

BIG READ / SGR PHASE TWO

EMOTIONAL WALK AS CITY RESIDENTS BID NATIONAL PARK 'FAREWELL'

With the impending SGR phase two and the park facing constant encroachment than ever before, Kenya could soon lose the only park within a capital city in the world if no immediate action is taken

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The next two months may be your last chance to visit the Nairobi National Park, before what is described as its "slow death" begins.

In two weeks time, President Uhuru Kenyatta will launch the second phase of the Standard Gauge Railway to Nairobi which, if it passes through the park, will change it forever.

Established in 1946, Nairobi National Park's acreage has remained intact with the animals confined in 117.21 square kilometres (28,963 acres). Until now.

Conservationists calculate that the SGR will be the killer punch in a series of hard blows the park has received of late.

Currently, a short drive out of Nairobi's central business district ushers you into the wide open grass plains and scattered acacia bush that play host to a wide variety of wildlife.

The sight provides wonderful memories for ordinary visitors during their maiden visits to the Nairobi National Park.

The park is currently home to about 35 lions and a number of cheetahs, leopards and the Zebra. There are also the buffalo and the giraffe, the black rhino and the warthog.

Others are hyena and the cheeky monkeys as well as many other wondrous species.

Even though visitors may still enjoy the park's picnic sites, three campsites and the walking trails for hikers, the Nairobi National park will fast become a shell, observers warn.

Cleaning tall buildings surrounds the park and in the distance is a cloud of smoky plumes of large industries pouring the air.

Just on the other side of the park's electrified fence line looms a row of new apartment buildings with waste finding its way into it threatening flora and fauna. The threats are so imminent that the situation has attracted the attention of corporates as well as conservationists willing to reverse the trend.

On September 24, hundreds of Kenyans participated in a walk aimed at protecting the Nairobi National Park.

The Nairobi Greenline Initiative and partners including Kenya Wildlife Service organised the walk. This could have been the last public attempt before the government slices the park into two.

Conservationists are vehemently opposed to these plans.

"The SGR can use alternative routes, not the park," said conservationist Sidney Quantai, chairman of the Kenya Coalition for Wildlife Conservation and Management, a local lobby group. "If it goes through the park it will just spark a slow but sure death of the only park in a city anywhere in the world."

The walk was aimed at raising awareness of the need to protect the park from human and commercial invasion, as well as give the public an opportunity to appreciate its beauty.

But for many participants, this was the last time to visit the park before its "slow death" commences.

Nairobi Greenline is an initiative of the Kenya Association of Manufacturers in partnership with the Kenya Wildlife Service and other corporate organisations.

The project has also planted a 30km long and 50m wide forest of indigenous trees that will shield the Nairobi National Park from the growing metrop-



olis.

Any land grabbers or polluters who dares to cross the line should face the full force of the new law, it says. Besides, those encroaching would have to contend with the whistle-blowing wrath of conservationists, nature lovers and the will of the Kenyan people.

Between April 2010 and April 2013, parallel electric fences were constructed to demarcate the Greenline - from Athi River's Cheetah Gate to just beyond the Carnivore. During these months, the Greenline Nursery collected and nurtured 250,000 indigenous seedlings for planting.

The planting took place from December 2010, and is still on-going.

But now, rather than threats from individual land-grabbers, the park is up against a government that should be protecting it.

Greenline trust chairman Cayling May said the park is now facing constant encroachment more than ever before and if there is no immediate action taken, Kenya could soon lose the only park within a capital city in the world.

"We are planting natural trees around the boundary in a big and demanding exercise," he said, adding that the park must be preserved for the coming generation.

May said the park is a natural jungle inside the city and as such, it should not be encroached.

"Greenery is what we forget. We need to plant more trees if we are to conserve this fragile ecosystem from extinction," he added.

Greenline co-ordinator Wanja Kimani said the trust collects the seeds from the park before they propagate them in tree nurseries.

Kimani said care is taken when transferring seedlings from the nurser-



A lioness walks down from a directional signage at Nairobi's National Park on July 12, 2014 /REUTERS



The safari walk at the Nairobi National Park where people go for recreation /FILE

ies to the area where they are planted to ensure that no invasive plants are allowed into the park.

"We also collect polythene bags that found their way into the park as they can kill grazers because they interfere with their digestion," she said, adding that SGR will introduce invasive species in the park if not stopped.

Kimani said for SGR bridge to be complete, it will take two years, a move that will completely chase wildlife away from the park.

"Huge traffic hindring their way into the park will completely chase wildlife away," she said, adding that this is likely to increase human-wildlife conflict.

APA Insurance, Heritage Insurance, AAR, KenGen Foundation, Copy Cat, Rhino Cement and Patrimont Norfolk sustainability team are among the companies that took part in the walk.

For Ann Murrage, who works for Flame Tree, wild animals in their ecosystems must be protected as they have given the country its pride as a tourist destination. Murrage said the standard gauge railway needs to be rerouted.

"It does not make any sense for huge project such as SGR to cut into two the only park in the world that is near the city," she said, urging the government to rethink the move.

Murrage said wild animals such as lions do not want noise as was observed during the construction of the Southern bypass.

For the bypass, the Kenya Wildlife Service lived off about 53 acres of land from the Nairobi National Park for the road.

Benson Anyango, an employee of the battery manufacturer Chloride Exide, said by planting trees around the industries will help clean the air.

Trees and other plants make their

own food from carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, water, sunlight and a small amount of soil elements. In the process, they release oxygen for us to breathe. Trees also help to settle out, trap and hold particulate pollutants (dust, ash, pollen and smoke) that can damage human lungs.

Anyango said the SGR project will do more harm than good to the wildlife in the park.

During the walk, keen environmentalists were encouraged to learn the 17 species of indigenous trees that have been planted in the Nairobi Greenline Forest.

These species are Acacia Kirkii, Acacia Mellifera, Acacia Polyacantha, Acacia Xanthophloea, Acacia Nilotica, Acacia Elatior, Acacia Seyal, Balanites, Carissa Spinaria, Cordia Africana and Croton Megalocarpus. Others are Erythrina Abyssinica, Feliperidium Decipiens, Grevillea Robusta, Markhamia Lutea, Prunus Africanaum, Warbugia Ugandensis

In the course of 2017, other locations will be identified for additional greenlines to be drawn throughout Kenya (in other parks and protected zones). Another 750,000 seedlings will be grown in readiness.

CONSERVATIONISTS CALCULATE THAT THE STANDARD GAUGE RAILWAY WILL BE THE KILLER PUNCH IN A SERIES OF HARD BLOWS THE PARK HAS RECEIVED OF LATE

HEALTH FEATURE For Nabiritha, sight after 7 years

BY STAR REPORTER @altheastar/kenya

It's mid-morning and Mwanahamisi Nabiritha sits lonely on a wooden stool outside their house in Chemongoch Village, Baringo County. She is singing along to a gospel tune from a small transistor radio placed by the window. As the tune fades away, she rises steadily and takes a few faltering steps. She then stretches her hands to get hold of the mud walls that make their tiny house in a bid to find her way around their homestead and eventually get to her friends and siblings playing nearby.

This has been her life. At seven years, Nabiritha has barely seen since birth. She has bilateral cataracts, a condition that has made her almost blind ever since she was born. She can only detect light and can only see dark shadows of objects near her eyes.

In fact, her parents only took her to school after she became of age. Cataracts normally occur when changes in the lens of the eye cause it to become less transparent. This results in cloudy or misty vision. There are several reasons why a child may be born with cataracts or develop them while they're still young.

Possible causes include fault inherited from the child's parents that caused the lens to develop abnormally, certain infections picked up by the mother during pregnancy, or an injury to the eye after birth.

The lens is the transparent structure located just behind the pupil that allows light to pass through to the light-sensitive layer of tissue at the back of the eye. Although cataracts mostly affects older adults, some babies are born with the condition and others develop them at a young age.

It's estimated that there are about 400,000 blind people in Kenya, with another 750,000 visually impaired. Cataracts are the largest cause of avoidable blindness in the country, making up 43 per cent of all cases of blindness.

As well as poor vision, cataracts can also cause 'wobbling' eyes and a squint where the eyes point in different directions as was the case with Nabiritha. Upon taking her to a local dispensary, her mother, Emily Nekesa was referred to Nakuru Provincial Hospital and eventually Kijabe Mission hospital where Nabiritha was to undergo surgery to restore her sight.

"I was confused since I could barely afford transport leave alone Sh10,000 required for surgery," says her mother, Emily Nekesa. "I just went back home to try and seek help from well-wishers."

It is upon return to the local health center that she was informed of an organisation, the Fred Hollows Foundation

Kenya (FHFK) that was sponsoring free eye services including surgeries.

Nabiritha was immediately booked for surgery at the Sabata Eye Hospital, about 200 kilometers away in Vihiga county. Courtesy of FHFK, Nabiritha is picked from home for the journey to Sabatia, a worthy travel that would see her undergo surgery that would restore her sight. Her mother travels with her and is admitted alongside her daughter.

Early the next morning Nabiritha is examined by Dr Sarah Sitati, a paediatric ophthalmologist.

About an hour later, she is wheeled into theatre. Anaesthesia is administered and after a brief prayer, Dr Sitati and her team get down to work. In about an hour, the surgery is complete and the eyes patched to start the healing process.

Moments later, Nabiritha is wheeled back into the ward. Her mother's joy is evident when the nurse announces that everything is alright.

The following day Dr Sitati carefully removes the patches. After tearing a little, Nabiritha opens her eyes and stares straight into her mother's face. What follows is an emotional moment as the mother and daughter stare at each other for the first time.

"What happened to your face mum", she asks upon noticing a scar in her mother's face.

"I was injured by a vehicle," she answers referring to an accident that she was involved in a few years back.

"So vehicles injure people?" she asks innocently.

"I am happy that my child is able to see me clearly. I never thought this day would finally come. Imagine for all those years my child has never known how I look like," she says amid sobs.

According to Mark Maina, Fred Hollows regional communications officer, needless blindness can be avoided if all partners pulled together to ensure preventive measures are implemented.

"Four out of five blind people don't need to be. It is for this reason that we support eye health workers and equip them to effectively deal with eye health patients," he says.

For the last seven years, the organisation has supported about 60,000 eye operations and treatments including training of surgeons, clinical support staff and community health workers.

Dr Sitati concurs "regular eye checkup is vital to ensure good eye health and detect ailments early enough for treatment."

In a month's time, Nabiritha will be back in hospital for checkup after which she will be given glasses to help her read in school.

Her days of darkness will finally be over and she will be able to lead a normal life like other children.



Nabiritha with a smile on returning home with her sight restored. /COURTESY