

Welcome speech at the opening of the Taita research station, 12.1.2011

Prof. Petri Pellikka, research station director

Honorary Deputy Director Esau Omollo, Her Excellency Ms Ambassador Heli Sirve, Honorary rector Thomas Wilhelmsson
Dear Wataita, Dear colleagues and friends, Ladies and gentlemen

I have the pleasure and honor to have you all here for the opening of the Taita research station of the University of Helsinki here in the Taita Hills, Kenya. I am pleased that we have such an excellent representation from the District and County, from Kenya Forest Service, University of Nairobi and National Museums of Kenya. I am also proud of our delegation from the University of Helsinki led by our rector. I am also happy that the Embassy of Finland is represented here.

I could not have dreamed 21 years ago that University of Helsinki would have a research station here in the Taita Hills, when I arrived here as a Master student in 1989. I and my colleagues from the University of Helsinki were here carrying out a minor field study funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland. Six MSc theses, among mine too, were done about the land use of the Taita Hills. The research topic was so interesting, that the research still goes on, because the land use is still changing. I left Taita Hills and Kenya in 1989 and came back in 2003 to carry out research with my own students.

Because of this personal background the opening of the research station here is a great personal moment and an achievement at the same time. The research station would not have been possible without the great cooperation between me and Professor Jouko Rikkinen, who finally gave me the last inspiration to go for it, and also without the strong support from the University of Helsinki, first of all, to provide funds for buying these premises, but also to support the renovation, management and future. I am greatly thankful for the University of Helsinki for this.

I am here not the first time. I have been accommodating here with my research team and students since 2003 when we started a project on land cover change studies in the Taita Hills. During these 7 years my students have been finishing 10 MSc theses and 5 PhD theses, and there is about the same number still coming in the next few years. With the cooperation with University of Nairobi, Kenya Forest Service, National Museums of Kenya and governmental and non-governmental organizations here in Taita we have great chances to carry out research for the benefit for Kenya and for the benefit for Taita people.

The main investors of the station from the University of Helsinki are Faculty of Science, Faculty of Biosciences and Environment, Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ruralia Institute. The Taita research station is not only for geography, nor for these faculties, but for the whole University of Helsinki. In addition, it can serve other educational and research establishments in Finland, and in principle it can serve also research groups from Kenya and other countries.

The Taita Hills and its surrounding plains is an excellent study area for geographical studies due to altitudinal changes in relatively small area, which is causing diversity in landscape, climate, ecology and human activity. The area suits very well for biological, geological, agricultural and sociological studies, only to name but a few. In addition, due to the diversity of landscape structures and forests, it also serves as an excellent pilot site for remote sensing methods development, which is my own research area.

We have some ideas how this station will develop, but the definite plans are not yet finalized. So far, my team has used this place for accommodation, for logistical support and as a second home. Nevertheless, we will set up here some laboratories, measurement stations for climate, hydrology, maybe seismology, and a visitor center to provide information for local communities and schools. We think that we are also able to attract tourists to come to the Taita Hills from the Tsavo plains.

Most of all it is the landscape and human communities of Taita, which is the laboratory. The geographers do not typically need laboratories, but they need environmental problems to study, and these we have here. The loss of indigenous forests and bushlands, increase of exotic forests, increase of agricultural land lead to loss of biodiversity, loss of water catchments, loss of water resources and intensification of soil erosion. We need to research these threats in an integrated way in order to manage the natural resources for the benefit of environment and human population.

In the Taita Hills, we have collaborated with many Kenyan institutes and organizations, but there are still lots of unexplored possibilities. These possibilities may be searched through a cooperation agreement between the University of Helsinki and University of Nairobi, which will be signed this week.

During the coming scientific session we will hear background and achievements of the research carried out by the University of Helsinki and our cooperation partners in the Taita and moreover in East Africa. The topics range from land cover change to biodiversity and agriculture. Let this program enlighten you the diversity of the research topics and new collaboration chances in the Taita Taveta.

I warmly welcome you to the opening of the Taita research station. Let this be a joyful event.