

GOVERNOR TUNAI'S REMARKS DURING THE 9TH MARA DAY CELEBRATIONS

15th September, 2020

Distinguished conservation champions of the Mara Basin Ecosystem, I am delighted to meet all of you comrades, on this important occasion. We are comrades, not in a military struggle, but in the important struggle for conservation.

We are marking this day amid fears and concerns over the spread of Covid-19, and I am glad that we have taken all necessary precautionary measures outlined by the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Health, that is why we do not have many people attending the celebrations today.

It is with a great sense of pride that we have come together once again to celebrate this Day, under the theme "Conserved Mara Ecosystem – Our Shared Prosperity" translating in Swahili as "Ikolojia ya Mara iliotunzwa - Ustawi wetu.

Our coming together demonstrates that various socio-economic aspects of our desired prosperity depends directly on the Mara Ecosystem – whether it is income from tourism activities; employment opportunities or suppliers of various services to the camps, hotels and lodges; or the pilots who fly aeroplanes bringing local and foreign tourists.

As we mark this 9th celebration of Mara Day, we recognize the encouraging transformative steps we have taken to conserve and improve the state of the Mara Basin Ecosystem, steps that have turned around the ecosystem from what it used to be nine years ago.

The rich and fertile Mara river basin hosts some of the largest wildlife populations in Africa. This includes those in the Serengeti National Park, which is arguably the most popular wildlife sanctuary on the planet. The basin is one of the most complex ecosystems on earth, which has in recent decades been under pressure due to poaching, expanding agricultural development, population growth and other factors.

Threats to the Mara River Basin include loss of forest cover in the upper catchment and along the river's tributaries and unsustainable agricultural expansion and intensification, including irrigation.

According to World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem relies on Mara River to sustain its stunning wildlife, among other socioeconomic activities in Kenya and Tanzania. So the Mara Basin Ecosystem has a significant socio-economic effect in the East African region.

Population growth, ever increasing tourist facilities, water pollution and unregulated water abstraction by urban settlements, large-scale commercial farming, industrial activities coupled with failures of local, national and regional legislation and institutional structures have gradually been worsening the situation.

However, we now have a comprehensive conservation strategy called the Mara Management Plan, which are now implementing, and it reducing the effects of some of those challenges.

Kenyan government, particularly the Narok County Government has shown tremendous commitment to conserving the Mara basin and ecosystem, as the river is a regional shared resource for sustainable economic development of Lake Victoria Basin to ensure sustainable use of resources.

In the last 9 years, we have planted more trees to conserve various forests and increase the forest cover, which has led to increased rainfall as well as increased water levels in the Mara River. That is why we also recently engaged in tree planting on the river bank of Talek River and cleaning up of the river, because of its significance to the Mara river as well.

Our efforts have included hiring 20 rangers to protect the Mau forest; we have hired and trained 300 new rangers at the Masai Mara; we have bought new and modern communication equipment for surveillance and to guard against poaching; through the Mara Management Plan we have stopped the construction of new camps; and we passed the Mara Community Fund Act, which I signed into law, to ensure that 19% of total revenue from the Mara goes to pastoralist communities to encourage them to partner with the County Government in conservation.

The annual Mara Day celebrations coincide with the annual wildebeest migration, a time when the eyes of the world are on the Masai Mara Game Reserve, as many local and foreign tourists flock the Mara to witness the mind-blowing phenomenon of Wildebeest migration.

This high season at the Mara, regardless of the Covid-19 challenges, we are pleased to have very many local tourists, and we appeal to Kenyans to come and experience the rare beauty of the Mara. We have put in place all the necessary precautionary measure guided by the World Health Organization protocols, and so we assure everyone of their safety.

Safeguarding of the Mara River Basin Ecosystem is a determination to conserve and sustain the environment, as well as tourism and its related activities.

My request to you all is that we should never let up our conservation efforts. If mankind dares to destroy the environment, the environment will easily destroy mankind, and in that contest, life on earth will be threatened, and human beings will face the threat of extinction.

Collectively, our shoulders are broad and strong enough to meet the challenges of the present moment, facing the entire Mara Basin Ecosystem.

The great savannas of Eastern Africa - home to traditional nomadic pastoralists, and the last refuge of some of the most spectacular wildlife populations on earth – should continue to be protected by all of us against major effects of climate change, human encroachment, human-wildlife conflict and depletion of forest cover.

We should do this strongly because the Serengeti - Mara Ecosystem supports the most diverse migration of grazing mammals on earth.

I thank the pastoral communities around Masai Mara for their continued cooperation which has been made stronger through the Masai Mara Community Fund, since they benefit from 19% of the total revenue collected from Masai Mara.

I would like to call on all stakeholders to continue working closely with the Narok County Government so that together, we can achieve the desired results.

Our collaboration in the implementation of the Mara Management Plan will keep the Mara Game Reserve on top as a leading tourism destination in Africa, and among the best in the world.

As your governor, I am committed to work closely with the Ministry in Environment and Forestry, as well as the Ministry of Tourism and all stakeholders, so that the fruits of our success in conservation of the Mara Ecosystem will be shared and claimed by all of us.

In the months ahead, we are going to step up efforts, jointly with the National Government to protect water catchment areas even further; to secure (through policy and practice) the river and rivulets that deliver their water into the Mara River.

As Narok County Government, we are going to do even more on the Mara Basin Ecosystem surveillance, as well as veterinary services, to reduce transmission of diseases from wildlife to livestock (like malignant cattery fever; also livestock whave brought new diseases to wildlife like rinderpest, which we have to guard against).

When we work strongly together, we shall surely overcome the challenges that face this ecosystem that we cherish. Nearly a decade has passed since we begun the conservation efforts on the Mara Basin Ecosystem, and so much has been achieved. This demonstrates that we are capable of achieving so much more when we work together.

In closing, as we celebrate this day, I celebrate you all and your commitment, and I pray to God that we shall live many years to come to see the success of our conservation efforts.

Thank you all and may God bless you.