

## **A love affair with the Tsavo**

She is a vibrant young volunteer who wants to leave a mark in wildlife conservation when her term in Kenya is finally over. In fact, Ms. Ayako Tanaka, 26, says conservation of wildlife in Tsavo East National Park has now become a part of her life and a realization of a dream that has fascinated her since childhood.

Ms. Tanaka came to Kenya from Japan in August 2007 as a member of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) in JICA. And after an initial orientation in Nairobi she was posted to Tsavo East National Park to work in the education department of the Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS).

Since then, she has put all her mind into working with school children and people from neighboring communities who visit the park teaching them about wildlife conservation and its many benefits.

“When school children come to the park, they are not only enthusiastic to see the animals but are also keen to know about the animals’ behavior. “Together with my Kenyan counterpart, we give them lectures on what they have seen,” she says. This helps the children understand their wildlife better and when they go back to their villages, they are able to participate in conservation activities. Tanaka says part of the conservation lectures explain to the children how lucky Kenya is to have such wonderful wildlife.

“Most children are astonished to learn that not many countries in the world have as wide a variety of wildlife as Kenya and hence the great need to conserve what we have,” says Ms. Tanaka.

She and other members of the education department in Tsavo East National Park are also involved in an outreach program that visits neighboring schools and villages educating the farmers about the need to conserve Kenya’s precious wildlife. During such sessions, the villagers and school children are advised on how to co-exist with wildlife and the benefits of doing so.

Audio-visual materials are used for easier understanding. “The future of conservation in Kenya,” says Ms. Tanaka, “lies with the young people who need to understand that the wildlife in Kenya is unique to very few countries and is therefore the country’s most valuable heritage.”

Periodically the education department holds exhibitions about wildlife where school children are invited to learn more about the wildlife.

KWS is already developing elaborate plans on how communities neighbouring national parks can eventually benefit economically from the parks. This will be achieved through comprehensive education and initiation of programs that will instill in the villagers a sense of ownership of the wildlife and therefore oblige them to protect the national park and its inhabitants.

To achieve this, Ms. Tanaka is working with a women’s group in Voi, a town neighbouring Tsavo National Park, teaching them how to improve their weaved products in order to make them more attractive for tourists visiting the park.

These are the projects that have kept Ms. Tanaka busy, and the recent interruption of her work due to the post-elections violence in the country got her very disheartened.

“When all the 56 volunteers serving in various parts of Kenya under the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) were recalled to Nairobi for security reasons, it was a big blow to our work,” she says.

According to the JOCV coordinator in Kenya, Mr. Nobuhide Hayashi, the recalling of volunteers serving in many parts of Kenya from their duty stations was necessary for their security since nobody was quite sure of the magnitude of the violence.

The volunteers working in sectors such as health, agriculture, education, social work among other engagements were all scattered in places such as Homa Bay, Kendu Bay, Kericho, Eldoret, and Bungoma where incidents of violence were reported.

Most of the volunteers who had been deployed in Central, Eastern and Coast regions reported back to their stations in early March.

However, those who had been deployed to Nyanza, Rift Valley and Western have temporarily changed their stations to areas that were less affected by the violence, as they remain hopeful that they will return to their original duty stations.

The frustrations the volunteers faced during the violence are similar to that experienced by Kenyans who suffered massive interruptions on their daily lives. Painful to the volunteers because most had waited for a very long time to come to serve in Kenya and were enthusiastic to see the work they had embarked on succeed within their allotted assignment period of only two years.

A good example is Ms. Tanaka who since her childhood growing up in Japan had always been interested in working for the wildlife in Kenya.

She had seen so many pictures of Kenyan wildlife on television and had lived with the dream of working for its conservation.

Her dream was even known to her parents and her entire family who shared in her excitement when she finally got the opportunity to come and work at Tsavo East National Park.



Ms. Ayako Tanaka prepares materials for an exhibition for schools on wildlife conservation.