

BirdLife International and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) have recently launched a new initiative to prepare a conservation and investment strategy for mountain ranges across eastern Africa, from Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the north to Zimbabwe in the south. Collectively termed the Eastern Afrotropical Biodiversity Hotspot, the region covers a total area of more than one million km² across sixteen countries and is made up of three ancient massifs: the Eastern Arc Mountains and Southern Rift, the Albertine Rift, and the Ethiopian Highlands. "The Eastern Afrotropical Biodiversity Hotspot is incredibly important for wildlife and people", said Julius Arinaitwe, BirdLife's Director for Africa. "It's very species-rich, with around 7,600 plants, 1,300 birds, 500 mammals, 350 reptiles, 230 amphibians and 890 fishes recorded so far. Many of these can be found nowhere else on earth. The hotspot also provides vital ecosystem services for millions of people". Despite the huge biological and socio-economic value of the hotspot, about 15 percent is currently under any level of protection, and only 10 percent of the original vegetation remains in pristine condition.



Eastern Afrotropical Hotspot

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"The primary threat is habitat loss, due to conversion of land for agriculture, plantations and commercial estates, as well as logging", said Julius. Other threats include fires, mining, development of infrastructure, gathering of firewood, and collection of plants for medicinal use, while hunting and disease have led to major declines in the populations of many species. The Albertine Rift has some of the highest human population densities on the African continent, with up to 750 people per km² in parts of Rwanda and Uganda. Consequently, much of the land was long ago converted to agriculture and pressures on the remaining lands are enormous. To launch the new initiative, a series of workshops and national consultations are planned. The recent inception workshop held in Cambridge (UK) will soon be followed by another meeting in Nairobi, Kenya. The profile will define the "Conservation Outcomes" which aims to identify the entire set of conservation targets in a hotspot that need to be achieved in order to prevent species extinctions and biodiversity loss. "The biodiversity profile will be a rapid assessment of biological priorities and the underlying causes of biodiversity loss in the hotspot", added Pierre Carret - Grant Director for CEPF. "It will focus in particular on the socio-economic, policy and climate change

dimensions to the hotspot and will set out clearly the priorities for future CEPF investment?. Preparation of the Ecosystem Profile will be undertaken on behalf of CEPF by BirdLife International and Conservation International building on similar approaches for the Mediterranean and Caribbean hotspots completed in 2010. BirdLife International is the lead organisation responsible for overall coordination and preparation of the profile, as well as delivery of the final product and expects to work alongside all interested stakeholders including 11 national BirdLife Partners during the project. The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund ? a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement (AFD), Conservation International (CI), the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Government of Japan ? provides grants for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private sector partners to help protect the Earth?s biologically richest and most endangered regions. Image credit: alvise forcellini / Flickr