

ABSTRACT

The loss of natural habitats through destructive anthropogenic activities has been identified as one of the major drivers of environmental degradation. This is even more prevalent in developing countries where poverty and ignorance of the value of biodiversity is rampant. A pilot study was conducted in two highland wetlands in central Kenya to compile baseline data through the use of field survey, questionnaire and subsequent seminars. The study showed that wetlands offer ecological, social and economic benefits that are not fully appreciated and hence there is a lack of concerted efforts to advocate for their sustainable use. Initial findings showed that both wetlands were rich in biodiversity, especially birds. However, these ecosystems were experiencing environmental problems such as dumping of solid waste, over abstraction of water, encroachment for commercial and residential use, wetland agriculture, overgrazing, improper land use practices on the watershed and wildlife poaching. A follow-up series of public awareness and education campaigns to sensitize the local communities to the importance of the two ecosystems helped change attitudes and perceptions. As a result, the local community organized themselves, revived a dormant community group, and for the last two years have created an eco-tourism venture that has helped address many of the above threats. Future conservation and management efforts for wetlands and their associated watersheds can achieve more with well informed stakeholders. Public education and awareness of the benefits of biodiversity conservation, adoption of wetland user-friendly alternatives, and income generating enterprises offer a unique opportunity to sustainably manage and conserve wetlands amidst increasing populations, poverty and limited resources.