

## UNDP-GEF grasslands project: the Tanzania montane grasslands project

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**Background** The Tanzania Southern Highlands and adjacent Nyika montane grasslands in Malawi form a distinct centre of plant diversity and endemism. The area is characterised by complex geology with old basement mountains and much more recent volcanoes (Mount Rungwe) adjacent to the rift valley faulting with Lakes Malawi (Nyasa) and Rukwa. Lake proximity generates rainfall up to 3,000 mm per annum. The maximum altitude is 3,000 m asl.

Whilst the biodiversity values of these montane grasslands (and some adjacent montane forests) have long been known to biologists, they have fallen through the cracks in national Protected Area system planning. Tanzania's conservation Protected Areas have traditionally focused on large mammals of the savannah systems and more recently the primate values of forests have led to forested national parks. But grasslands, with no trees or large mammals, were not the mandated concerns of Forest or Wildlife Departments. There was a major ecosystem gap in the protected area system. The realisation of this gap, coincided with the realisation that high-altitude grasslands which were once wilderness were now under threat for cultivation of potatoes and the growing importance of the wild orchid bulb trade as a dry-season food stuff in neighbouring Zambia ("chikanda").

**The project** This is a Global Environment Programme (GEF) Priority One project for Biodiversity – aimed at ensuring sustainability of Protected Area Systems. There are two entry points, one aiming to fix the "gap" by designing sustainable Protected Areas in this new biome (Parks, Reserves and buffer-zone community sustainable use areas). The other is working with the different protected area institutions (Parks Authorities, Wildlife and Forestry Divisions at national and local levels, and civil society) to develop capacity to plan, implement and monitor grassland protected areas.

Biodiversity values are high: the Kitulo Plateau has been described as the Serengeti of Flowers. At least 40 species of vascular plants are known to be unique to the Southern Highlands, and many more restricted to the Highlands and the Nyika Plateau in Malawi. The block-faulted Uporoto, the Rungwe volcanics and the older metamorphic Kipengere Range all give rise to distinct botanical assemblages. For example, *Protea praticola* is found only between 2300 and 2400 m on Mt Mbogo in Umalila, the balsam *Impatiens leedalii* is restricted to the edge of Numbi in Kipengere and the bell flower, *Cyphia rupestris* can be found only on Kitulo and Mbeya. Kitulo. The plateau itself has long been recognised as an area of outstanding botanical importance, with 31 plant species as national endemics, and the presence of as many as 42 species of terrestrial orchid.

The avian importance of Southern Highland grasslands is reflected in the fact that six areas have been designated as 'Important Bird Areas', the Tanzania / Malawi mountains are an 'Endemic Bird Area' (No. 105). Six species have been designated by IUCN / BirdLife International as 'category one' species (globally threatened). Three of these are listed as 'vulnerable' and three as 'near-threatened'.

The project will work with government and civil society stakeholders to develop capacity for the management of grassland protected areas. Outputs will include a strategic plan for a system of protected areas in the southern highlands, model management plans, sustainable use strategies and partnership agreements between different management agencies. A detailed M and E framework will allow monitoring of selected biodiversity values to show conservation impact.

