

Maiden African Students' Conference

African Biodiversity: Present state, challenges & prospects of its conservation

2nd to 4th July 2013, Nairobi, Kenya



Conference report

The conference was **sponsored by the Tropical Biology Association, The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS), the British Ecological Society and the British Ecological Society's Tropical Ecology Group**

and **hosted by the National Museums of Kenya**



Overview

The Tropical Biology Association African Alumni Group (TAAG) maiden students' conference was designed and organised by the Tropical Biology Association (TBA) African alumni with the aim of building the capacity of the next generation of biologists and conservationists. The TBA alumni organised this conference to create an international forum for discussions aimed at providing solutions to current issues facing conservation of the threatened African biodiversity. The conference provided a unique opportunity for students, early career ecologists, policy makers, conservation practitioners and naturalists from across Africa to share knowledge, interact and network. The conference also provided an opportunity for interaction between young African ecologists and senior career scientists, facilitating mentorship, research collaboration and networking. The three days' conference was packed with thematic talks, plenary sessions, student presentations and workshops. The conference brought together 178 participants from 13 countries, representing over 50 institutions.



A section of the conference participants ©Martin Odino

Nationality	Total
Ghana	1
Italy	1
Kenya	142
Malawi	1
Mauritius	1
Nigeria	4
Sierra Leone	1
South Africa	1
Tanzania	12
Uganda	8
USA	1
UK	4
Zimbabwe	1
Total	178

Countries of origin of
conference participants

The conference received extremely positive feedback with participants rating the conference overall as 1.6 on a scale of 1 (excellent) to 5 (very poor). 95% of participants said they would like to see another TAAG students' conference in the near future. 93% of the delegates reported that the conference had met their expectations.

““The conference was an experience I never had before and am proud to have had the once in a lifetime opportunity”

University of Nairobi student participant

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Conference content and themes

“Biodiversity in Africa – Present State, Challenges and Prospects for its Conservation”

The theme of the conference was “Biodiversity in Africa – Present State, Challenges and Prospects for its Conservation”. The conference was highly engaging, and provided for active participant discussions through question-answer and plenary sessions. This ensured that participants remained engaged throughout and contributed their own diverse experiences to discussions. Participants appreciated the unique opportunity for learning and networking that the conference provided. At the end of the conference, participants discussed the way forward, which culminated into interesting suggestions towards the future of the conference. 95% of the participants said they definitely looked forward to the next TAAG Students’ conference.

These were the conference working themes:

- ❖ Biodiversity loss and challenges of conservation in African context
- ❖ Climate change and other threats to biodiversity conservation
- ❖ Biodiversity and ecosystem functioning and services
- ❖ Capacity building for biodiversity conservation in Africa
- ❖ Social dimension aspects for biodiversity conservation
- ❖ Challenges and opportunities for effective linkage of biodiversity conservation research with policy and practice in Africa

Keynote talks

Four keynote talks were given by speakers from BirdLife International, the University of Nairobi, Oxford University, the Global Environment Facility, and the Tropical Biology Association. During these talks, the speakers shared practical conservation experiences from African countries in relation to each of the day’s conference theme.

The conference Keynote talks were:

- Challenges and opportunities for effective linkage of biodiversity conservation research with policy and practice in Africa by Dr. Leon Bennun (Bird Life International)
- Biodiversity loss and challenges of conservation in African context by Prof. Jonathan Kingdon (University of Oxford)
- Social aspects of biodiversity conservation by Prof. Nick Ouge (University of Nairobi)
- Capacity building for biodiversity conservation in Africa by Dr. Rosie Trevelyan (Tropical Biology Association)



Prof. Jonathan Kingdon making a presentation

©Martin Odino

Student Presentations

During the three days of the conference, thirty students, representing eleven countries shared their diverse conservation research findings and experiences. Among these very enlightening presentations were 23 oral and 7 poster presentations. On the final day of the conference, the presentations were rated by a panel of judges who considered a set of criteria including: originality of research, balance of presentation, simplicity of delivery and concise interpretation of results.

The following students received awards for best student presentations:

- **Best Oral Presentation:** Tendai Musvuugwa, Zimbabwe (Diversity and pathogenicity of ophiostomatoid fungi found on native trees in the Cape Floristic Region)
- **Best Poster presentation:** Simon Musila, Kenya (Knowledge and perceptions about bats by local people of Mijikenda community in Kenya)
- **Best Speed talk presentation:** Moses Chemurot, Uganda (Beehive and honey losses caused by bush burning to beekeepers in Adjumani District, Uganda)



Tendai Musvuugwa making her Best Oral Presentation
©Njoroge Wa Chege

Workshops

Four workshops were delivered during the conference. These workshops were organized around various themes tailored according to participants' fields of interests.

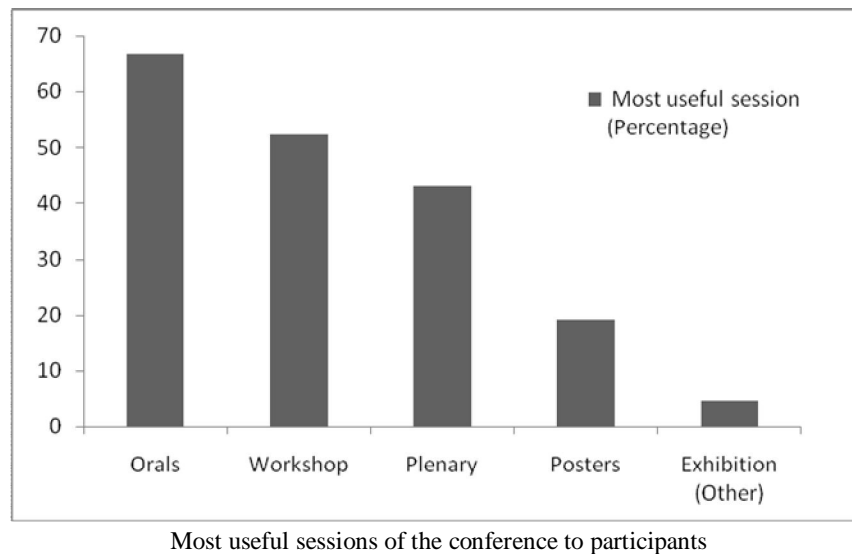
The Conference Workshops were:

- ❖ Bush craft skills and Mammal identification techniques by Prof. Jonathan Kingdon (University of Oxford), Bernard Agwanda (National Museums of Kenya) and Prof. Nick Ogue (University of Nairobi)
- ❖ Fundraising for conservation projects by Dr. Rosie Trevelyan (Tropical Biology Association)
- ❖ Biodiversity and ecosystem functioning and services by Dr Anton Espira (Eco2librium) and Dr Mwangi Githiru (WildLife Works)
- ❖ Conservation of carnivores by Dr. Bernard Kissui (African Wildlife Foundation)

Although these workshops were run in parallel, a session was organised in which the discussions and proceedings were shared with all conference participants by the rapporteurs from each of the working groups.

Conference assessment

Participants rated the conference overall as 1.6 on a scale of 1 (excellent) to 5 (very poor); 93% of them reported that the conference had fully (88%) and partly (5%) met their expectations. 67% of the participants ranked the Oral student presentations as the most useful session of the conference, followed by the workshops and plenary sessions as shown in the figure below.



Overall, the conference feedback showed that participants were happy with the pre-conference arrangements, programme delivery, achievement of expectations, refreshments and food, quality of presentation and conference facilities.

Some comments from participants:

*“The program is very relevant and any African scientist would be privileged to be part of it.”
(Student participant)*

“This is a very good initiative, TAAG is a great idea and it will surely keep growing until we have a critical mass of conservationists to cause a change!” (Conference participant)

“Thank you! My first attendance to TAAG conference was wonderful and I look forward to attend the next one!” (Conference participant)

“The conferences we are used to are not student based like this one; so your target is both unique and relevant.” (University of Nairobi student)

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the following organizations for funding the TAAG maiden conference: the Tropical Biology Association, the British Ecological Society, the British Ecological Society’s Tropical Ecology Group and The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS); and the National Museums of Kenya for hosting the conference. We are also grateful to the members of the conference’s Local Organising Committee without whose hard work, commitment and enthusiasm, the conference would not have been such a huge success. Special thanks go to the Key conference speakers– Dr. Leon Bennun, Prof. Jonathan Kingdon, Prof. Nick Oguge and Dr. Rosie Trevelyan for their inspiring and enlightening talks. Finally, we would like to acknowledge all the delegates for attending the conference and hope that they will find the skills, knowledge and experiences from the conference useful in their respective careers.