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A government officer prepares to plant trees in the Mount Kenya region. The Archdiocese of Nyeri, Kenya, operates Nyeri Hill Farm, a 3,000-acre farm that produces coffee and tea, in the region. The farm was started for evangelization and has expanded its goals to focus heavily on forest restoration and environmental conservation. (EarthBeat photo/Shadrack Omuka)

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GROWING A GREEN CHURCH

Editor's note: *This story is part of "Growing a Green Church," an ongoing series focused on churches' efforts to steward their buildings and land effectively in the context of a changing climate. The project is produced in collaboration with The Christian Century, Episcopal News Service, Faithfully Magazine, National Catholic Reporter, and Sojourners, with support from the Solutions Journalism Network and funding from the Fetzer Institute. Find more stories in the series here.*

Surrounded by hills, valleys, dirt roads and vast, uncultivated, semi-arid lands dotted with acacia trees and cacti sits the Archdiocese of Nyeri's Nyeri Hill Farm.

Approximately 103 miles (166 kilometers) from Nairobi, Kenya's capital, and less than 2 miles (3 kilometers) from the small town of Nyeri, the more than 3,000-acre farm was established to facilitate evangelization and help eradicate poverty and disease. But over the years, its goals have expanded and the farm has heavily invested in afforestation and other environmental conservation efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change that results in more droughts, flooding and soil erosion.

Among various cash crops, an animal farm and institutions, 825 acres of Nyeri Hill Farm are dedicated to coffee and 100 acres are dedicated to tea. According to farm archives, the Catholic archdiocese ownership of Nyeri Hill Farm coffee estates dates to 1904, when the Consolata Fathers established the first coffee demonstration plot at the current site of a Consolata Mission Hospital.

Commercial coffee and tea production officially started in 1914. Currently, the diocese has two factories for coffee and tea processing, one at Nyeri Hill Farm and the other at nearby Kamwenja.

Alfred Munyua, an environmental activist and a private coffee farmer in Nyeri County, said effects of climate change — like drought — have rendered the Mount Kenya region, where the farm lies, food insecure and have imposed a reliance on food from the government and well-wishers.

"All of these problems have been instigated by drought which is driven by illegal logging and encroachment in the forest hence decline in rainfall amount," Munyua said.

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According to MyKahawa (my coffee), a platform dedicated to raising the profile of Kenyan coffee, coffee does well in areas about 1,970 feet (1,800 meters) above sea level with annual rainfall of 47 inches (1,200 millimeters.) However, Nyeri Hill Farm — an ASAL (Arid and Semi Arid Land) area — averages just 37 inches (950 millimeters) of rainfall per year.

The farm used to experience low crop yields due to lack of rainfall, so they have started to install an irrigation system to boost production. Though the process is slow and not yet fully complete, the farm plans to eventually stop relying on rain-watered agriculture. The area with the irrigation system has seen an increase in production from 88 ounces (2.5 kilograms) to 352 ounces (10 kilograms) per tree.

And to conserve water, Nyeri Hill Farm has invested in a water recycling system that reduces water waste, contamination and costs, reducing their water bill by almost 50%. The farm has also invested in hulling of the coffee husks, which it uses as organic manure.

Munyua applauded Nyeri Hill Farm for its afforestation strategy, saying that it will restore the weather pattern and help eradicate hunger. Places like the nearby town of Mweiga, which was known for little rainfall, now are getting rainfall in all seasons. That means better farm yields, especially for those who rely on rain-fed agriculture and do not have irrigation systems.



A child affected by drought in Kenya pulls a jerrycan of water at Sopel village in Turkana, Kenya, Sept. 27. Below-normal rainfall is expected in most parts of the Greater Horn of Africa (GHA) over the next three months.(CNS/Reuters/Thomas Mukoya)

According to the Standard Newspaper, a Kenyan news outlet, though the country has seen some rain recently, the meteorological department has warned farmers that the rainfall amount won't be enough and they should consider planting drought-resistant crops so they will have something for harvesting at the end of the season.

In addition to adapting its own operations to climate change, Nyeri Hill Farm helps local communities on matters of conservation, focusing mainly on afforestation, proper waste dumping and soil erosion management.

As part of those efforts, the farm has established tree nurseries with thousands of seedlings of various species, including native plants, which they give to the surrounding communities, parishioners and institutions, including the diocese, which

takes seedlings for planting in the Mount Kenya area.

"What we need is to increase forest cover in the region which has been ruined by illegal activities in the forest," said Joseph Wanjau, the farm manager.

He said the farm raises thousands of tree seedlings every year to battle the effects of climate change and boost the government agenda of planting 15 billion trees in the next 10 years.

According to AfricanNews, the region has suffered almost three years of persistent drought, and IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre (ICPAC) announced that below-normal rainfall is expected in most parts of the Greater Horn of Africa (GHA) over the next three months. As the country experiences the worst drought in four decades, Bishop Anthony Muheria of the Nyeri Catholic Archdiocese warned of severe climate changes if Kenyans do not take environmental conservation seriously.

It is "the responsibility of each individual to ensure that the environment is conserved for the future generations," the bishop told EarthBeat. He applauded the Nyeri Hill Farm for its conservation efforts.

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"If we want to make a better future for our children and great-grandchildren, then we must embrace environmental conservation. Let us plant trees. We must stop cutting trees maliciously and, instead, we protect them," he said.

The bishop appealed to corporate leaders "to come to the rescue of the world by supporting environmental conservation activities like planting trees and cleaning rivers."

Last year during national prayer day at Subukia National Shrine, Muheria, who often preaches about the environment, urged pilgrims to take responsibility and pray for environmental conservation.

Mary Nyambura, a farmer and a parishioner in Nyeri, said that she got most of her conservation skills from the coffee farm. She does mixed farming on her 1.5 acres in Mathari village, just a few miles from Nyeri town.

"I have learnt a lot from this farm, from conservation to farming skills which has totally improved my farm produce," she said.

This story appears in the **Growing a Green Church** feature series. View the full series.