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VISION FOR A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

Sacred Mountain

by Hilary French - Paintings by Stephen Mureithi

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Illegal garbage dumping in Mt. Kenya National Park



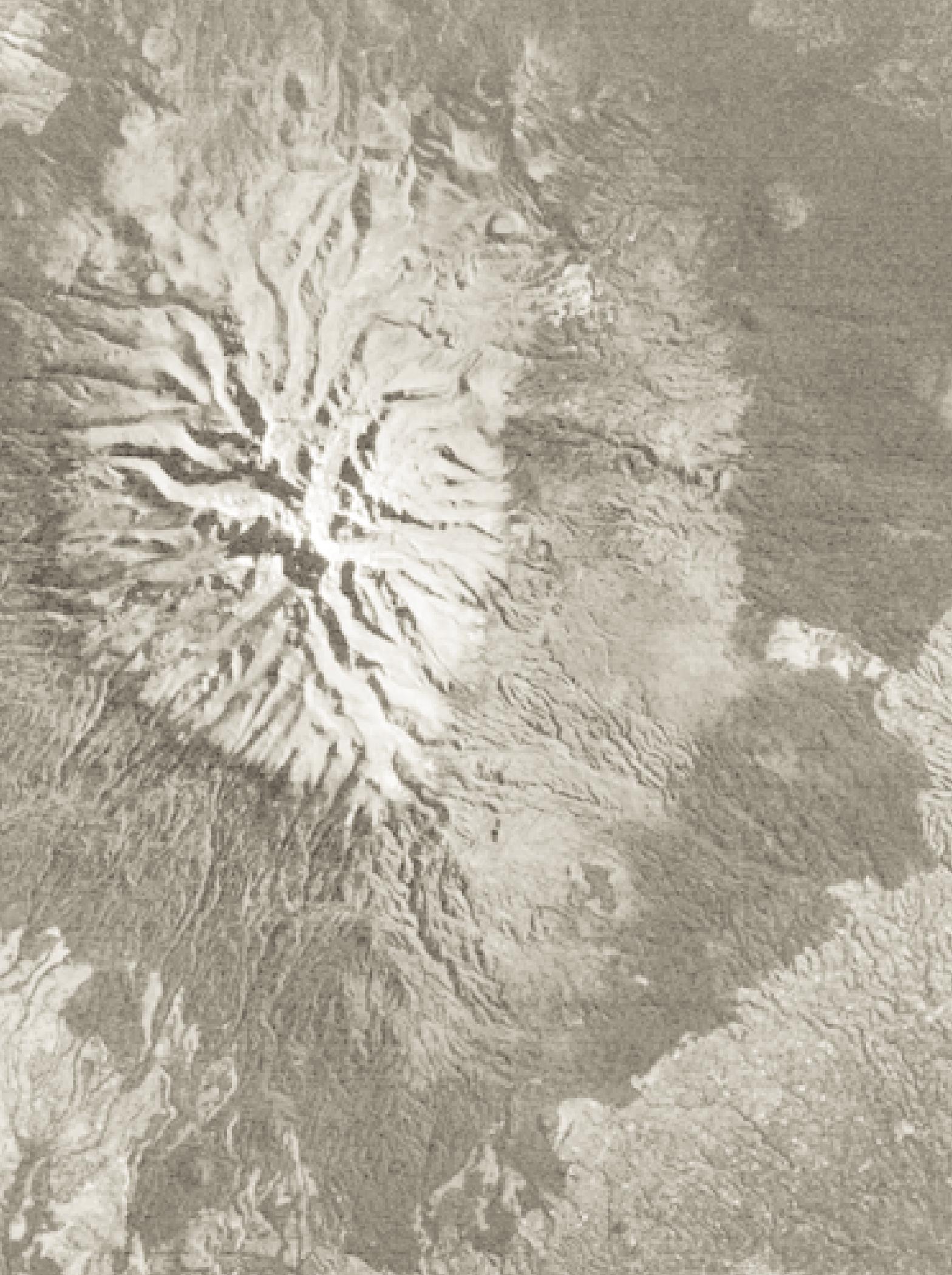
Sacred Mountain

Not all the news from Africa is bad.

by Hilary French - Paintings by Stephen Mureithi

There's a place in Africa where ice lies directly on the equator. Twelve glaciers—all of them shrinking—follow striated ridges up the rocky flanks of Mount Kenya, which rises 5,119 meters (17,058 feet) into the East African sky. If you should visit from other parts of the world, look for a great solitary cone that bears a striking resemblance to two other mythic mountains, Mount Rainier and Mount Fuji, but is more than 2,000 feet higher than either of them. To the Kikuyu people who have lived around it for at least three centuries, Mount Kenya is the dwelling place of God.

Mount Kenya is also regarded as an extraordinary place by biologists, ethnoecologists, and development experts, who see this mountain as the epicenter of a critical experiment—the outcome of which could have important implications for the future of the continent. Mount Kenya is home to a rich array of biological wealth, including at least 882 plant species and a wide variety of wildlife—including elephants, black rhinoceroses, giant forest hogs, and





Self-portrait: Artist Stephen Mureithi paints a mural to promote individual responsibility in conservation efforts.

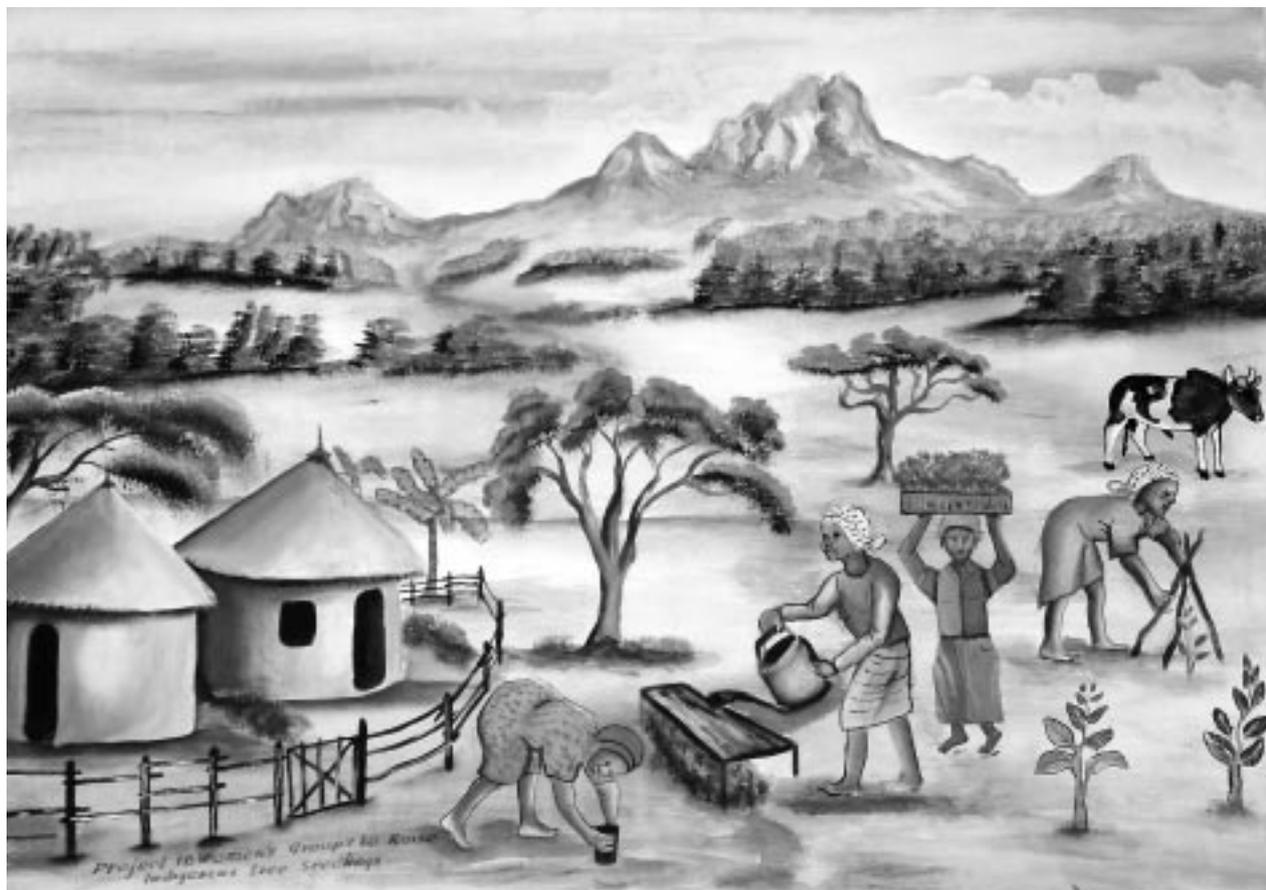
highly threatened mountain bongos—that inhabit the surrounding forest lands. The region became a national forest reserve in 1932 in the midst of the country’s colonial era, and portions of it were protected as a national park in 1949. In late 1997, the United Nations designated the Mount Kenya National Park and some of its surrounding forests a World Heritage Site in recognition of their extraordinary natural beauty and ecological importance.

This region is home not only to an abundance of nature, but also to a large number of people, many of whom live in poverty. People and nature have sometimes come into direct conflict in the area. In the early spring or late summer, bush elephants periodically emerge from the forest to raid farmers’ crops—and have been known to wipe out a 10-acre farm in one night. Conversely, people seeking income through illegal activities such as logging, charcoal production, and marijuana harvesting have often set up operations in parklands, which can accelerate deforestation and increase the risk of forest fires.

But there is also growing recognition in the region that the future of the local people and that of their rich mountain ecosystem are inextricably intertwined. The experiment now under way seeks to replace destructive

exploitation, whether by rampaging elephants or trespassing loggers, with a diverse economy in which the mountain’s unique ecosystem provides key ecological services while the people learn a range of new skills aimed at protecting the ecosystem and producing new sources of income. With guidance from an initiative called Community Management of Protected Areas Conservation (COMPACT), Kenyans are engaged in new programs to provide fresh water to both people and crops, reforest degraded slopes, stop illegal logging, introduce more energy-efficient cooking stoves, provide new jobs in beekeeping or ecotourism, and keep elephants out of farmers’ fields. COMPACT programs have also been established at five other World Heritage sites on four continents.

I had a chance to witness some of this renaissance when I traveled to Kenya last year, primarily to attend an annual meeting of the world’s environment ministers—the Global Ministerial Environment Forum of the Nairobi-based United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Just over a month earlier, Kenyans had peacefully elected a new president, overturning nearly four decades of one-party rule. That stunning political transformation generated widespread hope for significant improvements in both human and envi-



Raising seedlings: Women on the eastern side of the mountain plant indigenous trees for forest rehabilitation.

ronmental welfare in the country. (See our interview with Wangari Maathai, Assistant Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife, on page 26.)

I had long been both an observer and a student of international environmental diplomacy, having been a member of Worldwatch Institute delegations to the June 1992 UN “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro and to the September 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. More recently, I had become something of a direct participant in this process as well, working as a consultant to UNEP.

Skeptics often wonder whether all of the rhetoric about the environment and sustainable development in these large UN gatherings adds up to any real change on the ground. It was partly with that nagging question in mind that, before leaving for Kenya, I made contact with Nancy Chege, a former colleague at Worldwatch who now works as the local coordinator for the aforementioned COMPACT initiative in the Mount Kenya region. Nancy invited me to come and observe.

More than half of all Kenyans live in poverty, according to the most recent estimates. Reducing this number is a high national and international priority, as reflected in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by nearly all of the world’s heads of

state at the UN General Assembly in the fall of 2000. These goals call for reducing by half the share of the world’s people living in extreme poverty by 2015, reducing by half the number of people suffering from hunger or lacking access to clean drinking water; reducing infant mortality by two-thirds; and ensuring that all children are enrolled in primary school. The official Plan of Implementation agreed to at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 recognized a number of new targets as international goals, including significantly slowing the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010 and cutting by half the share of people without access to basic sanitation by 2015. Many observers wonder how realistic these goals are, and whether the poverty-reduction targets contained in the Millennium Development Goals are consistent with the more environmentally oriented targets affirmed in Johannesburg.

The efforts that Nancy Chege coordinates in the Mount Kenya region form just one component of the overall COMPACT program, which is also pursuing similar initiatives at Sian Ka’an in Mexico, Morne Trois Pitons in Dominica, Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the Barrier Reef in Belize, and Puerto Princesa in the Philippines. The \$6 million initiative is part of the Small



Children join in: Students plant indigenous tree seedlings on the western side of Mount Kenya.

Grants Programme of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the COMPACT initiative is jointly funded by the Washington, D.C.-based United Nations Foundation, which was created in 1997 to manage Ted Turner's \$1 billion gift to the UN, and by GEF (a joint undertaking of the World Bank, UNDP, and UNEP set up in the early 1990s to channel funds from donor governments to projects in developing countries that contribute to global environmental protection).

In the mid-1990s, Nancy had helped me research a Worldwatch Paper I was writing on the role of the United Nations in environmental protection and sustainable development. Published not long after the Rio Earth Summit, the paper examined prospects for the numerous treaties and agreements that had been reached there, as well as for the multitude of international organizations given a role in carrying them out, including UNEP, UNDP, and the GEF. Nearly a decade later, international deliberations such as those at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development were increasingly concluding that what the world needed most was not new polit-

ical agreements for environmental protection and sustainable development, but more concrete efforts to translate the rhetoric of sustainable development into on-the-ground reality.

With my official UNEP meetings over, I set off for the small town of Nanyuki to meet up with Nancy and see what I could learn about how this translation of rhetoric to reality was proceeding in the area where she worked. I saw that Mount Kenya was a towering presence in Nanyuki, which is a regular staging place for mountaineering expeditions. One of our first stops was at Nancy's small office in the middle of the bustling town.

On her wall I noticed a Geographical Information Systems (GIS) map of the broader region and the environmental conditions and challenges found there. Based on data from an aerial survey of the Mount Kenya forests conducted in 1999 by the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) with support from UNEP, it showed widespread forest destruction linked with various illegal activities: charcoal production; logging of indigenous tree species such as camphor (*Ocotea usambarensis*), cedar (*Juniperus procera*), and wild olive (*Olea europaea*); marijuana cultivation; and unautho-



Eco-Resource Center: It's an artist's painting of an artist's sketch, but the real building is now under construction.

rized agricultural settlements.

I learned that the information gleaned from the survey had generated a quick response from the Kenyan government, including the designation of parts of the region as a national reserve. This change in official status resulted in a shift in management of that area from the Forest Department to the Kenya Wildlife Service, which immediately launched a crackdown on illegal industries. Subsequent surveys show the logging of indigenous trees having declined by more than 90 percent since 1999, and the number of illegal charcoal kilns having fallen by 62 percent. In addition to providing the information needed for more vigorous enforcement, these survey and mapping exercises have provided critical input for people working to design the COMPACT projects and, by extension, for people who depend upon these projects for their livelihoods.

Later that day, we headed out of town and connected at a roadside refreshments kiosk with a Mr. Ngahu, a retired forest service official who was working on a project that is engaging primary school children in the restoration of local forests. Mr. Ngahu

climbed into Nancy's jeep, and we headed up a bumpy dirt road through the Gathiuru Forest on the western side of Mount Kenya. He explained that the children are raising seedlings of native East African olive (*Olea africana*), East African pencil cedar (*Juniperus procera*), and other indigenous species, and planting them in degraded areas of the forest. Along the way, we visited Guara Primary, the school that Mr. Ngahu was working with, and were greeted warmly by the principal, who told us about the challenges he was facing owing to a large influx of new students. They were coming, he said, in response to a much-heralded pledge by the new Kenyan government to eliminate the school fees that had previously made even public primary school education unaffordable to many.

Continuing up the road, we were passed several times by people headed in the opposite direction on bicycles loaded with fuelwood, which supplies some 80 percent of the energy used in Kenya. We also passed agricultural settlements that are part of the controversial "Shamba" system, in which local people are granted permission to cultivate small plots of land for food in return for agreeing to plant tree seedlings. Unfortu-



Bee-keeping: Farmers are learning that protecting forests, rather than clearing them, increases honey production.

nately, the 1999 aerial survey had revealed that the system was in many cases being abused in ways that contributed to more deforestation rather than reforestation. Enforcement of the rules was being hampered by corruption in the Forest Department, to which the new government had responded by sending home some 800 officers pending interviews to establish whether they were implicated in the malfeasance.

The morning after my visit to Gathiuru Forest, we left Nanyuki and drove to the town of Meru, on the main ring road around Mount Kenya. We stopped along the way at Nkunga Sacred Crater Lake, in the Imenti Forest. In the local Meru language, Nkunga refers to a mythical seven-headed dragon that was said to inhabit the lake and to trap straying humans by biting their shadows and using its magical powers to drag them into the river and devour them. Nkunga Lake was treated as a sacred shrine as a result of the beast's presence, which meant that water could not be drawn from it, nor could firewood be collected from the surrounding woodlands.

In recent decades, devotion to the myth has declined—and so has the ecological health of the lake. One particular problem has been a fast-growing invasive grass (*Leersia hexandra*) that is covering most of

the lake. To address this problem, one of Nancy's COMPACT projects is mobilizing local people to remove the weed with a hand-constructed wooden pulley system, and to turn the uprooted weed into marketable fertilizer. When their de-weeding task is completed, the local community will manage the lake as an ecotourism site featuring nature trails, picnic sites, bird-watching sites, rowboat facilities, and local mythological lore. The installation of a borehole is also planned, to provide the community with an alternative source of water that people will not have to descend steep slopes to fetch. This will not only stem erosion of the slopes but free up the women who formerly did the water-carrying to pursue other activities.

We continued our circumnavigation of Mount Kenya the following day, heading towards the town of Embu. Along the way, we visited several other COMPACT projects. At one of them, a coalition of groups is helping local farmers to establish beehives on the outskirts of the forest to generate income for environmentally friendly honey production. The farmers involved with the project have adopted the slogan "Trees for Bees," and are reportedly planting more trees both on their own farms and in the nearby forest, based on a new-found understanding that healthy veg-



Solar fence: The sun's energy not only sustains both farm crops and wildlife, but keeps the two separated.

etation results in more honey production and hence more income. The plan is for the local farmers to also work with the Forest Department and the Kenya Wildlife Service to monitor illegal activities in the forest, such as prohibited timber or marijuana harvesting. Other COMPACT projects in the Mount Kenya area include efforts to help local communities protect their crops from elephant raids by constructing a 14-kilometer-long protective solar-powered electric fence and installing wood-efficient cook-stoves at local schools in order to reduce fuelwood harvesting.

With our circumnavigation of the mountain now complete, Nancy and I headed back to UN headquarters at Gigiri, on the outskirts of Nairobi. There Nancy introduced me to Esther Mwangi, the Kenya Coordinator for UNDP-GEP's Small Grants Program, which oversees the Mount Kenya COMPACT projects. I also met Christian Lambrechts of UNEP, who was one of the forces behind the Mount Kenya aerial survey operations. We spoke of work still to be done in the Mount Kenya region and in other threatened areas, such as the Aberdare Mountains. I had wondered if progress on the ground was suffering from turf battles and other bureaucratic infighting, a common predicament in the development business. While these problems are not entirely

absent, I learned that the Kenya Forest Working Group and the Mount Kenya Donor/Partner Forum it facilitates were serving as useful forums for coordinating among the various organizations working to safeguard Kenya's forests. Rather than tales of infighting, I mostly heard about mutual respect and collaboration across bureaucratic lines.

Meanwhile, I logged onto the Internet to check on the news from home, where ominous war clouds were gathering and Washington, D.C. was beginning to look like a military fortress in response to stepped-up concerns about terrorist threats. Over the next month, events at the United Nations Security Council in New York dominated headlines as the world moved steadily down the path that would lead to the launch of the Iraq War in mid-March. Although the world was deeply divided on the wisdom of that course, in Kenya I had seen promising signs that international cooperation was not only possible but already well under way on an altogether different UN pursuit—that of protecting the planet's natural systems and improving the quality of life of all of us who depend upon them.

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