

# A tale of Forests, Folklore, and Hope

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If Barnabas Ngesemwo could return to his childhood in the Cherangany Hills, he would sit closer to his grandfather while he was telling stories by the fireside, and listen more intently. But, as a young boy, he was more interested in chasing butterflies, and hunting hares. Now, at 70 years of age, he recalls that those stories, “taught me about the forest and our community’s connection to it,” Ngesemwo says.

A storyteller himself, Ngesemwo is keeping the tradition alive, with tales inspired by memories of thick forests, roaring rivers, and valleys teeming with wildlife. He knows that the knowledge he shares is important as the landscape around him today is very different — the rivers are now a muddy trickle, and the lush valleys are scarred by rampant logging and degradation.

Cherangany forests currently sequester 33 million tons of carbon dioxide. With restoration, the forests could sequester nearly 38 million tons, a significant boost in the fight against climate change.

## Research project bringing hope

But there is help, and because of it Ngesemwo remains optimistic. It comes in the form of a new research project that is combining traditional knowledge with modern research techniques, to find the best ways to restore the Cherangany Hills ecosystem. It is hoped that it will identify viable options to tackle problems like illegal logging, encroachment, livestock grazing, cultivating along riparian areas, and climate change.


*Nature Kenya, National Museums of Kenya, Kenya Forestry Research Institute, Kenyatta University, and the Kenya Forest Service, are working together on this project. It is funded by the Global Centre on Biodiversity for Climate.*

## Early findings

Researchers are gathering data dating back to 1994 to understand how the forests have changed and what the future might hold. They are also mapping degraded areas, identifying areas requiring urgent restoration, and exploring what livelihoods outside the forests, like the growing of fruit trees and other high-value trees on farms, would be possible.

Preliminary findings show that between 1994 and 2023, forest cover in the Cherangany decreased significantly while farmland in the area expanded. Also, grasslands shrank, and the water quality declined due to poor farming practices like the overuse of agrochemicals.

Paul Gacheru, Species and Sites Manager at Nature Kenya, says that “The project is creating a shared vision, and when completed, it will help us develop a business case for the restoration of the forests of the Cherangany Hills.” He adds, “With it, we can rally support from communities, governments, and investors.”

For Ngesemwo, the restoration of the Cherangany Hills forests is a chance to see the them flourish once again, and perhaps one day, his great grandchildren sitting by the fireside, will listen to stories of how their ancestors saved the forests. 

## 100,000 ha of forest

About 100,000 ha of forest in 13 Forests Reserves cover the Cherangany Hills, stretching across the counties of Trans-Nzoia, Elgeyo Marakwet, and West Pokot. They are globally important biodiversity hotspots, and are one of Kenya’s five vital water catchment areas. The Cherangany Hills forests feed the Nzoia River (which flows into Lake Victoria), and contribute to the Turkwel and Kerio rivers, which are key to the operations of the Turkwel Hydro-power Station, Kenya’s third-largest hydropower plant.