

Dakatcha Nature Reserve

2023 Report

A ROCHA
KENYA

Message from our team



Dear Wonderful Partners,

Thank you for your help in protecting the Dakatcha Woodlands!

2023 was a busy year in Dakatcha for the A Rocha Kenya land purchase team. Close to 3,000 acres were secured for conservation between January and November, bringing the total size of the Reserve to over 7,000 acres. Over 150 individual plots were purchased. Thousands of hours of conversations were spent with land owners, community chiefs, lawyers and community members to negotiate land deals and clearly communicate our vision for the Dakatcha Nature Reserve.

Thanks to your funding and donations, we have created a magnificent Nature Reserve in the Dakatcha Woodlands and secured it for biodiversity protection. We love the privilege of caring for this reserve on your behalf and studying the biodiversity it supports. Vegetation surveys this year increased our plant list for the Reserve up to a massive 545 different species. Elephant footprints have been recorded in recently purchased plots in the northern area. Nine scouts regularly patrol the Reserve to protect it from illegal activities. Members of the community who want to sell land are now actively seeking us out to purchase and protect plots in the Dakatcha Woodlands.

Thank you for enabling us to care for this wonderful landscape and all the life that depends on it. Because of your generosity, Sokoke Scops Owls, Golden-rumped Sengis, leopards, elephants, and all kinds of wild and wonderful butterflies, trees, flowers, beetles and lizards have a safe refuge to live, and the communities of people around the reserve enjoy a more ecologically resilient landscape. We are grateful for your partnership. This would not have been possible without you.

Asante sana!

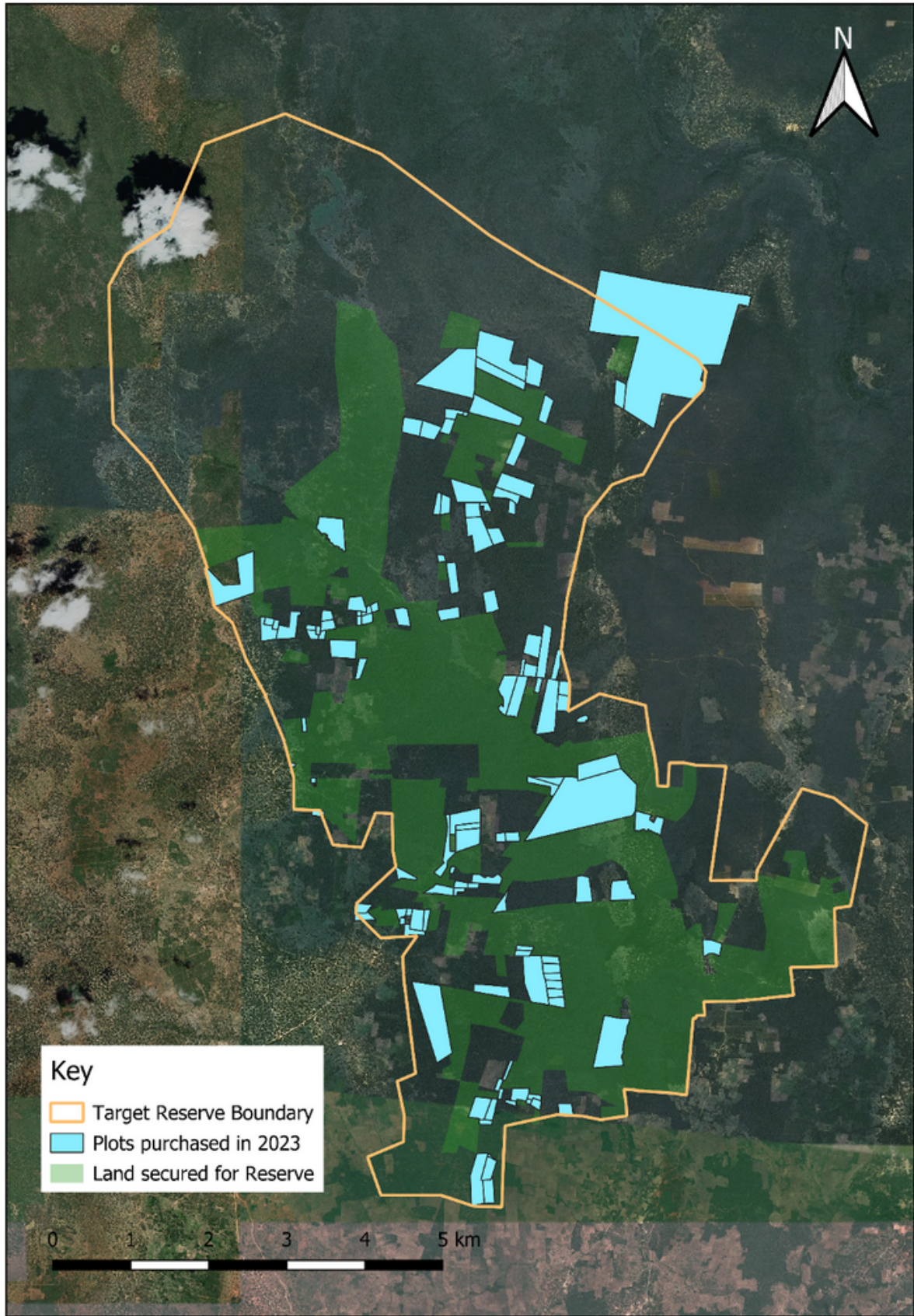


Fig.1 Land purchased for the A Rocha Dakatcha Nature Reserve in 2023 (in blue) and target boundary (outlined in orange)

Project Summary

The Dakatcha Woodlands is the largest remaining unprotected patch of East African Coastal Forest in the world.

These forests once stretched from Somalia to Mozambique, but less than 10% of this habitat remains today, mostly in fragmented patches and largely unprotected. The patches that remain are very vulnerable and are being rapidly degraded by land clearing for agriculture, charcoal burning and unrestricted livestock grazing. A Rocha Kenya is purchasing land in the Dakatcha Woodlands Key Biodiversity Area, focusing on the highest quality remnant habitat, to create a Nature Reserve that will act as a refuge for the biodiversity of this landscape.

In 2023, A Rocha Kenya made significant progress towards creating a contiguous Nature Reserve in the Dakatcha Woodlands. This year **2,289 acres** were purchased, bringing the total amount of land in the **A Rocha Dakatcha Nature Reserve to 7,459 acres**. A further 3,500 acres within the Target Reserve Boundary are currently under negotiation for purchase. Securing these plots will “fill in the gaps” of the Reserve, creating a refuge for the unique and wonderful biodiversity of the Dakatcha Woodlands.

A Rocha Kenya began purchasing land in the Dakatcha Woodlands in 2014 to create the A Rocha Dakatcha Nature Reserve. The target boundary for the Reserve was drawn to include the highest quality forest in the landscape, focusing initially on habitat for the endangered Sokoke Scops Owl. In 2019, A Rocha Kenya ecologists caught the endemic and endangered Golden-rumped Sengi on camera. This was the first time this species had ever been officially recorded north of the Sabaki / Galana River and the target boundary of the Reserve was therefore extended to include sengi habitat. The total target area A Rocha Kenya thus hopes to purchase, focusing on the habitat of the Sokoke Scops Owl and Golden-rumped Sengi, is c.16,000 acres (Fig.1).

Land purchase in Kenya is never simple and Dakatcha is no exception! To the west of the reserve lies the government-owned Galana Ranch. The widely agreed boundary lies several kms to the west of the target reserve, however government surveyors have produced old maps which show the ranch boundary in fact cuts through the northern edge of our original target boundary.

We have therefore redrawn our target boundary to exclude any land that could be considered part of the Galana Ranch (Fig. 2), as there is a risk any land purchased within this area could be claimed by the government. We had already purchased some land north of the Galana Ranch which we expect to be compensated for, should the government claim it for the Ranch. It is not a clear situation, so we are monitoring closely, managing cautiously, and focusing land purchase outside the ranch boundary.

Other challenges include increasing land prices, uncooperative herdsman from outside the community with destructive herds of cattle and camels, climate change impacting natural systems, and a community in poverty who are slowly clearing the land outside the reserve of its natural resources.

A Rocha Kenya cannot fully solve these problems, they are often beyond our control. However, we are committed to the land and to working with the people of the Dakatcha Woodlands and, thanks to partnerships such as the one we have with you, we are making a difference in this landscape. We will continue to work closely with the community and the biodiversity of the Dakatcha Woodlands for as long as there are people to work with and nature to conserve.

The creation of the A Rocha Dakatcha Nature Reserve has already provided a refuge for many species, with many yet to be discovered, and ensures that communities in this area have a healthy ecosystem services provided for them by the forest.



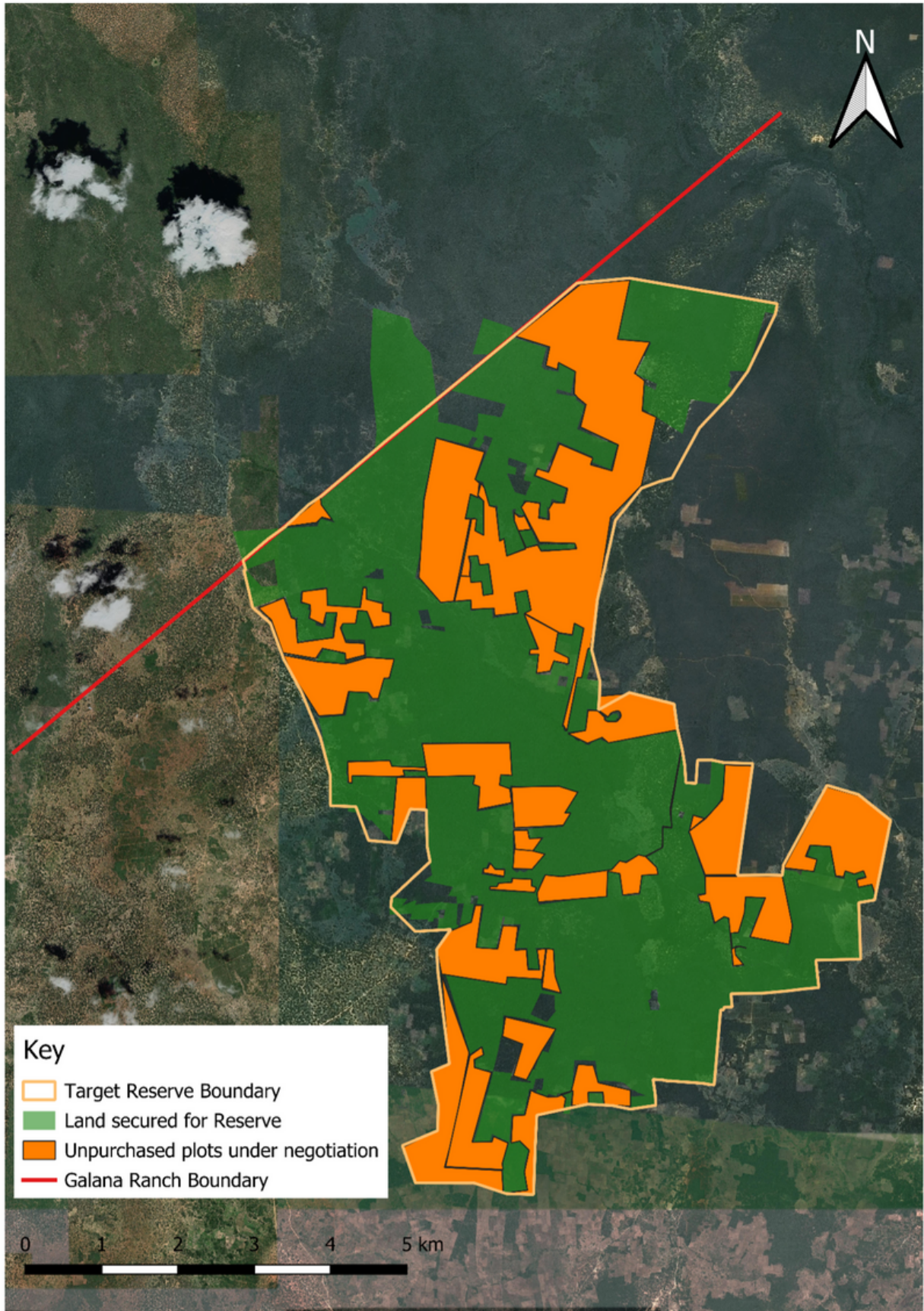


Fig.2 The A Rocha Dakatcha Nature Reserve with updated Target Reserve Boundary excluding land from the Galana Ranch (red line); all land already secured for purchase (green); all land under negotiation for purchase (orange).

Biodiversity

The Dakatcha Nature Reserve is a mosaic of habitat types, creating a rich landscape for biodiversity

In the wet season the air is thick with butterflies in the open, grassy woodlands of *Brachystegia*. These blend into dense *Cynometra* Forest, the much-loved habitat of Africa's tiniest owl, the Sokoke Scops Owl. The Dry Forests of *Diospyros* and *Manilkara* create a dense shrub understory, sheltering the endemic Golden-rumped Sengi and other small mammals as well as the scops owl. Areas that were previously completely cleared farmlands are being reclaimed by *Brachystegia*, *Acacias* and *Commiphoras*, providing important habitat for rare and threatened coastal birds such as the Clarke's Weaver, Malindi Pipit and Fischer's Turaco.

A thorough vegetation survey was carried out in July this year during the wet season with some exciting results. During this survey an impressive **224 plant species** were recorded, including two IUCN Red Listed threatened species, *Euphorbia fluminis* and *Huberantha stuhlmanni*. A possible new species of Aloe was discovered and more work will be done to gather flowering and fruiting material for a solid conclusion. These results build on the vegetation survey during the dry season in 2022, bringing the total plant list for the Dakatcha Nature Reserve to **545 species**.

More biodiversity surveys are planned for 2024. We want to gather population data of the Sokoke Scops Owl and Golden-rumped Sengi and compare against data collected in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, the largest remaining protected patch of East African coastal forest in Kenya. There is a threatened tree species, *Warburgia stuhlmannii*, in our Reserve, but it has been targeted for charcoal and timber. We want to locate the remaining trees, map them and see if we can propagate more in our nursery and replant them across the Reserve. In addition to the Sokoke Scops Owl there are four other threatened species of bird in our Reserve we have not yet studied: Sokoke Pipit, Southern Banded Snake Eagle, Fischer's Turaco and Clarke's Weaver. We also want to collect accurate data on the condition of the Reserve habitat, including location and causes of disturbances. This will inform our Environmental Education officers to target their activities to those particular areas and issues. For example, if many snares are being set around a particular village, we can talk to the villagers about it, understand what is driving the snaring, and work with them towards an alternative income or food source. While there is a lot of biodiversity research that has already been done in the Reserve, there is still a lot to do! We have merely scratched the surface and now we need to dig deep. Our focus in 2024 is to build on our baseline surveys to understand the biodiversity of our Reserve and how best to care for it.

Community

2024 was a positive year for A Rocha's relationship with the community

Many community barazas (meetings) were held to introduce A Rocha to the community and our purpose in the Dakatcha Woodlands. To successfully conserve the forest and biodiversity, we know that A Rocha can't do it alone. We therefore seek to work closely with the community and therefore put a lot of time and resources into including people from the community in A Rocha Kenya's activities. As a result, the reserve-adjacent communities have responded very positively towards the reserve and the work ARK is doing there.

A highlight of 2023 has been local willingness to sell land to A Rocha for conservation. People want to sell to A Rocha because they know they will benefit from A Rocha activities. Not only do people receive a fair price, rapid payment, and help navigating the complexities of land purchase in Kenya, they also know they will benefit from the ongoing presence of the forest in their landscape.



A Rocha has hired **nine scouts** from within the local communities to manage daily operations of the Reserve. The scouts benefit directly from the Reserve as employees, they understand the work of A Rocha and they understand the communities. This has made the scouts the best possible ambassadors for the Reserve. They constantly build awareness of the conservation restrictions of the Reserve and because of their official and unofficial presence in their own communities, there was no charcoal burning in the Reserve in 2023.

Community Agricultural Support

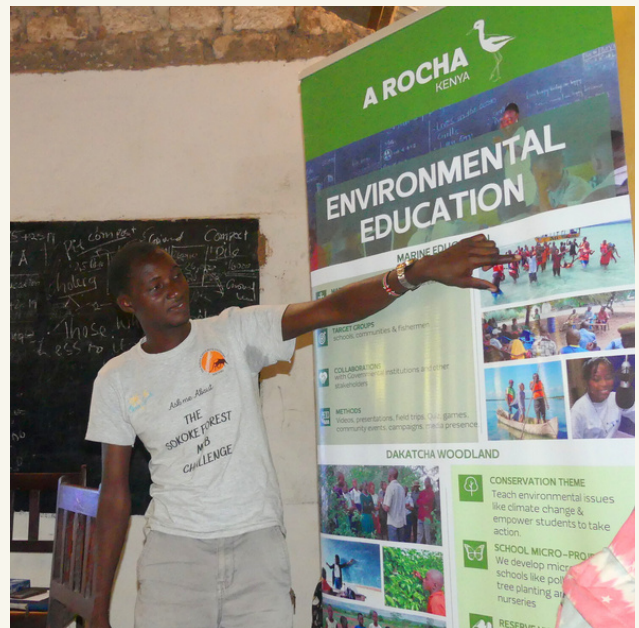
In 2018, A Rocha Kenya began a community development project to help farmers in the Dakatcha area

Most of the Dakatcha population are subsistence farmers with very limited opportunities for alternative livelihoods. Furthermore, many of the farming techniques are inefficient and inappropriate for the arid/semi arid conditions of Dakatcha. A Rocha has a community support programme teaching regenerative farming techniques that improve soil quality and increase crop yields. Better crops yields reduce pressure on communities to extract resources from the forest, like old growth trees for charcoal. Beyond techniques, the programme seeks to transform attitudes towards farming, helping community members value biodiversity as well as produce profits. If the community can be empowered to care for their natural landscape as they manage the land for agriculture, then we will see large scale conservation transformation.



Environmental Education

A Rocha employs a full time environmental education officer who works in 15 schools around the Dakatcha Woodlands. The officer visits the schools regularly and teaches environmental education classes with a different curriculum each year. Through the programme, hundreds of students have learnt about biodiversity, climate change, environmental degradation, conservation and participated in tree planting and regenerative vegetable gardens in their school grounds. The kids love the programme and are learning to care for their forest and their biodiversity as the next generation of conservation leaders.



Looking Ahead

Buying a block of forest to protect it is one thing, restoring damaged areas of it is another - and keeping it intact and thriving into the long-term future is yet another. A Rocha is committed to ensuring that the forest in (and around) the Dakatcha Nature Reserve not just survives, but flourishes and reclaims much of the glory that it once held before charcoal and timber extraction hit it.



Part of this commitment means walking the long path of sustainable livelihood development with community members. We have recently begun piloting honey-production with a small number of farmers, which we hope to expand such that many can earn a significant income from the intact indigenous forest. Linked to the bee-keeping programme, a teaching programme for both farmers and



school children is being developed about pollinators and their importance for farmers - how they pollinate crops but also need natural habitat to breed successfully.

While much has been learnt about the biodiversity and the basic species lists for several of the main taxa have been published, there are still many gaps in our knowledge. Plans are to study and seek to understand



how the coastal forests regenerate naturally so that we can implement effective forest restoration programmes of the damaged areas.

We are investigating sustainable sources of long-term funding such as carbon or biodiversity credits, while ensuring the local community benefits directly. Your involvement and support has made all of this possible. Thank you!

