and institutional stakeholders continued commitment.