Imperial Ecology and Indigenous Displacement in Colonial Kenya: A Case of Mwea Plains, 1928-1945

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Abstract
This paper examines the profound environmental transformation of Kenya's Mwea Plains between 1928 and 1945, analyzing how British colonial land policies fundamentally altered indigenous human-nature relationships and precipitated ecological degradation. Through archival research and oral testimonies, this study demonstrates that colonial interventions-including the Crown Lands Ordinances, creation of African reserves, forest conservation policies, and the Kenya Land Commission recommendations-disrupted traditional land tenure systems and forced population movements that intensified environmental pressures. The research reveals how colonial "conservation" rhetoric masked land and other resource appropriation strategies while indigenous knowledge systems were systematically marginalized. This case study contributes to broader understandings of colonial environmental history and the lasting impacts of imperial resource extraction policies on African landscapes.

Key Words: *Ecology, Environment, Land, Transformation.*

Introduction

The environmental history of colonial Kenya reveals a complex narrative of ecological transformation driven by imperial economic imperatives and racialized land policies. The Mwea Plains, located in what is now Kirinyaga County, provides a compelling case study of how colonial administration fundamentally altered indigenous relationships with the environment between 1928 and 1945. This wetland ecosystem, traditionally used by multiple African communities for seasonal grazing and cultivation, became a contested landscape where colonial conservation rhetoric intersected with systematic land appropriation and population displacement. The period under examination represents a critical juncture in Kenya's environmental history, marking the transition from indigenous land management systems to colonial resource extraction regimes. The establishment of British colonial rule in Kenya in 1895 initiated a series of policy interventions that would profoundly reshape the Mwea Plains' ecology and the communities that depended upon it. These transformations were not merely incidental consequences of colonization but rather deliberate outcomes of imperial strategies designed to facilitate white settlement and resource extraction while marginalizing African land rights and environmental knowledge.

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This study contributes to the growing scholarship on colonial environmental history in Africa, building upon the seminal works of scholars such as William Beinart, who has extensively documented the intersection of conservation ideology and colonial control mechanisms across the continent.[1] Similarly, it engages with the theoretical framework established by Alfred Crosby's concept of "ecological imperialism," which illuminates how colonial powers transformed landscapes to serve metropolitan interests.[2] The research also draws inspiration from James Scott's analysis of state simplification schemes and their environmental consequences, particularly relevant to understanding how colonial administrators reimagined complex indigenous land tenure systems.[3]

Methodology

This paper combines archival analysis with oral history testimonies, recognizing that official colonial records often obscured or misrepresented African perspectives on environmental change. Oral testimonies from earlier residents of the Mwea Plains, collected between various periods, provide crucial insights into pre-colonial land use practices and the lived experiences of environmental transformation. These narratives challenge colonial assumptions about African environmental management and reveal the sophisticated ecological knowledge that guided indigenous land use decisions. Secondary sources included published works on colonial environmental history, land policy analysis, and anthropological studies of Central Kenyan communities. The theoretical framework drew heavily from environmental history scholarship, particularly works examining the intersection of colonialism and ecological change in Africa. The analysis employed concepts from political ecology to understand how power relations shaped environmental outcomes while utilizing insights from indigenous knowledge systems research to evaluate traditional resource management practices. The research faced several methodological challenges, including the limited availability of African-authored sources from the colonial period and the potential for memory distortion in oral testimonies collected decades after the events in question. These limitations were addressed through triangulation of sources, careful attention to the social and political contexts that shaped source creation, and explicit acknowledgment of the gaps and silences in the historical record. The study also recognized the ongoing political sensitivities surrounding land rights in Mwea and attempted to present historical analysis that was sensitive to contemporary concerns while maintaining scholarly objectivity.

Colonial Expansion and the Reimagining of Mwea's Landscape

The British colonial project in Central Kenya began with a series of military expeditions designed to establish administrative control over the fertile highlands that would eventually become the backbone of settler agriculture. The systematic conquest of what colonial authorities termed the "Kikuyu Province" involved not only military subjugation but also the fundamental reimagining of landscape categories and land use possibilities. The establishment of Fort Smith in Dagoretti-Kiambu in 1894, followed by Fort Hall (present-day Murang'a) in 1900 and the Nyeri station in 1902, created an administrative infrastructure that would facilitate the transformation of indigenous territories into colonial economic zones.[4]

Captain Richard Henry Meinertzhagen's 1906 expedition to establish the Embu station proved particularly significant for the Mwea Plains, as this administrative post would govern the contested wetlands that lay at the intersection of multiple African territories. Meinertzhagen's brutal

[4] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945

campaign, which allegedly resulted in the deaths of 797 Africans from the Ndia and Gichugu communities alone, exemplified the violent foundations upon which colonial environmental control would be established.[5] The destruction of villages, livestock, and agricultural infrastructure during these expeditions created immediate environmental impacts while simultaneously demonstrating the colonial state's willingness to use force in reshaping human-environment relationships. The colonial perception of the Mwea Plains as economically marginal initially protected the region from the intensive settler appropriation that characterized the central highlands. Colonial administrator Philip Mugo's observation that "the area used to flood whenever it rained and it was prone to mosquito infestation as well as other biting flies" reflected European environmental preferences shaped by temperate climate expectations.[6] The plains' clay soils, high temperatures, and seasonal flooding patterns made them unsuitable for the tea and coffee cultivation that attracted settlers to higher elevations. However, this apparent disinterest masked a more complex colonial strategy that would eventually transform the plains into a site of intensive agricultural development. The construction of the Uganda Railway between 1896 and 1901 provided the infrastructural foundation for colonial resource extraction while simultaneously creating financial pressures that would drive more intensive land appropriation policies. The railway's escalating costs—from an initial estimate of £1.75 million to a final expenditure of £5.53 million—forced colonial administrators to seek rapid economic returns from their East African territories.[7] This financial imperative would drive the development of settler agriculture and the corresponding dispossession of African communities from their most fertile lands. Charles Eliot's tenure as commissioner and first governor proved pivotal in establishing the ideological framework that would guide colonial environmental policies throughout the period under examination. Eliot's conviction that Kenya's "vast landscapes" possessed untapped "economic potential that only needed to be unlocked by the Settler Class" justified systematic land appropriation while delegitimizing indigenous land use practices.[8] This colonial ecological wisdom, grounded in assumptions about African agricultural incompetence, would provide the intellectual foundation for decades of environmental intervention and control.

The Crown Lands Ordinances and the Legal Architecture of Dispossession

The Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902 established the legal framework that would govern colonial land appropriation throughout Kenya while fundamentally altering the juridical relationship between African communities and their territories. This legislation granted colonial authorities "absolute powers to declare any unoccupied land as crown land, which could then be leased to European settlers," effectively criminalizing traditional land management practices that involved seasonal fallowing or rotational use patterns.[9] The ordinance's impact on the Mwea Plains proved particularly severe, as the wetlands' seasonal use patterns made them vulnerable to classification as "unoccupied" during certain periods of the agricultural cycle.

[5] Ibid
[6] Philip Mugo, interview by author, Mwea, Kenya, 20/6/2025

[7] Paul Mosley, *The Settler Economies: Studies in the Economic History of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia 1900-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 42-45.
[8] Ibid, pp 48-49.
[9] Kenya Land Commission Report, 1932-1934 (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1934), 156.

The colonial misunderstanding of African land tenure systems created the conceptual foundation for systematic dispossession while simultaneously justifying these appropriations through appeals to efficient resource utilization. The Ndia and Gichugu communities' practice of shifting cultivation, which allowed exhausted parcels to regain fertility through temporary abandonment, became interpreted as evidence of land abandonment rather than sophisticated environmental management. Colonial administrator's assertion that "African land that had been set aside as grazing field or that lay unused as part of the shifting cultivation cycle was now considered unoccupied land and thus automatically became crown land" reveals the devastating impact of imposing European legal categories on African ecological practices.[10] The 1915 Crown Lands Ordinance intensified these appropriation mechanisms by "redefining all land in the protectorate as crown land, making African land tenure insecure and subject to European interests."[11] This comprehensive legal transformation effectively rendered all African communities tenants on their ancestral lands while providing colonial authorities with unlimited discretion in land allocation decisions. The ordinance's environmental implications extended far beyond simple ownership transfers, fundamentally altering the incentive structures that had previously guided sustainable resource management practices. Subsequent legislation, including the Native Lands Trust Lands Ordinance of 1938, the Crown Lands (Amendment) Ordinance of 1938, and the National Parks Ordinance of 1945, completed the legal architecture of environmental control while systematically marginalizing African land rights.[12] These ordinances created overlapping jurisdictions and competing authority structures that frequently resulted in administrative confusion while consistently disadvantaging African communities in land disputes. The cumulative effect of this legislation was to transform the Mwea Plains from a commonly managed resource serving multiple communities into a contested territory subject to arbitrary colonial intervention. The environmental consequences of these legal transformations became evident in the increased conflicts over resource access and the breakdown of traditional management systems that had previously maintained ecological balance. The displacement of communal tenure systems with individual property rights disrupted the collective action mechanisms that had historically prevented overgrazing and resource depletion. Colonial officials' observation that "perhaps this period could be seen as the epitome of environmental degradation in colonial Kenya as Africans were confined in small spaces leading to overcrowding and overgrazing" inadvertently documented the ecological costs of their own legal interventions.[12]

Environmental Determinism and Settler Agriculture

Colonial land policies in Kenya reflected a sophisticated understanding of environmental factors, though this knowledge served primarily to facilitate European settlement rather than promote sustainable resource management. The colonial administration's "meticulously involved assessment of the climate and social conditions to identify regions that would support the type of farming settlers were accustomed to in Europe" demonstrated environmental awareness while

[10] KLC Report, 1932-1934, 158.
[11] Ibid, p.162.
[12] Walter N. Wamicha and Fred Mwanje, "Environmental Management and Conflict in Kenya," in *Environmental Change and Security in Africa*, ed. James N. Kariuki (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010), pp. 162-164.

simultaneously justifying the appropriation of the continent's most productive agricultural zones.[13] This environmental determinism shaped settlement patterns that concentrated Europeans in highland areas with temperate climates while relegating African communities to marginal lands with challenging environmental conditions. The privileging of "moderate temperatures, adequate rainfall, and fertile soils, similar to those found in Europe" in colonial settlement policies reflected both practical agricultural considerations and racialized assumptions about environmental suitability.[14] The central highlands, including present-day Nairobi, Kiambu, Nyeri, and parts of the Rift Valley, became the spatial foundation of settler agriculture precisely because they offered "conditions ideal for cultivating crops such as tea, coffee, maize, and wheat, which were staples in European agriculture.[15] This environmental selectivity created a hierarchical landscape where the most productive territories were reserved for settler agriculture while African communities were confined to areas deemed unsuitable for intensive cultivation. The Mwea Plains initially fell outside these colonial environmental preferences due to their challenging conditions for European-style agriculture. The region's "low-lying topography, high temperatures and clay soil that was prone to flooding militated against human settlement' from a European perspective, leading colonial authorities to overlook the plains' agricultural potential during the initial phases of settlement.[16] Local resident Philip Mugo's recollection that "Muzungu [White man] did not want to settle in mwea as the area could not support the growing of tea and coffee like areas of Nyeri and Kiambu" illustrates how colonial environmental preferences initially protected the plains from intensive appropriation.[17] However, the establishment of European settlements in the surrounding highlands created indirect pressures on the Mwea Plains ecosystem through the displacement of African populations and the disruption of traditional resource management systems. The years between 1930 and 1945, characterized as "the years of colonial consolidation of White Settlements," witnessed the establishment of the European Settlement Board with an annual budget of £2 million, facilitating the settlement of 493 white farmers on approximately 1.2 million hectares of highland territories.[18] This massive land appropriation created population pressures that would eventually force African communities to intensify their use of marginal areas like the Mwea Plains. The environmental consequences of this settlement pattern extended beyond the immediate impacts of agricultural conversion to encompass broader ecological disruptions caused by population displacement and the breakdown of traditional resource management systems. The concentration of settler agriculture in the highlands created demographic pressures that cascaded through the regional ecosystem, forcing African communities to exploit previously marginal areas more intensively while simultaneously restricting their access to traditional resource bases in forested areas and fertile valleys.

[13] Henrietta L. Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), 78.
[14] Godwell Nhamo and Vittorio Inyang, eds., *Climate Change and Natural Resources Conflicts in Africa* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 145.
[15] Henrietta L. Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*, 1994, pp. 82-84.
[16] Philip Mugo, Oral Interview, Thiba, Mwea, 20/6/2025
[17] Ibid
[18] See for Example, Paul Mosley, *The Settler Economies*, pp. 1983, 156-158.

The Creation of African Reserves and Environmental Marginalization

The establishment of African reserves represented a systematic attempt to spatially contain indigenous populations while freeing up productive lands for settler agriculture, creating profound environmental consequences that extended far beyond simple territorial reorganization. These reserves served multiple colonial objectives: absorbing "indigenous populations to specific areas while freeing up fertile land for European settlers," providing "reservoirs for cheap labour that was needed once the settler plantations were in place," and facilitating administrative control through ethnic segregation that "reinforced the policy of divide and rule because the reserves were ethnically constituted."[19] The environmental implications of this spatial reorganization proved devastating for both the confined communities and the ecosystems they were forced to occupy.

The creation of ethnically defined administrative units through the reserve system fundamentally disrupted the flexible territorial arrangements that had previously allowed African communities to respond to environmental variations and resource scarcities. The colonial practice of designing reserves to "accommodate one ethnic group or in very rare instances two ethnic groups that were considered to be related to each other" ignored the complex inter-ethnic relationships and seasonal migration patterns that had historically maintained ecological balance across the region.[20] This administrative simplification forced communities with historically fluid territorial boundaries into fixed spatial categories that proved environmentally unsustainable.

The Maasai experience with the Laikipia and Ngong reserves, established following the First Anglo-Maasai Agreement of 1904, provided a template for the environmental disruption that would characterize the reserve system throughout Kenya. The systematic appropriation of Maasai grazing lands in the Rift Valley by settlers like Lord Delamere forced pastoralist communities into "infertile land carved for them in Ngong and Laikipia (Northern Reserve)," disrupting centuries-old grazing patterns and forcing the intensification of land use in ecologically marginal areas.[21] This pattern of displacing communities from productive lands to marginal territories would be repeated throughout Central Kenya, with devastating environmental consequences.

The demarcation of reserve boundaries demonstrated the colonial administration's profound ignorance of indigenous land tenure systems and environmental management practices. Administrative officials "lacked any clear idea about the kind of 'occupation' which should carry any inalienable rights" and imposed "European concepts of rights over fixed areas of land" that destroyed "the great flexibility that had prevailed in the pre-colonial Kenya when it came to matters of land use and ownership."[22] This administrative simplification eliminated the adaptive mechanisms that had allowed African communities to respond to environmental variations while maintaining ecological sustainability.

The environmental consequences of this spatial reorganization became evident in the rapid degradation of reserve lands due to overcrowding and overutilization. Julius Wambu's observation that "African areas like Mwea were prone to land degradation right from the day they were created" because "these spaces were tiny too tiny to absorb African population which unfortunately kept on

[19] Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (London: James Currey, 1990), pp. 89-92.
[20] Peter G. Veit, *Africa's Valuable Assets: A Reader in Natural Resource Revenue Management* (Washington, D.C.: World Resources Institute, 2009), pp. 232-234.
[21] KLC Report, 1932-1934, pp. 98-102.
[22] Kenya Land Commission Report, 1932-1934, p. 104.

rising" documented the immediate environmental impacts of colonial spatial policies.[23] The inability of confined communities to reduce livestock numbers due to cultural and economic attachments resulted in systematic overgrazing that "almost cleared all vegetation of Mwea especially in lower parts Mwea along the banks of river Tana."[24]

The Mwea Plains' position as a frontier area between multiple reserves created particularly complex environmental problems as different communities competed for access to diminishing resources. The colonial government's practice of "literally shifting the plain from one African reserve to the other" in pursuit of "administrative efficiency" created what Garrett Hardin would later term a "tragedy of commons" situation where no single community possessed clear management authority.[25] James Muthee's recollection that "land in this place became a battle field as people from across Tana and Rupingazi invaded Mwea saying it was theirs and they had a right to graze, hunt or even cultivate crops of their choice" illustrates the environmental chaos created by unclear territorial boundaries and competing claims.[26]

Forest Conservation and the Restriction of Indigenous Land Rights

The colonial forest conservation program in Kenya represented one of the most systematic attempts to control indigenous access to natural resources while simultaneously appropriating valuable forest products for colonial economic development. The East Africa (Forests) Order in Council of 1902 established the legal foundation for forest management in the region, ostensibly aimed at "regulating the exploitation of forest resources and establishing a framework for the conservation and management of forests."[27] However, the practical implementation of these policies served primarily to restrict African access to forest resources while facilitating colonial timber extraction and protecting watershed areas that supported settler agriculture.

The Forest Ordinance of 1911 and its subsequent amendments created a comprehensive system of forest reserves that severely restricted indigenous communities' traditional relationships with forested environments. The Mount Kenya Forest became a particularly significant site of contestation, as communities such as the Ndia, Gichugu, and Embu had "historically relied on Mount Kenya forests for grazing, firewood, medicinal plants, and hunting" but now "found themselves barred from these activities."[28] The transformation of these forests from community resources into state-controlled reserves eliminated crucial components of indigenous livelihood systems while forcing communities to intensify their use of remaining accessible lands.

The establishment of the Northcote line around 1912/13 created a physical boundary that symbolized the colonial state's determination to exclude African communities from forested areas regardless of historical land rights or sustainable use practices. This demarcation line was designed to "clearly demarcate the forest reserves to save them from further encroachment and subsequent

[23] Julius Wambu, interview by author, 20/6/2025/ Mwea region, Kenya.
[24] Ibid
[25] Kenya Land Commission Report, 1932-1934, 176.
[26] James Muthee, interview by author, 18/6/2025, Mwea region, Kenya.
[27] Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 145-147.
[28] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945.

'destruction' by African communities who perceived forested areas as 'commons."[29] The colonial assumption that African communities would inevitably destroy forest resources reflected racialized environmental ideologies that ignored centuries of sustainable forest management practices.

The enforcement of forest boundaries involved systematic violence against African communities, as documented by Simon Mbui's recollection that "even a few years to independence, we could not step in the forest to hunt or gather firewood. Our women were met with untold brutality for closing that line."[30] This violent enforcement became particularly intense during the State of Emergency when "women and children spotted near the forest were suspected of supplying Mau Mau fighters with food and arms."[31] The militarization of forest conservation policies demonstrated the colonial state's willingness to use force in maintaining environmental control while highlighting the political dimensions of resource access restrictions.

Indigenous resistance to forest conservation policies revealed the profound disruption these measures caused to traditional livelihood systems and environmental relationships. Chief Muruatetu from the Embu community articulated this resistance before the Kenya Land Commission, arguing that "We have been told that we would burn the woodland if we owned it. We never burned our trees before the arrival of the Europeans."[32] His testimony challenged colonial assumptions about African environmental management while documenting the sophisticated resource management practices that had historically maintained forest health.

The testimony of colonial administrator H.E. Lambert before the Kenya Land Commission provided crucial evidence of pre-colonial forest management systems that contradicted colonial narratives of African environmental destructiveness. Lambert confirmed that "the Ndia, Gichugu, and Aembu people had been living and cultivating in the Mount Kenya forest without harming it long before Europeans arrived and the Northcote line was drawn."[33] His acknowledgment that these communities "lived in the forest and farmed in the glades" with "clear guidelines for one another" and that "tribal elders fined those who" caused forest fires demonstrated the existence of sophisticated environmental governance systems that colonial policies systematically dismantled.[34] The gazetting of Mount Kenya Forest as a Government Forest Reserve in 1932 and subsequently as a National Park in 1949 completed the legal exclusion of indigenous communities from their ancestral territories while creating new pressures on remaining accessible lands. The "strict enforcement of forest boundaries and punitive measures against trespassers" left "local communities with limited options for sustaining their livelihoods," forcing them to seek "alternative lands for cultivation and grazing."[35] The Mwea Plains became a refuge for these

[29] Ibid.

[30] Simon Mbui, interview by author, Kabare, Kenya

[31] Ibid

[32] Kenya Land Commission Report, 1932-1934, p. 245

[33] Ibid

[34] Ibid, p.248

[35] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945.

displaced populations, leading to "significant demographic and environmental changes in the region" as communities intensified their use of previously marginal lands.[36]

Population Displacement and Environmental Intensification

The restriction of access to forest resources and the confinement of African communities within increasingly crowded reserves created powerful demographic pressures that fundamentally altered land use patterns in the Mwea Plains. The inability of the Ndia and Gichugu communities to expand into forested areas, traditionally used to "reduce population pressures on their land or even to defuse internal civil struggles precipitated by diminishing natural resources," forced these communities to reconsider their relationship with the previously marginal wetlands.[37] The transformation of the plains from a seasonal grazing area into a site of permanent settlement and intensive cultivation represented a fundamental shift in human-environment relationships driven by colonial spatial policies. The Kikuyu reserves, particularly Kiambu, experienced severe overcrowding that forced community members to seek alternative livelihood strategies, including migration to settler farms as squatters and movement to marginal areas like the Mwea Plains. David Anderson's documentation of Kikuyu flight to "European settler farms to become squatters rather than suffer in the overcrowded reserve" illustrated the desperate conditions created by colonial land policies.[38] Tabitha Kanogo's research revealed that by 1930, approximately 200,000 squatters lived in the colony, with 122,000 from the Kikuyu community, demonstrating the massive scale of population displacement created by land appropriation policies.[39] The initial period of the squatter system provided temporary relief from overcrowding while offering African communities access to larger and more fertile plots than were available in the reserves. Kanogo's observation that squatters had "a lot of freedom both in terms of stock they could keep and the size of land they could cultivate" and that "breaking into virgin land (what the Kikuyu squatters referred to as kuna) depended on the strength of one's machete" documented the agricultural opportunities that initially made squatting attractive.[40] However, this arrangement proved unstable as settler farmers consolidated their control over African labor and land use through increasingly restrictive legislation. The progressive restriction of squatter rights through the Resident Native Labour Ordinances of 1918, 1924, and 1926, culminating in the devastating 1937 ordinance that "virtually transferred responsibility for squatter labourers from the colonial government to the hands of settlers," created new waves of population displacement that intensified environmental pressures on the reserves.[41] The 1937 ordinance granted settlers "immense powers in controlling the squatters and their welfare," including the authority to "restrict or eliminate the number of squatter

[36] Ibid

[37] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945.

[38] Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya*, p. 156.

[39] Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905-1963* (London: James Currey, 1987), p. 78.

[40] Ibid, p.82

[41] Ibid, p. 146

livestock altogether and to decide the acreage that was to be under squatter cultivation."[42] The subsequent eviction of Kikuyu laborers from settler farms by 1945 created a massive return migration that further intensified overcrowding in the reserves.

The desperate conditions in the Kiambu Reserve forced community leaders to seek accommodation in other African territories, leading to Senior Chief Koinange's personal appeals to "Ndia elders to give him some space in their territory so as to settle some of his landless people in their Mwea Plain."[43] This unprecedented request for territory outside traditional clan boundaries demonstrated the severity of the land crisis while initiating a new phase of environmental change in the plains. The eventual agreement to accept landless Kikuyu as ahoi (tenants) required the adoption of traditional rituals including "paying a certain number of goats to the clan elders" and undergoing ceremonies that symbolically incorporated outsiders into clan structures through being "born with a goat" (guciarwo na mburi).[44] The settlement of ahoi in the Mwea Plains brought significant environmental changes as these new residents introduced agricultural technologies and crops acquired through contact with settler farming. Robert Chambers documented that these migrants "possessed a more advanced agricultural technology" including "ox ploughs, citrus trees, and traders' skills in maize and bean marketing" that enabled them to "effectively develop larger farms than those of families into which they had been 'adopted."[45] The introduction of ox-drawn ploughs proved particularly significant as it allowed the cultivation of "large portions of land that had previously been used as grazing fields thus altering the environment."[46] Colonial records documented that "thousands of Ahoi households were already settled in Mwea by 1936," creating demographic pressures that fundamentally altered the region's ecological balance.[47] Pius Maina's observation that "even the land that was set aside for grazing or left fallow to regain fertility continued to diminish" illustrated the environmental consequences of intensified land use driven by population pressure.[48] The situation was further complicated by "the arrival of the incoming of groups of Akamba seeking refuge in the Mwea plains to save their livestock from the cruel arm of government destocking," creating additional pressures on an already stressed ecosystem.[50]

The Kenya Land Commission and the Legitimation of Dispossession

The Kenya Land Commission of 1932-1934, chaired by Morris Carter, represented the colonial government's attempt to address growing African land grievances while simultaneously legitimizing the existing distribution of territory between settlers and indigenous communities. The commission's mandate to "carry out an investigation on the nature of African claims to land alienation, consider the present and future needs for land for the African people and decide on the best land tenure system for Africans" suggested a comprehensive review of colonial land policies.[49]

[42] Ibid, p. 158

[43] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945.

[44] Ibid

[45] Robert Chambers, *Settlement Schemes in Tropical Africa: A Study of Organizations and Development* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 234.

[46] Ibid, p. 236.

[47] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945.

[48] Pius Maina, interview by author, Mwea region, Kenya.

[49] Kenya Land Commission Report, 1932-1934, 15-18.

However, the commission's proceedings and recommendations revealed the extent to which colonial legal and administrative frameworks had already predetermined the outcomes of territorial disputes. The commission's investigation of the Mwea Plains ownership dispute illustrates the challenges African communities faced in asserting traditional land rights within colonial legal frameworks. The competing claims of the Aembu, Mbeere, Ndia, and Gichugu communities reflected the complex territorial relationships that had historically characterized the region, but colonial administrators sought to impose singular ownership categories that ignored the flexibility of traditional land tenure systems. H.E. Lambert's testimony acknowledging the difficulty of establishing "the original border between the Mbeere and Ndia territories" demonstrated the "frontier character" of the Mwea Plains and the permeability of traditional territorial boundaries that colonial administration sought to rigidify.[50]

The commission's ultimate decision to award the Mwea Plains to the Kikuyu Reserve reflected colonial preferences for administrative efficiency over recognition of complex traditional land rights. District Commissioner J.W. Pease's recommendation that "the 205 miles of Mwea be included in the South Nyeri Reserve" and his assertion that "the Ndia and Gichugu indigenous undoubtedly had the most claims in this region" established the legal framework for subsequent land allocation decisions.[51] However, Pease's additional proposal that the three Kikuyu reserves be "gazetted as a single, comprehensive reserve designated for the Kikuyu and 'kindred tribes'" fundamentally altered the territorial implications of this award by opening the plains to settlement by all Kikuyu communities rather than preserving traditional clan-based land rights.[52]

The commission's adoption of a "profit and loss account" methodology for calculating land compensation created a pseudo-scientific framework for legitimizing colonial land appropriation while appearing to address African grievances. The calculation that the Kikuyu Reserve had "lost 109.5 square miles of territory due to government alienation" and the recommendation to transfer "174.4 square miles of Mwea Plains to Nyeri District and an additional 90.5 square miles of land to Kiambu District" resulted in a claimed "net gain of 156 square miles of territory for the Kikuyu Reserve."[53] This accounting exercise obscured the qualitative differences between the fertile highland territories appropriated for settler agriculture and the marginal wetlands offered as compensation. The commission's critique of African land tenure systems, particularly the Githaka system practiced by the Ndia and Gichugu communities, reflected colonial assumptions about the superiority of individual property rights over communal land management. The commissioners' assertion that communal tenure systems "tended to promote soil degradation" ignored the sophisticated environmental management practices that had maintained ecological balance for centuries.[54] Their recommendation for individual land tenure was based on the belief that "people would be given land security under the new land tenure, which would incentivise them to develop

[50] Ibid, p.186
[51] Ibid, p. 192
[52] Kenya Land Commission Report, 1932-1934, 194.
[53] Kenya Land Commission Report, 1932-1934, 74.
[54] Kenya Land Commission Report, 1932-1934, p. 198.

their land without worrying about being evicted," but this analysis failed to recognize the environmental benefits of flexible, communal resource management systems.[55]

The commission's conclusion that "Africans had enough land to meet their need for more land" and their recommendation that communities "be urged to use improved farming practices in order to boost land production" established the ideological foundation for subsequent conservation interventions.[56] This finding allowed colonial administrators to dismiss African land grievances while justifying intensive management of indigenous territories through conservation programs. The commission's suggestion that "the government step in and assist in establishing demonstration farms to teach Africans about appropriate land management techniques" legitimized colonial control over African agricultural practices while positioning European farming methods as inherently superior to traditional approaches.[57]

The Gospel of Conservation and Colonial Environmental Control

The emergence of conservation ideology as a tool of colonial control in the Mwea Plains reflected broader imperial strategies for legitimizing resource appropriation while marginalizing indigenous environmental knowledge. The colonial adoption of what Donald Worster termed the "Gospel of Conservation," inspired by the American Dust Bowl disaster of the 1930s, provided a scientific veneer for interventions that primarily served colonial economic interests.[58] The application of this conservation framework to the Kenyan context ignored the fundamental differences between American industrial agriculture and African subsistence farming systems while perpetuating racialized assumptions about indigenous environmental management capabilities.

The appointment of Colin Maher as Soil Conservator in 1935 marked the institutionalization of conservation ideology within colonial administration, providing technical expertise for interventions that would fundamentally alter African agricultural practices. Maher's assessment that "land in most of these areas were either eroded or were on the verge of being eroded if nothing was done to arrest the situation" established the empirical foundation for conservation programs that would restrict African land use practices while imposing European agricultural methods.[61] The colonial attribution of environmental degradation primarily to "poor African land use and agricultural practices like overstocking" ignored the role of colonial policies in creating the population pressures and resource restrictions that forced communities to intensify their land use.[62]

The implementation of conservation programs in the Mwea Plains involved both positive interventions, such as terracing and tree planting, and restrictive measures that curtailed traditional resource management practices. The government's organization and financing of "planting of grass" in lower Mwea, followed by the deployment of "Colonial Chiefs in Ndia to restrict grazing activities in those areas," demonstrated the coercive dimensions of colonial conservation.[59] Francis Murage's testimony that "the government organized planting of grass in the areas near Tana and the askari [police] were given orders not to allow any cattle even from the Ndia or Gichugu from

[55] Ibid, p. 199.

[56] Ibid, p.201.

[57] Ibid, p. 203

[58] Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 45-67.

[59] Francis Murage, interview by author.

grazing in the area" revealed how conservation rhetoric justified the exclusion of indigenous communities from their traditional grazing grounds.[60]

The introduction of terracing in upper Mwea around 1936 represented a more intensive intervention in African agricultural practices, imposing European soil conservation techniques on landscapes that had been successfully managed through traditional methods for centuries. The colonial focus on the "sloppy" topography of upper Mwea and the concern that "cultivation activities could easily lead to massive soil erosion" ignored the sophisticated understanding of slope management and water conservation that indigenous communities had developed over generations.[61] The coercive enforcement of these conservation measures through colonial chiefs and headmen created resentment and resistance among affected communities.

Bernard Muriuki's recollection of the "conduct of colonial chiefs and Headmen" who "took it as their official duty to instilling discipline to anyone who disregarded Government directive when it came to land use" illustrated the authoritarian character of conservation programs.[62] The observation that "these people (chiefs and headmen) had so much power that they went even further to instill discipline by way of beating people for no apparent reason in pretext of enforcing sheria (laws)" revealed how conservation ideology provided justification for broader systems of colonial control that extended far beyond environmental management.[63]

The colonial failure to engage indigenous communities as partners in environmental management reflected deeper assumptions about African intellectual capacity and environmental knowledge. The exclusion of African voices from "decision making about the environment they lived in not only led to resistance by Africans but also brought to the fore the Europeans attitude towards Africans understanding and knowledge of their environment."[64] The dismissal of traditional practices such as shifting cultivation as "primitive and unscientific, and therefore, not worthy of consideration when it came to environmental conservation" eliminated potentially valuable approaches to sustainable resource management while imposing European methods that often proved inappropriate for local conditions.[65] The interconnection between conservation policies in different regions created cascading environmental effects that intensified pressures on the Mwea Plains ecosystem. The introduction of destocking policies and grazing fees in the Machakos Reserve forced "many of the wealthier stockowners to simply move their herds across the Tana River to the unsupervised wilds of the lower Mwea plains."[66] This displacement of livestock from regulated to unregulated areas created new environmental pressures that undermined conservation efforts in the Mwea Plains while demonstrating the inadequacy of piecemeal approaches to regional ecosystem management.

Wartime Disruption and Agricultural Transformation

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 created new imperial priorities that fundamentally altered colonial environmental policies while intensifying extractive pressures on African

[60] *bid*

[61] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945.

[62] Bernard Muriuki, interview by author, Mwea region, Kenya.

[63] Ibid

[64] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945.

[65] *bid*

[66] Ibid

territories. The British government's need to increase food production for military consumption led to the abandonment of conservation programs in favor of intensive agricultural production regardless of environmental consequences. Robert Chambers documented that "with the outbreak of the War in Europe, the colonial administration quietly buried its soil conservation programme and turned instead to exhorting the people to grow as much food as possible."[67] This policy reversal demonstrated the subordination of environmental concerns to imperial economic needs while creating new pressures for landscape transformation. The colonial request for Africans to grow potatoes, carrots, cabbages, and beans on contract basis represented a fundamental shift toward cash crop production that would have lasting environmental implications. Provincial Commissioner C. Tomkinson's 1941 offer to "exempt from recruitment into military labour" those who accepted government contracts for vegetable production created powerful incentives for agricultural intensification.[68] The establishment of the Dried Vegetable Factory at Kerugoya required the leasing of land for processing facilities while encouraging the conversion of traditional food production systems to meet external market demands. The transformation of the Kerugoya area from forest to agricultural land illustrated the speed and scale of environmental change that colonial authorities could impose when imperial priorities demanded it. Julius Gathogo's testimony that "Kerugoya was initially called 'Kiriguoya' meaning a place full of fear due to the thick forest and the many hyenas and other wild animals that roamed in the area" documented the pre-war environmental conditions that were rapidly eliminated to support vegetable production.[69] This transformation from "a place full of fear" to an agricultural processing center symbolized the broader colonial project of reimagining African landscapes as sites of resource extraction rather than complex ecosystems supporting diverse communities. The wartime emphasis on food production created new relationships between African communities and their environments that prioritized immediate economic returns over long-term sustainability. The colonial willingness to abandon conservation programs when production demands increased revealed the instrumental character of environmental policies that the colonial state had passed.

Conclusion

The environmental transformation of Kenya's Mwea Plains between 1928 and 1945 represents a paradigmatic case of colonial ecological disruption that fundamentally altered indigenous human-nature relationships through the systematic appropriation of African lands, restriction of traditional resource access, and imposition of European agricultural methods, creating a cascade of environmental changes that dismantled sophisticated indigenous environmental management systems while forcing communities into unsustainable relationships with increasingly marginal lands. The evidence challenges colonial narratives that attributed environmental degradation primarily to African land use practices, revealing instead how colonial policies created demographic pressures and resource restrictions that forced communities to intensify their exploitation of remaining accessible territories, while colonial conservation programs served

[67] Robert Chambers, *Settlement Schemes in Tropical Africa*, p. 267.

[68] Kenya National Archives, Administrative Records, Central Province, 1928-1945.

[69] Julius Gathogo, interview by author, Kerugoya region, Kenya.

primarily to legitimize further restrictions on African land rights and appropriate valuable resources for settler agriculture and timber extraction. The transformation from a seasonally used common resource supporting multiple communities into a contested landscape subject to intensive settlement illustrates the broader colonial project of reimagining African environments as sites of resource extraction rather than complex ecosystems, with the breakdown of traditional tenure systems disrupting collective action mechanisms that had historically prevented resource depletion while creating incentive structures that prioritized short-term economic returns over long-term ecological sustainability. The study demonstrates the sophisticated environmental knowledge possessed by indigenous communities and the devastating consequences of marginalizing this knowledge in favor of European agricultural methods often inappropriate for local conditions, while the wartime abandonment of conservation programs in favor of intensive food production revealed the instrumental character of colonial environmental policies that served imperial economic interests rather than genuine ecological concerns, establishing patterns of extractive resource use that would persist long after formal colonial rule and creating legacies that continue to shape contemporary challenges related to land rights, resource management, and environmental degradation in Kenya, ultimately representing more than a case study of colonial policy implementation but illustrating the fundamental violence of colonial projects that sought to remake African landscapes according to European preferences while subordinating indigenous knowledge systems and environmental relationships.

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