

Title A Nairobi newspaper reports that, after consideration of the scientific evidence, Kenya's National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) has decided to advise the Kenyan Government to halt the planting of the biofuel crop jatropha within the Coast region of Kenya. Proposed jatropha plantations would do irreparable damage to coastal Important Bird Areas (IBAs), including the Tana Delta and Dakatcha Woodlands. The reported decision has been applauded by BirdLife Partner NatureKenya, which has been fighting a vigorous campaign against the destruction of woodland and other coastal habitats to make room for biofuel crops. NatureKenya also provided much of the evidence on which NEMA's decision was based, especially recent research which has cast doubt on the supposed benefits of jatropha as a 'green' alternative to fossil fuels. Scientific studies now recommend growing jatropha only as a hedge or living fence. Even before NEMA's decision, a company planning to grow oil seed crops on 28,000 hectares of the Tana Delta pulled out after consultations with NatureKenya and other BirdLife Partners, citing concerns over environmental impacts and long-term climate change effects. In July, two directors of NEMA were suspended after accusations that they had acted irregularly in granting a licence to the Canadian company Bedford Biofuels to grow jatropha on a 10,000 ha 'pilot' site in the Tana Delta. According to the Nairobi press, NEMA's Chairman, Mr Francis Ole Kaparo, said that the licence had been awarded in spite of mounting scientific evidence which has exposed the claims made for jatropha as false. 'There is nothing to prove jatropha is viable. In fact, all evidence shows it has failed,' Mr Kaparo is quoted as saying. NEMA has advised the Kenyan government to cancel Bedford's licence, but the company is challenging the cancellation. Bedford's local representatives have organised demonstrations in favour of the Jatropha plantations, which have been described as an attempt to 'intimidate' the authorities. 'We congratulate the NEMA Chairman, Mr Francis Ole Kaparo, the NEMA Director General Dr Ayub Macharia, and NEMA technical staff for their wise decision', said NatureKenya CEO Paul Matiku. 'NEMA is on the right path to sustainable development, by using science to avoid irreversible environmental, social and economic costs. We hope the Ministry will follow this advice and cancel Bedford Biofuel's licence for a 'pilot' of 10,000 ha of jatropha at Tana, and that this wise decision has been made clear to Kenya Jatropha Energy Limited at Dakatcha.' He added: 'Globally, biofuel crops, originally viewed as substitutes for climate-damaging fossil fuels, have replaced food crops and natural habitats, leading to rising food prices and loss of critical wildlife habitats and ecosystem services.' The Tana Delta has long provided local communities with food and livelihoods. Its value to the nation includes ecosystem services such as water storage, shoreline protection and marine life spawning grounds. It also has huge tourism potential. But as demand for land to grow commodity crops has increased globally, the Tana Delta has become the focus of interest for international speculators and investors. 'Over the last decade, conflicts have been increasing in the Tana Delta as the demands for competing land uses, natural resources, nature conservation and community interests have intensified,' said Paul Matiku. 'It is for this reason that NatureKenya and stakeholders, led by Office of the Prime Minister, are initiating a combination of strategic planning and integrated assessment to develop a long term General Management Plan.'