



## A field study on seaweed use along the coast of Kenya

### Before arrival

Already in my first year at KTH, I heard about many students from our program who wrote their bachelor thesis abroad. Many of them had received the KTH Field Studies grant. Everyone I spoke to was very satisfied and said they had learned a lot, which made me start thinking about going abroad as well. When the time came for me to apply, I teamed up with my friend Ebba, and we began contacting both companies and professors at KTH whom we knew had worked on environmental projects abroad in various ways. That's how we got in touch with our supervisor, who had just started a new project in Kenya together with another person based there. Both the country and the project sounded exciting, and after a few meetings, it was decided that we would work with this project.

My expectations for the trip were to grow as a person and gain insight into environmental problems and solutions in other parts of the world, and I did. Before departure, we had to apply for a visa, which was a simple process online. We also needed to get some vaccinations. There were sometimes a few weeks between doses, so we started getting vaccinated as soon as we were informed that we were going. One thing we missed, but should have done before arrival, was to check whether a research permit was required in Kenya. In most cases it isn't, but in our case it was, which led to a somewhat stressful period once we arrived. It worked out well in the end, but it's definitely something worth checking before you go!

### Upon arrival

Ebba and I arrived at the end of March and stayed for just over two months. We had started working on the literature study before we left, and continued with it almost immediately upon arrival. Within the first few days, we met our local contact who was also involved in the project we were going to write about. He drove us to various places where a local company working with seaweed was active, and there we met people who later helped us find interviewees. We also got to see the seaweed farms for the first time!



## Financials

Living in Kenya was generally cheaper than in Sweden, especially when it came to food and transportation. A typical tuk-tuk ride, which we mainly used, cost around 20 SEK for a 10-minute trip. However, we ended up spending more on tips than we had initially expected. One tip to save money is to create a budget beforehand, and make sure to include any trips or excursions you might want to do in the country. It's also wise to leave some room for unexpected expenses so you're not caught off guard if something happens. In my case, my laptop stopped working shortly after we arrived, and after a lot of back and forth, I had to buy a second-hand one locally. It wasn't very expensive, but still a cost I hadn't planned for.

## Accommodation

Before we left, we asked our local contact person about accommodation. He recommended that we start by booking a place for 1–2 weeks, and then arrange the rest once we were there. This would give us the chance to see where we actually wanted to stay. We also asked if there were any areas to avoid, but there really weren't any. So, we booked two weeks at a fairly simple hotel, which was more like a small apartment. After that, we booked different hotels in various areas along the coast because we wanted to try staying in a few different places. We spent a relatively large part of our budget on accommodation in order to stay somewhere slightly nicer – and we thought it was worth it. But there were both more basic options and more luxurious ones available.

Most of the places we stayed at had either private or shared kitchens, which allowed us to cook our own meals. There was also usually staff on site who could help us with various tips about the area. We met many incredible and helpful people through our accommodations!

## Project

Our project focused on the local use of seaweed in Kenya, including its potential applications and how it can be further developed. We conducted both a literature review and several interviews with local researchers in the field. After each interview, we wrote down the information to later include it in our report. Most of the interviews were held in person, except for two that were conducted via email. We also visited the seaweed farms again to gain a better understanding of the entire process and to take photos for the report.

When the report was nearly finished, we held a seminar at the company that had supported us. There, we presented our findings and received feedback. It was a very valuable experience and allowed us to include new perspectives in the report.

## Country

The nature in Kenya was incredibly beautiful, and where we stayed there was clear blue water and lots of greenery. The climate was hot and humid, often over 30 degrees with a heavy and intense kind of heat. Because of this, we usually ran errands in the mornings and afternoons to avoid going out during the hottest part of the day. There were also many monkeys in the area that tried to steal our food. Since we often stayed in places with some level of tourism, there were monkeys that knew exactly how to snatch food. Most of the time it was fine, except for one occasion when we had to give them all our fruit.

The people were very helpful and outgoing, which is often quite a contrast to people in Sweden. In the beginning when we arrived, we experienced a bit of a culture shock. I also found it a bit overwhelming at first to realize that we were going to be there for eight weeks, which felt like a very long time. However, this feeling got much better over time – and by the end, we didn't want to leave!

Another thing that differed from Sweden was that it could sometimes be difficult to get in touch with the people who were supposed to help us with the project. The phrase "pole pole" was used quite often in the country, meaning that you should take things slowly. A lovely expression in many situations, but a bit frustrating when you're working on a thesis.

## Leisure and social activities

Our free time in Kenya was spent hanging out at the beach and discovering new restaurants, among other things. We also visited a nearby village a couple of times, where we got to know a guy who worked at the company that helped us. It was really interesting to see how the local population in the area lived. During our time on the coast, we also went on a safari to Tsavo East, which was an incredible experience. We also took the opportunity to visit a church, since many people in the country attend church every Sunday. There was a lot of singing and dancing, and everyone was so excited that we wanted to join. An amazing experience!

We chose to spend our last week in Kenya in Nairobi, where we met two really friendly Kenyan students who had studied at KTH. They showed us around the city, which was super cool. We also went on another safari, this time to the Masai Mara. We were away for three days and saw so many animals and such a lovely landscape. Highly recommended!



## Sustainability

During our stay in Kenya, we tried to live as sustainably as possible, for example by eating vegetarian or fish from local fishermen. We also ate a lot of locally grown fruits and vegetables, which were widely available. When traveling to and from Nairobi, we chose to take the train, which also gave us the opportunity to see more of the country.

The project was linked to many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goal 14 (Life Below Water) and Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), as a large part of the work involved exploring how to use marine resources sustainably at the local level, in order to reduce both imports and exports.

### **Other recommendations and observations**

Even though the majority of the people we met were very friendly, it's still important to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. It was also emotionally challenging at times to be in an environment where poverty was so present, as it sometimes made us feel helpless, even though we tried to help in the ways we could.

It's also worth mentioning our hospital visit. There are many diseases in Kenya, including some spread by mosquitoes (use a mosquito net even if you're taking malaria tablets), as well as through food and water. Unfortunately, I was a bit unlucky and caught some kind of bacterial infection that resulted in a fever of nearly 40°C and two nights in the hospital. I received care quickly, so it worked out fine in the end, but it was a bit mentally tough to be sick so far from home, especially before the doctors knew what it was. That said, unexpected things will happen, but with some help, it usually works out in the end!

Kwaheri!