

Up in smoke: charcoal production threatens almost a tenth of Somalia's avifauna

Title

When African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom) forces took control of the port city of Kismayo in Southern Somalia in September, they found an estimated four million sacks of charcoal waiting to be exported. A further four million sacks were stockpiled in and around the city, and at the village of Buur Gabo, near the Kenyan border. Much of the charcoal going out of Kismayo is believed to have come from the Jubba valley, part of an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) shared between Somalia and Ethiopia, which includes six Important Bird Areas (IBAs) on the Somali side of the border. All the charcoal at Buur Gabo is thought to have come from the mangroves and *Acacia* forests of the Laag Badaana (Bush Bush National Park) IBA, which is contiguous with the Boni Forest Reserve on the Kenyan side of the border, part of the East African Coastal Forests EBA. Further stocks of charcoal subsequently found at Badhaadhe, to the north of Laag Badaana, are also likely to have come from the national park. Between them the Jubba forests and Laag Badana are home to more than 50 bird species not found anywhere else in Somalia, representing 9% of Somalia's recorded avifauna, and their survival in the country is threatened by the scale of charcoal production.

The UN and the Somali government have banned the export of charcoal, which provided the main source of income for the al-Shabaab militants who previously controlled Kishmayo. The Somali government ban on charcoal exports dates back to 1969, and Somalia's new president has re-emphasised that he does not want either the Somali ban, or the UN one, lifted. But exports have resumed because the port is under control of forces that are beyond the control of the president. Now that the charcoal is moving, mangrove and *Acacia* trees are once again being cut down. Reports indicate that many people involved in charcoal production are well aware that the damage to their environment and livelihoods is likely to be irreversible, but see themselves as having no economic alternative. It is thought likely that the fragile *Acacia* dry forest ecosystems in particular will be unable to recover, while Laag Badana holds the most important remnant of Somalia's mangroves, which are under extreme pressure elsewhere from exploitation and coastal development.