

# SAND HARVESTING MENACE

## SOUTH COAST RESIDENTS RAISE CONCERN

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The ongoing sand harvesting along the Kenyan coastline has raised eyebrows among residents and other stakeholders operating in the South Coast as the dredging and disposal of sand poses an environmental threat to the internationally renowned Diani Beach and its ecosystem.

The residents under the umbrella of South Coast Residents Association (SCRA) and other interested parties in Diani have come out to strongly petition the government to stop the operation in the area claiming that the sand harvesters who have been commissioned by Kenya Ports Authority (KPA) were operating with impunity using an outdated licence which was issued after an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) done by National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) in 2007.

According to SCRA, the 2007 licence is invalid since not all stakeholders were involved in carrying out the environmental assessment exercise. The stakeholders include Kenya Association of Hotel Keepers and Caterers (KAHC), Kwale County Natural Resource Network (KCNRN), The fishing community, Beach operators and Environmentalists. SCRA also wants The County Government of Kwale to be enjoined in the petition as an interested party as it levies taxes on those operating businesses in the area including those transporting on road sand harvested from the coastline. The County Government of Kwale had not been constituted in 2007 when the initial licence was issued as the Kenyan constitution was amended in 2010 which allowed for the formation of county governments in the country.

“The current sand harvesting operation is therefore illegal and needs to be stopped immediately”, says SCRA members warning that the continued operation of the sand harvesters was detrimental to the ecologically sensitive areas especially to the existence of corals and algae along the reefs in Tiwi and Waa areas in Diani where the exercise is rampantly being carried out. The sand operation also leads to the diminishing of some fish species in the sea thus affecting the fishing community in the area.

Dr David Obura, a renowned Kenyan Marine Biologist in an article in the Cordio (website) confirms that dredging leads to sand being deposited on the reef hence affecting the corals and algae and subsequently the fish population in the sea. This, he says, greatly affects the economic activities of the local fishermen in the area affected.

“So far the government has been completely silent. There are a couple of things it should do. NEMA should suspend the operations immediately. It must require that the EIA be updated. The assessment must also specify relevant options for monitoring the adjacent reef and limiting sediment plume effects and consult the relevant authorities in the county government”, states Dr Obura in the online publication dated 22nd March, 2019.

The petitioners are optimistic that this operation can be stopped immediately citing the case of the Chinese harvesting sand at the start of the building of Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) from Mombasa in 2014 in which SCRA managed to stop the operation through an environmental tribunal. SCRA also wants all stakeholders to be involved in future EIA exercise in South Coast.

“If we don't stop this rampant sand harvesting which is an environmental hazard in our midst, soon we will only have bare rocks instead of the usual pristine white sand in our beaches, more so in Diani Beach”, regret the South Coast Residents. Diani Beach has been voted the best beach destination in Africa by international tour and travel agencies in the last five years.

Coastal dredging and port construction exacerbates sediment influx by re-suspending benthic sediments. Fine sediments tend to have greater effects on corals compared to coarse sediments (corals, seagrass, beds, mangroves, nearby beach and tidal flat areas used by avifauna, turtles and humans). Coral reefs are among the best known marine habitats in Kenya because their existence in the Marine ecosystem are an attraction to numerous fish species which benefit the local fishing community. It is also an attraction to the tourists visiting the area particularly for Scuba Diving and Snorkelling.

The ongoing sand harvesting exercise is being undertaken after Kenya Ports Authority (KPA) launched a massive improvement project in the port of Mombasa which requires thousands of tonnes of sand to backfill areas for land reclamation. KPA intends to expand its oil terminal to accommodate three or four ships docking at the same time.

In their petition the residents say the licence for the EIA carried out in 2007 was extended by 24 months in 2011 but the addendum did not include sand harvesting in areas south of Shelly Beach in Mombasa. They are therefore preparing a petition to be lodged at the Mombasa High Court to issue an order to stop the operation in the South Coastline. There has also been concern over the observation of intense dredging activity of the vessel Willem Orange associated with KPA project along the coast south of Mombasa at close proximity to the reefs located in front of Tiwi beach, an area not included in the 2007 EIA which has negatively impacted on the reefs in the South Coast.

In the past, the petitioners have managed to hold meetings with NEMA, KPA and some contractors involved in the project but nothing has been forthcoming after the meetings. In April, for example, a Parliamentary select committee on environment met the stakeholders including the sand harvesting contractors, NEMA and KPA officials to deliberate on the matter but the stakeholders' grievances are yet to be addressed. An EIA official at NEMA headquarters in Nairobi, Mr Gideon Rotich, said he was aware of the raging issue at the South Coast adding that a Mr Stephen Wambua, NEMA's Environmental Director was handling the issue from their Mombasa office.

Despite previous grievances lodged by the stakeholders in the meetings, the petitioners are now filing the case in court to compel KPA to seriously pay attention to their plea to save Diani and for NEMA to carry out a fresh EIA in the area involving all stakeholders including the Kwale County Government.