

Abstract

The Yala swamp is an extensive wetland in western Kenya, covering an area of 17'500 ha. The wetland, together with its three lakes, is an important site for biodiversity conservation. The local community has been associated with the wetland for a long time, and they obtain key resources from it. To date, however, 2300 ha of the wetland have been reclaimed for agricultural production, and there are fresh proposals for further reclamations. The aims of this paper are to describe the patterns of utilization of the wetland, including a preliminary economic valuation of the resources, and compare these with the costs and benefits of conversion. Surveys, interviews, and participant observation were used to obtain information. Direct economic values were calculated for fisheries, water transportation, agriculture, building materials, fuelwood, grazing, hunting, mat making, salt licks, and tourism. Indirect values include medicinal plants, vegetables, flood control, and wildlife habitats. The wetland also has existence and option values, which will be lost if the swamp is converted. Comparing these values with the short-term gains, and the cost of conversion, and considering soil degradation and disruption of the socio-cultural situation, it is suggested that the wetland provides valuable economic resources to support the population, and should not be converted. Instead, traditional sustainable uses of the wetland should be promoted for the benefit of the local people.