

Kenya's forests under siege as development pressure mounts

► Controversial developments in Nairobi National Park and Imenti Forest have triggered public outrage.

► Experts are questioning transparency, legal compliance and the long-term impact on biodiversity and water towers.

JACINTA MUTURA, NAIROBI

Development projects are increasingly encroaching on Kenya's forests and protected parks, sparking public outrage among Kenyans and conservationists over the future of the country's natural heritage.

The latest contentious plan involves hiving off part of Nairobi National Park to relocate the Nairobi Animal Orphanage and construct a parking facility, a move conservationists warn could open the door to further encroachment.

Kenya's forests and protected parks are under growing pressure from infrastructure expansion, state-backed projects and private developments.

According to the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), the relocation aims to improve animal welfare by moving the orphanage from its current five-acre site to a larger, modern facility at the periphery of the park, near the Bomas of Kenya.

At first, the project was proposed to hive off about 99 acres of Nairobi National Park, a space that will include a 76.6-acre area, a 22-acre ecological corridor linking the new orphanage site to the Nairobi Safari Walk, a 10-kilometre electric perimeter fence and a 700-metre predator-proof barrier.

However, conservationists say the Nairobi and Karura forest projects reflect a worrying lack of transparency, raising fears that protected green spaces are under threat.

KWS insists the new facility will include veterinary and research units, quarantine areas, training spaces and improved visitor infrastructure.

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report reveals that the orphanage will be relocated to an 18-acre site, and in another section of the report, they indicate that the orphanage will be relocated to a 64-acre site.

"We are told that this is necessary for convenience and growth. But I

ask, growth for what? And at what cost? Nairobi National Park is not an empty space waiting to be developed. It is a living ecosystem," said Nyaguthii Chege, from the Green Belt Movement.

"It is the only national park in the whole world that is within a capital city. It is a place where wildlife migrates freely while the skyline of a modern city rises in the background," she added.

The project also includes ecological corridors, fencing, sanctuary headquarters and a large car park, further fuelling controversy over land use.

Conservationists also cite inconsistencies in the EIA, which alternately describes parking capacity as 50 buses and 100 cars, and elsewhere up to 1,300 vehicles.

Friends of Nairobi National Park (FoNNAP) argue that a proposed 1,300-vehicle parking facility appears excessive and may serve wider commercial interests, including the Bomas International Convention Centre (BICC), allegations KWS denies.

The other contentious issue includes the construction of a perimeter fence around the site. KWS indicates that the boundary of the proposed site will be marked by a 700-metre electric fence.

They further state that the site will be enclosed by an approximately 10-kilometre electric perimeter fence to ensure the safety of both captive animals and surrounding wildlife populations.

These discrepancies have raised doubts over the actual scope and size of the land KWS intends to hive off from the park and what is the intended purpose.

While KWS is citing 99-acre, conservation groups argue that enclosing a location by a 10-km fence signals a possibility of hiving off a larger portion that will not be declared in as part of the project.

KWS reported that already partial funding to construct the 700-metre electric perimeter fence has already been allocated. According to KWS, the total estimated budget for the relocation and modernisation of the orphanage is Sh57,868,000.

Transparency concerns

This has fuelled fears that the relocation plan is being used as a gateway for commercial infrastructure within protected land, a claim that KWS has vehemently dismissed as false.

"They also say that this particular project will only take 0.03 per cent of the park, but this is the same logic



Karura forest. [Courtesy]

GREEN SPACES, FORESTS VIOLATIONS AND THREATS

NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK

- Proposed excision 99 acres of park land for relocation of the Nairobi Animal Orphanage.
- Planned construction of a 1300-vehicle parking facility inside the park.
- Proposed construction of a 10-km electric perimeter fence
- **Other projects contributing to loss of park land:** Southern Bypass, Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) Phases I and II, Inland Container Depot Road

IMENTI FOREST

- Proposed excision of up to 200 acres of forest land
- Planned construction of: Meru State Lodge, Airstrip, Golf course

KARURA FOREST

- Clearing of sections of indigenous forest for a 3-acre tree nursery project.
- Construction of temporary accommodation for National Youth Service (NYS) personnel.
- Restricted access to project sites, limiting independent verification.
- Secret construction of a 3-kilometre tarmac road within the forest.
- Proposal to excise 51.64 acres for Kiambu Road expansion.

- Attempt to establish a private hotel inside the forest through a special user license.

NGONG ROAD FOREST

- Construction of a luxury eco-lodge and wellness retreat within the forest.
- Excision of about five acres of forest land.
- Construction of permanent concrete structures despite claims of eco-friendly facilities.
- **Alleged plans to excise additional forest land for a VIP access road linking:**
- Talanta Stadium
- Proposed conference facilities at Bomas of Kenya

ABERDARE FOREST AND ABERDARE NATIONAL PARK

- Proposed highway cutting through the Aberdare ecosystem affecting 255 acres of the forest
- Potential destruction of bamboo forest, montane forest and moorland habitats. Fragmentation of wildlife habitats and migration corridors.

UHURU PARK

- Alleged attempts to excise part of the park for expansion of Uhuru Highway.

that has allowed almost four per cent of this National Park to be lost in the last decade," said Akshay Vishwanath, from Just Act.

"We lost part of the park for the Southern Bypass, then the Standard Gauge Railway Phase 1 and Phase 2 and part of the park was lost for the Internal Container Depot Road," Akshay added.

The groups state that the area serves as habitat for a wide range of wildlife, including lions, rhinos,

Maasai giraffes and numerous bird species, warning that disturbance of such zones could disrupt ecological balance and wildlife movement.

"The fact that KWS, an environmental institution, justifies this project by saying they are not cutting down a forest, but they are just clearing a grassland within a National Park speaks to either a cognitive dissonance on their part or a simple lack of understanding of what their mandate is," Vishwanath asserted.

There are also concerns over the approval process. Conservation groups allege that the EIA was approved without meaningful public participation and that key documents were not made available for public scrutiny.

For many, the developments in Nairobi National Park represent a test case that could set a precedent for future encroachment into protected areas. "We are told that this parking space is for tourism and infrastructure support. But there are alternative solutions that do not require taking land from a national park. We could invest in satellite parking but we cannot replace its biodiversity once it's lost," Chege said.

"What is happening here is not an isolated case. It is part of a troubling pattern that we see across our country," she added.

In Meru County, Imenti Forest is at the centre of a growing legal dispute over proposed developments that could affect the forest's landscape.

The proposal to hive off up to 200 acres in Imenti forest for construction of Meru State Lodge, an airstrip and golf course caused a storm of reactions and public fury.

But despite the interim conservatory orders issued by Meru Environment and Land Court, barring the government from altering, clearing or constructing in any section of Imenti Forest until the case filed is heard and determined, government machinery have moved into Kithoka of the forest and started felling trees in the forest under heavy security.

Last week, Forestry Principal Secretary Gtonga Mugambi defended



the project insisting that the proposed airstrip will be complete and operational from Thursday, June 18 despite the court order.

“These works, we are committed to deliver them. They come with big economic opportunities. State lodge will employ more than 500 Meru people, the golf will employ many people,” Mugambi said.

“There was nobody there who had an interest in putting the last signature. Today, one of you, and that is me standing in front of you, I have that opportunity to put that signature and deliver this project for Meru,” the PS said.

He argued that: “It is only Meru County where you cannot land because we do not have an airstrip.”

The petitioner Francis Awino seeks to stop any excision or allocation of land within the forest, arguing that the developments pose a direct threat to the ecological integrity of the forest and could lead to irreversible environmental damage if allowed to proceed.

In his petition, Awino seeks to have the court preserve the status quo and prevent any activities that could alter Imenti forest before the case is fully heard.

The case also raises more concerns about recent amendments to the Forest Conservation and Management Act.

He argues that the changes in the recently assented law may have weakened protections for public forests by allowing infrastructure projects such as roads and utilities to be approved under less stringent conditions.

Section 56(2) of the Forest Conservation and Management Act in-

troduces easements and wayleaves within public and private forests for roads, public installations and utilities, a provision conservationists say can be exploited.

“This law will be misused to a maximum because provided whatever the authority is giving is in line with a public utility, it will pass and the law does not define what is a public utility. It can be anything including a hospital or a state house inside Karura like what we are seeing in Imenti,” Job Mwangi, Advocacy manager at Green Belt Movement argued.

“We are really discouraged because if the president is very busy talking about the 15 billion trees agenda, yet he’s still the one who is allowing such draconian amendments to pass, what does this tell us? He’s not being genuine. You cannot be giving on this side and taking from the other,” he added.

The Conservation groups argue that legal and policy shifts could be creating new pathways for development within protected forests.

Forest encroachment

“This is more than a legislative amendment. It is a defining environmental governance moment that will shape the future of our public forests, water towers, biodiversity, climate resilience, indigenous ecosystems, and community rights for generations to come,” the Green Belt Movement argued.

Few forests in Kenya carry as much historical and symbolic weight as Karura Forest. Once the site of fierce resistance against land grabbing in the 1990s, the forest is again at the centre of a conservation battle.

The government had initiated the clearing of sections of the forest to establish a large-scale tree nursery aimed at supporting the national target of planting 15 billion trees by 2032.

The project also included the construction of temporary accommodation for National Youth Service (NYS) personnel before the court stopped the construction until the case filed in court to challenge the project is heard and determined.

Officials have defended the initiative as necessary to boost seedling production and support reforestation efforts. However, conservation groups argue that the approach is fundamentally flawed.

The ministry of Forestry led by the Cabinet Secretary Deborah Barasa stated that the project was in support of President William Ruto’s 15 billion trees initiative.

But stakeholders questioned the logic of cutting down mature indigenous trees in order to plant new ones, particularly within a protected urban forest. They also argue that there are alternative sites outside the forest where such facilities could be established without compromising biodiversity.

“Their main argument was that they are doing this in almost all the forest stations in Kenya such as Kinare and Ndunduri forests, but Karura is not like any other forest. It is an

indigenous forest,” said Mwangi.

“When you want to do seed propagation, you do it near where they are needed. But because of the tarmacking that had happened earlier, we were certain it could also be a backdoor route to grab the forest,” he added.

Another major point of contention is the lack of public participation. The Friends of Karura Community Forest Association, which is legally mandated to co-manage the forest, says it was not consulted or involved in the planning of the project.

Environmentalists also pointed to restrictions placed on access to the site, which have made it difficult to independently verify the extent of the works before the court halted the construction, fuelling concerns that the project could be larger or more permanent than officially described.

In August 2025, a three-kilometre tarmac was secretly constructed inside Karura Forest, justified as access to guards’ houses.

“They actually tarmacked that stretch within two nights. They argued that it was meant to help them access the guards’ houses in Karura, but Friends of Karura Forest and Kenya Forest Service had actually built some new blocks of apartments at the KFS headquarters to move the guards,” said Mwangi.

Karura has faced repeated attempts at excision, including a 2024 plan to remove 51.64 acres for Kiamplu Road expansion, later reduced by court to 0.3 acres.

The board also granted a private firm a licence for a hotel project inside the forest, later stopped by court.

Ngong Road Forest is also under pressure from a luxury camping project initiated without NEMA approval or public participation.

Reports showed inconsistencies in the scale of development, ranging from 11 to 20 cottages. The developer is linked to individuals in government. “It was a secret project that they hoped we wouldn’t notice. But it’s hard to hide the excision of five acres and the construction of a hotel in one of the last remaining forests within Nairobi.”

“And they’re not done with the Ngong Road Forest Sanctuary; we know of plans to take approximately 10 hectares of this same forest to build a road for VIPs between Talan-



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ta Stadium on Ngong Road and the new conference centre at Bomas,” Chege alleged.

She alleged that there are also attempts to hive off a section of Uhuru Park to expand Uhuru Highway.

Beyond Nairobi, the Aberdare Forest and National Park face a proposed highway cutting through the ecosystem, strongly opposed by conservationists.

The road project, intended to connect parts of Nyeri and Nyandarua counties, has been strongly opposed by conservation groups.

The Aberdare ecosystem is one of Kenya’s five main water towers, a key biodiversity area, and home to endangered species such as the mountain bongo and hundreds of bird species.

“This expanded road would cut across the Aberdare ranges, fragmenting one of Kenya’s most important water towers, a living interconnected system that protects Kenya’s climate, water resources, wildlife and livelihoods,” said the conservation group.

According to project documents, the road would affect over 255 acres of forest, including bamboo, montane forest and moorland. Conservationists warn that it could fragment habitats, disrupt wildlife corridors and increase human-wildlife conflict.

Alternative routes

There are also concerns about increased road traffic leading to wildlife collisions and long-term ecological degradation.

Critics argue that alternative routes exist that would achieve the same connectivity goals without cutting through the protected area.

Studies have also questioned the economic viability of the project, suggesting that it may not deliver the anticipated benefits.

Although a court has temporarily halted the project, conservation groups remain concerned that it could still proceed if approvals are upheld.

Green Belt Movement stated that taken together, the moves on public forests and parks point to a trend of incremental encroachment into Kenya’s protected ecosystem.

“Piece by piece, acre by acre, we see plans to turn our forests, our parks and our public green spaces into construction sites. These plans would systematically, intentionally and deliberately replace our natural ecosystems with built infrastructure,” Chege asserted.

Irungu Houghton from Amnesty International stated that too many of the government projects are being pushed through systems that are in violation of Article 1 of the Constitution. “Without public participation and public ownership, development has no rooting in our society,” he said.

Former Chief Justice David Maraga said, “Are we going to do development at the expense of our environment? This is a very serious thing that we are extending the arid and semi-arid parts of this country.”

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ENVIRONMENT

Calls grow to stop construction of Imenti airstrip in protected forest

Public opposition to the construction of an airstrip in the Upper Imenti Forest Reserve in Meru County is intensifying, with calls to halt the project growing louder.

Conservation groups, community leaders and environmental advocates have united in demanding an immediate stop, warning that the development threatens biodiversity and undermines forest protection efforts.

The latest appeal comes from Rhino Ark Kenya Charitable Trust, a conservation organisation focused on protecting Kenya’s mountain forest ecosystems through electric fencing, community partnerships and sustainable resource management.

In a statement, Rhino Ark called on the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) to suspend all works pending compliance with environmental laws and constitutional requirements. “As a long-standing conservation partner in the Mt Kenya ecosystem, Rhino Ark has invested over a billion shillings over 14 years in conservation infrastructure, including 320 kilometres of electric fencing around Mt Kenya forests,” the organisation said.

Through its Rhino Charge off-road event, the organisation has raised funds over 37 years to protect more than 650,000 hectares of forest habitats and construct 853 kilometres of electric fencing to reduce human-wildlife conflict.

At the 37th Rhino Charge held in Samburu, Sh365 million was raised in an event attended by President William Ruto.

Rhino Ark said the investments have reduced human-wildlife conflict and strengthened conservation in a key ecosystem.

The organisation raised concern that the airstrip is being constructed within a protected forest that forms part of the Mt Kenya ecosystem, also gazetted as a national reserve for its ecological and water catchment value.

The project is expected to include a State Lodge and a golf course.

Rhino Ark also argued that no public participation or Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) had been conducted, and no licence had been issued by NEMA, raising concerns over legality and oversight.

Mt Kenya is one of Kenya’s five main water towers, supplying water for irrigation, hydropower, agriculture and livelihoods. The Upper Imenti Forest lies on the divide between the Tana and Ewaso Nyiro basins, making it ecologically sensitive.

The ecosystem hosts more than 880 plant species, including 81 endemics, and supports wildlife such as elephants, bongo, leopard and over 50 highland bird species.

Rhino Ark proposed upgrading existing facilities instead of constructing a new airstrip in a protected forest, warning of ecological damage and policy conflicts with national development frameworks. **[Peter Muiruri]**