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**FAUNA**  
with  
Agatha Ngotho

## The giant panda

In recent decades the giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) has also served as a national emblem for China while its image appears on a large number of modern Chinese commemorative silver, gold and platinum coins.

The giant panda has been known to attack humans, presumably out of irritation rather than predatory behaviour, though it is often assumed to be docile.

### Habitat

It is a bear, native to central and southwestern China and lives in bamboo forests.

### Physical appearance

The name means "cat-foot black-and-white". It is easily recognised by its large, distinctive black patches around the eyes, over the ears and across its round body.

Adults measure around 1.5 metres long and around 75 cm tall at the shoulder. Males are 10-20 percent larger than females weighing up to 150 kilograms while females weigh 125 kilos.

The giant panda has black fur on its ears, eye patches, muzzle, legs, arms and shoulders while the rest of the animal's coat is white. Although scientists do not know why these unusual bears are black and white, some speculate that the bold colouring provides effective camouflage into its shade-dappled snowy and rocky surroundings.

The giant panda's thick, woolly coat keeps it warm in the cool forests of its habitat. They have large molar teeth and strong jaw muscles for crushing tough bamboo.

It has the second longest tail in the bear family, which measures about 150 mm long and can live to be 25-30 years old in captivity.

### Behaviour

In the wild, the giant panda is a terrestrial animal and primarily spends its life roaming and feeding in the bamboo forests.

Though solitary, each adult has a defined territory and females are not tolerant of other females in their range.

Pandas communicate through vocalisation and scent marking such as clawing trees or spraying urine. They are able to climb and take shelter in hollow trees or rock crevices but do not establish permanent dens.

Pandas rely primarily on spatial memory rather than visual memory. Social encounters occur primarily during the brief breeding season in which pandas in proximity to one another will gather. After mating, the male leaves the female alone to raise the cub.

### Reproduction

In captivity, Giant pandas breed by artificial insemination as they seem to lose their interest in mating once they were captured.

Mating season is between March and May when a female goes into her estrous cycle for two or three days and only occurs once a year.

Gestation period ranges from 95 to 160 days and cubs weigh 85 to 140 grams. Twins are not uncommon with pandas but only one will live.

### Diet

Though it belongs to the order Carnivora, the Giant Panda's diet is 99 percent bamboo. Other parts of its diet include honey, eggs, fish, yams, shrub leaves, oranges and bananas in captivity.

The average giant panda eats as much as 9 to 14 kilos of bamboo shoots a day. In captivity, zoos typically maintain their bamboo diet, though some will provide specially formulated biscuits or other dietary supplements.

### Social significance

In the past, pandas were thought to be rare and noble creatures. The mother of a Chinese emperor was buried with a panda skull in her vault.

Unlike many other animals in Ancient China, Pandas were rarely thought to have medical uses. The few known uses include the Sichuan tribal peoples' use of panda urine to melt accidentally swallowed needles, and the use of panda pelts to control menses.

Loans of giant pandas to American and Japanese zoos formed an important part of the diplomacy of the People's Republic of China in the 1970s and this practice has been termed the panda diplomacy.

Additional information: Wikipedia



## Ecotourism plan for Kaya forest

By HUSSEIN ABDULLAHI

Sacred Mijikenda forests along the coast containing the remains of numerous fortified villages known as Kayas will soon be opened up for visitors through an ecotourism project driven by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK).

These forests which are regarded by the indigenous people of Coast province as the abodes of their ancestors are held as sacred sites and are in the custody of a select group of council of elders who ensure they are not contaminated by destructive human activity. The Kaya villages are recognised for their outstanding universal value in conserving the heritage of the Mijikenda community and are thus enlisted in the prestigious World Heritage Sites by Unesco.

The Kayas are revered as the repositories of spiritual beliefs of the Mijikenda people and are seen as sacred abode of ancestors and consists of 11 separate forest sites spread over 200 km along the coastline. French Ambassador to Kenya Elizabeth Barbier while officially opening the newly-constructed information centre at Kaya Muzimanya in Rabai in Kilifi District said the Kayas offer opportunity to other people to appreciate the unique cultural diversity at the Kenyan coast which had been used in the conservation of forests. She said her government will market the Kayas to attract foreign tourists for them to discover the real part of culture instead of relying on the traditional beaches and safaris. The envoy said the French government will support cultural diversity in Kenya for peace building and environment conservation. She said her government has funded the Rabai ecotourism and information project to the tune of Shs3 million in aid to

conserve the unique Mijikenda culture and open the Kayas as tourist attraction sites.

"It is not only the beaches and Safari packages that Kenya has to offer for tourist attractions, there are unique cultural sites like the Kayas that also need to be marketed," she noted.

NMK director general Dr Idle Farah said the NMK will continue to sensitise all communities on the importance of preserving their heritage and history observing that the unique Mijikenda traditions and culture has rendered the forests at the coast "virgin and healthy". He said in an effort to preserve the Kaya NMK has gazetted these sacred forests and enlisted them in the prestigious world heritage list. The director-general said the biodiversity of the Kayas and forests surrounding them have been protected using traditional beliefs and urged other Kenyans to emulate the Mijikenda people and preserve their environment through cultural practices for posterity.

Dr. Farah said heritage professionals will soon carry out condition survey of the sites with a view to come up with a management plan that would guide and improve their conditions of conservation and managements.

"Tour operators, school heads and well wishers should bring visitors to see the benefits of working with the communities in conserving their heritage" said Dr. Farah.

He said the NMK will give Kaya elders who manage the forests technical advice that will help them make utilize the forests more sustainably.

The chairman of the NMK board Issa Timamy pledged that NMK will offer marketing of the Kayas abroad through partnering with the Kenya Tourism Board besides offering technical expertise.

## Worm outbreaks threaten food security

By HUSSEIN ABDALLAH

At least 30 districts in central and eastern Kenya have reported cases of armyworm and bollworm infestation, raising concerns over damage to crops in affected areas after a prolonged drought.

"The infestation may be attributable to climatic change. The rains have led to a quick multiplication of the pests," the deputy director of agriculture in the plant protection services division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Joseph Ngetich said.

"Intermittent periods of rainfall provide good conditions for the hatching of the pests' eggs," Ngetich said. "If after a dry spell it rains continuously, we will not see an outbreak as conditions will not be conducive for hatching."

This has been the case since October when heavy rains after the drought concentrated egg-laying moths and provided grass/cereals for newly-hatched caterpillars. Dry, sunny periods, as experienced in November, during the caterpillar development, promoted their survival and rapid development.

The first armyworm outbreak was reported in the Tana Delta area along the coast in November, "but it was repressed and did not cause major infestations", noted Ngetich.

"Overall, the armyworms have affected about 2,474ha of pasture and 386ha of maize," he said.

"By December though, most of the maize was beyond knee-high, beyond the vulnerable stage."

The larva of the armyworm feeds on young grasses (pasture) and cereal crops. About 10 districts, mainly in the Ukambani area of Eastern Province, have been affected; a bumper harvest is expected in parts of the province.

### Outbreak forecasting

Trapping armyworm moths is useful for the prediction of an outbreak. Light and pheromone traps with an insecticide cube may be used. "If we see catches of up to 20 moths a night, we know there will be an outbreak because of mating, laying of eggs and hatching."

There are at least 400 surveillance traps in Kenya. Outbreak patterns elsewhere are also useful. "For example, if there are reports in Malawi, then in Tanzania, we know the next region to be hit will be Kenya," he said.

He said the armyworm outbreak is under control although there are still pockets of infestation in areas such as Kajiado, south of Nairobi. Armyworms are among notifiable migratory pests in Kenya.

### African bollworm

The bollworm has also infested fields in central and eastern Kenya. "Bollworms are usually a minor pest but this year they have become a major pest. People are not prepared for (them)," noted Ngetich, adding that control efforts and damage assessment were ongoing.