

Tanzanians call for easier data access and sharing for posterity of a biodiversity hotspot

Tanzanian stakeholders have expressed urgent need for consolidation, sharing and easier access of biodiversity data in order to help in guiding conservation decisions and reduce duplication of efforts. This is particularly in regard to the Eastern Arc Mountains and Coastal Forests, a region that forms part of a unique biodiversity rich hotspot that has over years attracted a lot of research and conservation interest. These concerns were expressed during a national consultation meeting held on 6th August 2012 in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania as part of a BirdLife led project that is consolidating and availing biodiversity data for this important section of the Eastern Afrotropical biodiversity hotspot. The meeting aimed at conducting a biodiversity information needs and availability assessment for the Tanzanian side of the Eastern Arc Mountains and Coastal Forests (EACF). "There is still lots of important information out there that planners and key decision makers do not have access to, yet it could be important in guiding decisions regarding the Eastern Arc Mountains Coastal Forests of Tanzania", said Mr Deo-Gratius Gamassa, the Chief Coordinator of Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (WCST, BirdLife in Tanzania), in his opening remarks. "This initiative is therefore laudable and it should focus on making data accessible and in simple formats that can be used even at the local level", he added. Also in attendance was Mr Zawadi Mbwambo, a representative from Tanzania Forest Service who further emphasized on the need to bring together the widely scattered data. "Relevant information is spread all over among projects and institutions, yet decision makers want it at a central place. As a result, people may be referring to outdated references while making important decisions", he pointed out. On a positive note however, he indicated that the Tanzanian government has done a lot to improve management of indigenous forests, including upgrading several to reserve status and creating corridors between important forests. "Not only do such efforts become more effective if they are guided by relevant up-to-date biodiversity data, but even development decisions would better be guided by facts from such data", he said. In his closing, he called for reinforcement of networks among institutions and urged stakeholders to bridge the information gap currently being witnessed. Fortunately, the Tanzanian Commission of Science and Technology (COSTECH), the organ mandated to coordinate and promote research development activities in Tanzania is already some steps ahead in putting together national data and availing it. Ms. Hulda Gideon, a COSTECH representative was very enthusiastic about the BirdLife-led project and indicated that COSTECH now holds a database of

Tanzania's national biodiversity information (TanBIF) which is now being actively updated. The information contained in the databases is freely accessible for the purposes of meeting the information needs of stakeholders. She welcomed WCST to join consortium of institutions that are contributing to TanBIF. Also, present was a representative from Nature Kenya (BirdLife in Kenya) who used the opportunity to demonstrate how biodiversity monitoring data is being captured through the World Biodiversity Database and being used for national and international reporting to influence policies and decisions. The meeting ended in high spirits with a general feeling by stakeholders that this project will help to bridge the current gap in information on status of biodiversity especially in the Eastern Arc Mountains and Coastal Forests of Tanzania and Kenya as a whole. It had been hosted by WCST in collaboration with BirdLife Africa Partnership Secretariat, being an activity of a Critical Ecosystem Partnership (CEPF) funded project being implemented by BirdLife International through WCST in Tanzania and Nature Kenya on the Kenyan side.