

Helping the People Protect African Violet Habitats in Africa!



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Kenya and Tanzania, East Africa, are well known tourist destinations as many people are aware of the fabulous wildlife parks like the Masai Mara, Serengeti National Park and Ngorongoro Crater. Maybe the most famous wildlife event is the 1,500,000+ wildebeest migration (ranges from 500-1000 miles) over the Serengeti and Masai Mara ecosystem. Let's move up to 19,340 feet.

Snow-covered Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania looks over both countries. If you stand on the top of Kilimanjaro and looked to the east and scanned to the south, you will see the Eastern Arc Mountains and the Coastal Forests of Kenya and Tanzania, where the last remaining populations of African violets live. These mountains and forests are designated as one of 24 biodiversity hotspots in the world by Conservation International (On 1.4 % of the world's land surface, one can find 44% of the plant species!) Of all the biodiversity hotspots, the Eastern Arcs & Coastal Forests have the greatest number of endemic (found no where else in the world) species per acre. The endemic African violets are the ambassadors (flagship species) for the Eastern Arc Mountains and Coastal Forests. The offspring of 2 or 3 of the 22 wild species have been commercialized into the 20,000+/- hybrids that so many people have come to love so much. The violets are an indicator of ecosystem health. If the violets are healthy, so is the ecosystem in which they live. Next time you look at the violet, think about its original habitat and about the people who live there. Let's look in on one place from which the African violet comes.

We will go to Mbololo Forest (part of the Taita Hills, Eastern Arc Mountains) near Voi, Kenya. Voi is a busy town located on the Nairobi-Mombasa Highway. Coming from Nairobi you can see Mbololo on your right just before arriving in Voi. This 400-acre forest fragment jumps out of the flat, dry Tsavo plains, where the elephant & lion still roam free. It takes about 1½ hours to drive from Voi to the base of the mountain and then up a steep rough road to the entrance to the forest. There, you find modest homes, schools, small farms and places of worship. Families struggle to live off the land. The energy of each family member is used to grow food, take care of any grazing animals, collect firewood (their only energy supply), and obtain water. The opportunity to make money is limited. They might, on a good day, make only US\$0.50; still they are fortunate to live near the forest.

They live near the closed-canopied Mbololo Forest. As rainstorms and water-filled clouds move by, the forest collects the water that is so important to the people and the violets. Not only do local people benefit from the watershed (called a catchment), but the people who live in the foothills of the mountain benefit as well. The people could not live without the forests, and neither could the violets. The water and shade of the forest are just what the violets need to survive. Let's walk into the forest to see the violets.

It's a hard, up-and-down hike of about 30 minutes on an old road until we reach a small trail that enters into the forest. After 5 minutes, we drop down around the edge of a southeast-facing cliff under a tree canopy that allows very little light to enter. At the base of the 50-foot cliff we look up to see a fantastic site – a rock-face covered with violets (*Saintpaulia teitensis*)! The flowers, 4-8 per stalk, are dark blue. The leaves are thick and leathery, dark green, with smooth leaf margins, often with raised veins and some with red undersides.

But, as much as they appreciate the Mbololo forest, the people living in the area need to survive, and they cannot continue to protect the forest without some help. That is where you come in. Funds are needed to purchase fuel-efficient stoves, to provide technical assistance to maintain agriculture and honey production, to help develop tree nurseries, to pay people to help plant and restore the forests that have already been removed. Based on recent DNA analyses, *S. teitensis* in Mbololo should be granted high priority status for conservation. The East African Wild Life Society (EAWLS) is already on the ground assisting the people who live around Mbololo Forest (http://www.eawildlife.org/programme_areas/education.htm).

In Tanzania, where most of the violet populations occur, The Tanzanian Forest Conservation Group (TFCG) helps local villagers conserve their forests. Two sites should be classified as high priority for conservation-the Uluguru and Nguru Mountains, based on DNA analyses of *Saintpaulia*. TFCG is already working on the ground in the Nguru Mountains. (http://www.tfcg.org/docs/project_nguru.htm).

Recently the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden established an the African Violet Conservation Fund. Tax deductible donations can be made to help protect and restore the forested habitats that people and African violets depend for their survival. The Zoo sells an African violet test tube [tissue culture] plant (*S. rupicola*) to support its conservation efforts.

Step up and take the lead in this very important activity and people know that you are part of an effort to protect the African violet in the wild. Help the people and you help the violet.

Information on the Eastern Arc Mountains and the African violets in the wild can be found at the following web sites:

Wild African Violets

<http://www.mv.helsinki.fi/jkolehma/article.html>

Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund

www.cepf.net/xp/cepf/where_we_work/eastern_arc_mountains/eastern_arc_mountains_info.xml

Tanzania Forest Conservation Group

www.tfcg.org

Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden

<http://www.cincyzoo.org/Conservation/GlobalConservation/AfricanViolets/africanviolets.html>

Eastern Arc Conservation Programme

<http://www.easternarc.or.tz/cm.htm>