

Lamu in Kenya: The Former Trade Capital of East Africa

Lamu is the largest town on Lamu Island, which is in turn part of the Lamu archipelago in Kenya. It is also the headquarters of Lamu town. It is one of the oldest and best preserved living settlements among the Swahili towns on the East African coast, with origins dating back to the 12th century AD. Its buildings display the long history and development of Swahili technology.

The Lamu District is an incredibly diverse and rich area. The six indigenous communities of Lamu are reported to have been in this area for over 1,000 years and Lamu Town can be traced back to the early days of Islamic culture in the 7th century. The town and nearby islands are dotted with incredible archeological sites which have given rise to the town being declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001. The communities of the District are dependent on fishing and farming for their livelihoods, with many continuing to practice traditional ways of life, including hunting and gathering.



With more than 700 years of continuous development, it was once the most important trade centre in East Africa, before being overtaken by Zanzibar and Mozambique. It has also retained an important religious function and is a significant center for education in Swahili and Islamic culture.

Inappropriate Construction

Although plans are still being confirmed, there is a proposal in place for a large deep sea port development project along the coast from Lamu town. The Lamu port is expected to have a total of 22 berths with a quay that will occupy 1,000 acres. Other proposed infrastructure of the 16 billion dollar development would include a railway, major highway, international airport, resort city, pipeline, oil refinery and oil storage tanks. Lamu, which was declared a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve in 1980, is home to rare marine species such as sea turtles, sharks and dugongs, and also hosts two national reserves: the Kiunga Marine Reserve and Dodori National Reserve. The wider port area would cover all of these reserves.

A development of this scale and scope would result in unprecedented new levels of population growth and put strong pressures on both the cultural and natural values of the region.

Although the Kenyan Government heralds this venture as the answer to the economic woes of the area, the impact on the people of Lamu and its environment cannot be understated. Despite this obvious impact, little information concerning the port has actually been released to the people of Lamu and the only consultation between the Government and the residents of Lamu on the issue occurred early in 2009. Given that the proposed port appears likely to go ahead in the near future, the communities of Lamu wish to engage the Government in discussion on the matter and hope to develop and use a bio-cultural community protocol as one of the mechanisms to do so.



Other Threats: Insufficient Management & Neglect

Lamu relies on the presence of fresh water for its continued viability, and nearby water catchments are threatened by encroachment and illegal development. This delicate resource needs to be protected in order for Lamu to remain the living town that was inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Several buildings in Lamu have been allowed to become quite dilapidated, and unless major restoration work is done, many could potentially collapse and cause structural damage to other buildings nearby.

If the Lamu petrol port project comes to fruition, the increased traffic and modern port facilities it will bring to the region will seriously threaten the outstanding universal value of this site. Proper safeguards need to be developed to ensure the ongoing protection of Lamu before it becomes swallowed by the development and its new industry.

<http://www.globalheritagefund.org>

<http://natural-justice.blogspot.com>

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