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Notes From the Field

Huri Hills Kenya



Location:

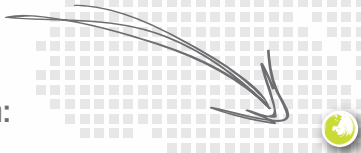
Kenya

Project: Hurri Hills

Date: August, 2010

Reporting GGC Staff:

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June 7th- June 11th: Nairobi

Nairobi is truly fabulous, even if it's a bit cold and the sky is grey and threatening rain. It is so exciting waking up each morning and realising where I am. Nairobi appears so alive, vibrant and wonderfully chaotic. Roughly half of Kenya's population is below the poverty line, yet it is so humbling to see so many smiling faces and hear laughter from the throngs of people outside the roadside shops.

The city has undergone rapid development in the last ten years. Luxuries found in the western world such as shopping centres and fine dining restaurants can be seen sprouting up across the city, making

Continue on next page »

Notes From the Field

Huri Hills | Kenya

real estate scarce and expensive. An increase in mobility has been aided by the introduction of low-cost automobiles and there has been a steady growth in the city's assiduous middle class.

Nairobi is host to a plethora of international organizations (UN, USAID, etc) that are involved in promoting and supporting African development. This includes Food for the Hungry (FH); a Christian based NGO who I will be working with during my time here in Kenya. They are a wonderful group of people who have established a strong relationship and presence with the communities living in Kenya. I have been kindly welcomed into their organization and, in partnership with Global Green Carbon, will assist them on developing a reforestation project in Hurri Hills, one of their development zones in Northern Kenya.

For this first week, FH has arranged for me to meet with various government organizations: the Kenya Wildlife Service, Kenya Forest Service, Kenya Agriculture Research Institute, and the Kenya Forestry Research Institute. The plan is to discuss with them the objectives of the reforestation project and to determine how they can be involved during project implementation. My



assistant is a lovely young woman named Claire, the marketing executive for FH, who will help me prepare for the trip to Hurri Hills.

I have five days in Nairobi before I am expected in Hurri Hills. I cannot wait for my "African" journey to begin...

June 14th - Day 1:
Journey to Marsabit

It's Wednesday morning, 6am and my bags are packed for the eight hour journey that awaits me from Nairobi to Marsabit town. I am greeted by my driver David, a local Kenyan and staff member of Food for the Hungry who will be my driver for the first half of the trip until we reach Isiolo, a small town half way to Marsabit in the North East side of Kenya.

I am anxious to get on the road and venture off into the vast Kenyan landscape that I have heard so much about. We begin by driving out of Nairobi in one piece, a city that is known for its congested manic traffic during the morning rush hour. Lush green rolling hills can be seen from the distance scattered with crops of maize and small wooden sheds. The air is damp and slightly cold with a strong smell of burning wood.

After four hours of driving, we finally reach Isiolo.
Continue on next page »

The hot temperature and dust filled wind is a sign that we are moving closer into the arid lands. I am greeted by my new driver. His name is Pius and he is a man of endless smiles and laughter. Pius is a Rendille, an ethnic tribe native to Kenya, and an FH staff member for the Marsabit District. We pack ourselves into the Toyota Land Cruiser, a vehicle that is most suitable for the road conditions we are about to embark on in the second half of our journey. Soon after our departure from Isiolo, scenic mountain landscapes could be seen from the distance surrounded by dry rangelands covered in dwarf shrubs and volcanic rocks. I was eager to catch a glimpse of any wildlife that may be roaming across the horizon, but all I could spot were some birds frantically trying to escape the speed of our vehicle and herds of camel dispersed along the road side.

Finally, it was time to eat and take a break from the relentless heat and rough terrain. We stopped at a remote compound consisting of a few Manetas (small wooden/mud huts) where visitors can lay down for a rest, eat a meal and cool down from the relentless heat. This is the last stop to get food and water before reaching Marsabit town. I didn't hesitate to try the local fare, pan fried goat's meat with rice accompanied by a warm glass of camel's milk. An interesting combination that was successful in taming my hunger.

On the road again, the last stretch before we reach Marsabit town. This region of Kenya is host to both the Rendille and Samburu tribes who together share a common language and an understanding of each other's boundaries. A young boy, no older than ten years old, stands on the side of the road holding an arrow in one hand and watching us guardedly as we drive pass him. Pius tells me he is a young Rendille warrior, who roams the lands alone out-casted by his family until he is old enough to marry and claim his own territory. Until then, he is forbidden to return home. Finally, we reach the mountain town of Marsabit. I am warmly welcomed by an FH staff member named Anne who shows me to my room in their guest house. Dusk has fallen and a cool breeze moves through my room. I have arrived and look forward to what tomorrow will bring.



Day 2: The Mount Marsabit Forest Reserve



I am abruptly woken to the sound of the neighbour's rooster insisting that I get up and embrace the day. I get myself ready before I meet with Guyo Tuke, the managing director of FH for the Marsabit District. Guyo is a kind man who is passionate about his job and the people he works for; including the communities that FH supports in the district. He briefs me on our itinerary for the day consisting of numerous meetings with local stakeholders who will be involved with the Hurri Hills reforestation project.

By the afternoon, I was free. The meetings had gone well and I was set to travel to Hurri Hills the next day. Martin Soi, another FH staff member, offered to take me to the Mount Marsabit Forest Reserve for a chance to see some of Kenya's wildlife. The forests here in Marsabit, like so many others in Kenya, are highly threatened by an increasing human population living in and around the district. The Kenya Wildlife and Forest Service are working hard to secure these last remaining forest ecosystems before they are lost forever.

We drove the Toyota Land Cruiser into the reserve, a required vehicle when venturing into these forests. The reserve is home to

Continue on next page »

many different wildlife species: elephant, leopard, wild boar, birds etc. First, we drove to one of the water basins nestled inside an open crater within the mountain. It is reaching six o'clock in the evening and from the far off distance, there is movement at the forest edge. Slowly, a large shape emerges followed by several others of different size. They are a family of elephants coming for a drink and a bathe. It was a spectacular sight, as more and more joined for the evening social hour.

It was beginning to get dark, so we piled back into the vehicle and headed down the mountain trail. Moving quickly, we wanted to make sure we reached the bottom before night fall. Suddenly, we were greeted by the presence of an African bull elephant. Startled and ears erect with massive ivory tusks, this beautiful creature was not to be underestimated for his powerful strength. We sat in silence, awed by what we had encountered. He slowly turned away, looking from behind to check what we were doing. His curiosity

kept him close to us. We slowly moved the vehicle forward and then back he came, standing his ground firmly, staring at us intently. We were at a loss as to how we should proceed. Should we reverse or will this exacerbate the situation, forcing him to charge our vehicle? Thankfully, we were joined by a KWS (Kenya Wildlife Service) vehicle coming from the opposite direction. The bull quickly jetted up the side of the mountain, into the dense forest landscape leaving us with our hearts pounding rapidly. It was an accelerating experience.

Tomorrow I will be in Hurri Hills. It will take us 4 hours to get there via the Chalbi Desert.

I am eager to see the landscapes that await me and to finally meet the people of the Hurri Hills community.

Day 3: Arriving in Hurri Hills



Our bags are packed into the vehicle and we are ready to go to Hurri Hills. I am accompanied by the Hurri Hills Chief, my FH driver Anthony, and a young Gabra (ethnic tribe found in Marsabit District) woman named Adele.

Continue on next page »



Notes From the Field

Huri Hills | Kenya

I am prepared for a journey that will take us across the barren Chalbi desert where the air is dry and filled with incredible heat. I have packed my water supplies and a few snacks to sustain me for our four hour trip.

As we drive across the northern Kenyan landscape, I listen to the Chief describe his community that resides in Hurri hills. He is a sincere, passionate man who works hard to support his community's development initiatives. He does not have an easy job, but I admire his dedication to helping his people strive for a better future. As we drive along, he is proud to point out all the beauty this land encompasses.

We manage to cross the desert and begin to make a slow incline towards the Hurri Hills that can be seen in the far off distance. Several hills dominate the horizon. I am amazed by their beauty, anxious to get up there. The temperature is mild. A nice relief from the heat we endured crossing the desert.

Finally, we reach our location and we are welcomed warmly by the community as we drive through to our final destination. Young



Anthony and myself



Chief with village elders and Adele

children run towards us waving their hands and smiling, curious to see who was in the vehicle. The Chief was insistent on showing us the Hurri Hills landscape and took us to one of the hill tops allowing mobile phone reception. There is no electricity in this remote area and the phone signal is limited to only a few hill top locations.

Reaching the top of the hill, I am confronted by the beauty of this place. So many rolling grass hills can be seen with patches of trees scattered randomly across them. It is hard to believe that this area was once inhabited by 30,000 hectares of forest. I am looking forward to finding out more about this magnificent place and the history of this community.



The night sky has fallen and dinner has kindly been prepared for us by some of the women hosting us at the lodge. We are served fresh goat's meat with rice and chapatti, provided by the Chief. This would be our menu for the three days we would stay, along with our morning and evening tea.

Kenyans love their tea, even in places as remote as the Hurri Hills. Kenya is one of Africa's oldest tea-producing countries. The earliest reference to tea growing dates back a hundred years to

1903. It is believed that a British settler living in Kenya's western highlands imported the first *Camellia Sinensis* seedlings from India and planted them on a two-acre farm on an experimental basis.

After we polished off our plates and washed it down with a warm cup of tea, we could finally call it a day, get some rest, and be ready for a full day tomorrow in the Hurri Hills.

Day 4: My Introduction into the Hurri Hills Community



I start the day with my first meeting with one of the groups from the community. They are the "Hay Group" consisting of men, women, and youth. Established in 2000, the group is responsible for sustainable management and harvesting of grass for hay production which they sell to Marsabit and Kalacha. There has been tremendous success of this initiative with the support of their Chief and FH. Revenues have been used to pay school fees, purchase food supplies, and for the construction of the Hurri Hills Lodge last year.

I began to discuss with them (with the assistance of a translator) the plans for implementing a reforestation project in their community and then invited them to voice their views on the subject. Several individuals both women and men participated in the discussion and expressed their support for the project. It quickly became evident that these people did not need me to convince them of the hardships they will face in the future if they do not take action in managing their resources. I was pleased to hear their enthusiasm for the project.

At the end of the meeting, one of the women in the group stood up and with sincere gratitude, presented me with a traditional milk container made from cow skin and the roots of *Asparagus Africana* (a local tree species in the region). I am told that this traditional milk container is worn by a newly wedded woman leaving her parents home and travels with it on her back following closely behind her husband to her new home. I was incredibly grateful for their gift and thanked them for coming and listening to what I had to say.

Later that afternoon, I met with the Village Elders and other young men of the community with the assistance of the Chief. The only women present in the group, I was beginning to wonder if they would be interested in anything I had to say. I started to feel slightly intimidated. The Chief introduced me to the group and I proceeded to ask them for their thoughts on bringing a reforestation project into their community and if any of them remember a time when the Hills were forested. They told me that at one time, the hills consisted of 30,000 hectares of forest and several natural water springs. However, these are only stories that have been passed along through time. Settlement began in 1976 and the degradation of the hills was already evident. Dido Guyo, one of the village elders stands up and begins to recall when he was a child witnessing the last remnants of the water springs. It is believed that the destruction was a result of nomadic pastoralists burning their way through the forest to make way for their livestock and a solution to eradicating the tick infestation. Over time, the forests were destroyed and grasslands emerged making it ideal for the pastoralists, encouraging them to continue further degradation. The Elders stated clearly that they are aware of their mistakes and want to bring trees back to the hills.

Several discussions were centred on the issue of water scarcity, the need for more trees, and the importance of the communities' involvement in supporting the reforestation project. It was encouraging to see the Elders speak so passionately about the need for change in their community. For them, bringing back trees to their environment means a promising future for the next generations. The meeting was adjourned and I was again thanked by the group for coming. Relying completely on my translator, I responded back

with gratitude for them taking the time to meet with me. I received several amusing smiles and handshakes that left me feeling good about our meeting.

I then headed into one of the villages to visit the family of the young girl, Adele, who accompanied me on the way up to Hurri Hills from Marsabit. She invited me to her village where she and her mother live. I enter into the dark room of their menatta where Adele's mother was boiling some water for tea on the open fire. The small room was filled with smoke, leaving my eyes watering, but I was the only one with this problem. The other two paid no attention and continued to talk profusely in their local Gabra language. I sat back and observed this moment drinking my tea as the other young children stared back at me, mesmerized by my presence in their home. Smiling back at them, they would shy away behind their grandmother's back and giggle hysterically. Several members of the village stopped by the menatta to greet Adele welcoming her back from Marsabit where she was working for extra money to support her mother. Her father, a nomadic pastoralist, has not been home for over a year. Feeling it was time to go, I finished my tea and thanked her family for welcoming me into their home.

The first full day in Hurri Hills was filled with new experiences.

Visiting with the various groups today opened my eyes to a way of life that can only be understood when you visit these places. I am eager to learn more about the Gabra people in this community and their environment in which they live in.



Day 5:

The Project Site and More Focus Groups

I wake early. There is a slight chill in the air and the dampness can be felt inside my room from the morning mist. I gather my things to take a bath: towel, flip flops, soap, and my bucket. I am taken to the wooden bath house where I am given a plastic tub of warm water (heated by the women in the menatta next to the lodge). Open to the experience and in need of a clean, I step inside.

After getting myself together, I am accompanied by the Chief and Land Committee (represented by three elders from the community) to go assess the project site for reforestation. Travelling across the open terrain, it is evident that a forest once stood on these Hills. Patches of trees are scattered around the landscape dominated by vast stretches of dry grassland. The only sign of wildlife that can be seen is a few Gazelles trotting in the far off distance and birds swarming in and around our vehicle. I am told that there is Cheetah and Giraffe that roam these Hills, but I am not lucky enough to spot them. We arrive at the project site. It is dry grassland with very few trees present. However, surrounding the property boundaries is a deep riverine densely packed with trees. This was encouraging. We spent the next few hours surveying the land and assessing its potential for the project. The elders were keen to point out the different types of trees present and what they traditionally use them for. I was also informed of their names in the local language.

By the afternoon we were back at the lodge, relaxing with a cup of tea made with fresh milk. I have planned to meet with two more groups: the environmental youth group and some of the women

from the community. I was interested to meet with the environmental youth group since they have been involved with the maintenance of previous tree planting initiatives in the community supported by FH and other donors. I also wanted to meet with some of the women in the community to listen to their thoughts and concerns with the project and to gain a better understanding of who they were.

Both these groups were incredibly informative. However, it was the women's group that left me feeling both humbled and unbelievably marvelled by the role they play in their community. Like so many other women living in the rural parts of Africa, these women are responsible for just about everything: childbearing, cooking, building their homes, collecting firewood, and collecting water. Their travels for collecting firewood and water can keep them away from the village for several hours (14Km), only to return to cook for their family and tend to their homestead. For the men, livestock rearing is their only priority. The women showed tremendous support and enthusiasm for the project and thanked me for taking the time to listen to what they had to say. I felt privileged to have had the opportunity to meet with them.

Tomorrow I will leave Hurri Hills and start my journey back to Nairobi. My time spent here has been exhilarating and memorable, filled with scenic landscapes and enlightened by the Gabra people and their culture. It will never be forgotten.

