

## Between Two Oceans

by Tim Jackson, *Africa Geographic* August 2008

East Africa harbours three areas of high biodiversity that are key to regional conservation efforts. One is the coastal forests of eastern Africa, which run along much of the coastline from southern Somalia to Mozambique. The second, the afro-montane forests, is a series of widely scattered, but geographically similar mountains – most importantly, the Eastern Arc Mountains, which incorporate the Albertine and Southern Rift and the Great Lakes, and the Ethiopian highlands. Last, but not least, is the Horn of Africa, which completes the trilogy.

The Albertine Rift is home to more endemic birds, mammals (particularly primates) and amphibians than any of its African neighbours, and the Great Lakes harbour an extraordinary diversity of freshwater fishes. Agricultural expansion is threatening these afro-montane and coastal forests, while the bushmeat trade sustains a growing human population in the Albertine Rift.

The Horn of Africa has more endemic reptiles than anywhere else on the continent. It is also home to the Somali wild ass, sacred baboon and several threatened antelope species, including the beira, dibatag and Speke's gazelle. This is also an important area for rodents – rats and mice account for 40 per cent of all mammal species here. Sadly, the Horn is one of the world's most degraded conservation areas and only five per cent of the original habitat remains. Political instability, overgrazing and the charcoal industry are all to blame.

Many of the region's national parks, such as Amboseli, Nairobi, Tarangire and Lake Manyara, were established to protect the non-breeding or dry-season ranges of large herbivores rather than other elements of their biodiversity. Typically, in the wet season, wildebeest, eland and Thomson's gazelle wander beyond the borders of sanctuaries into areas of human activity. Animal populations have suffered. Since 1977 for instance, half of Kenya's wildlife has disappeared, including 30 per cent within protected areas.

Recent surveys show that wildlife populations in southern Sudan may have bucked this trend. In spite of 25 years of civil war, 1.3 million antelope and gazelle are estimated to live there. The country has also seen a resurgence of conservation activities and 20 per cent of southern Sudan is now protected.

Throughout East Africa, agricultural development has played a large role in the rapid degradation of wildlife migration and dispersal corridors that are critical to the protected-area network. This has had startling consequences for migratory antelopes, such as wildebeest in the Masai Mara, which declined by 81 per cent between the late 1970s and 1990s. Similarly, within northern Tanzania's Tarangire system, hartebeest, gemsbok and wildebeest populations plummeted by 88, 90 and 95 per cent respectively between 1988 and 2001.

Human-wildlife conflict is listed among the greatest threats to protected areas in Kenya. For instance, lion populations in the past-oral ranches adjacent to the Masai Mara may be headed for extinction, probably through conflicts with the burgeoning human population.