

CLIMATE CHANGE AND WILDLIFE

Another Way to Save the Planet by Bicycle

This event is not just a race, but an extraordinary opportunity to immerse in the landscape and ecosystems of this iconic mountain.

BY JEMMA BATTEN

For the past 21 years, Africa's second-highest mountain has played host to a unique event – the 10to4 Mountain Bike Challenge. For one weekend in February, the diverse and often rare wild inhabitants of Mount Kenya are joined by cyclists of all ages and abilities. They come from across Kenya and beyond to compete in races covering terrain between 10,000 and 4,000m – hence 10to4. For participants, the event is not just a race, but an extraordinary opportunity to immerse themselves in the landscape and ecosystems of this iconic mountain.

Mount Kenya supports rich biodiversity, including Afro-alpine moorlands, giant heath, East African bamboo, timberline and montane forests. The mountain teems with life, from the thriving soil biota to large mammals such as elephants, leopards, giant forest hogs, and even a small remnant population of mountain bongo.

Mount Kenya is also the “water tower” of Kenya. The country's third-longest river, the Ewaso Nyiro, starts here and goes on to deliver water to a huge area of arid northern Kenya before dispersing into the desert. Similarly, water from Mount Kenya plays a critical role in the hydrology of vast areas of northeastern Kenya, and the Tana River Delta to the southeast, and even has an impact as far as the Somali border. Besides being an essential resource for natural ecosystems, it generates hydropower and supplies

major irrigation and drinking water systems.

Founded in 1999, the Mount Kenya Trust (MKT) is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that works closely with government agencies to protect and conserve Mount Kenya's natural environment and to support and educate local people. The Trust's work is by necessity enormously varied, and projects include a 14km elephant migration route; daily patrols to prevent poaching

and other illegal activities; tree nurseries

to support reforestation programmes; and a community health outreach service. The Trust is responsible for planting

well over a million trees and treating 133,000 healthcare patients, while every year

35 MKT rangers patrol 700 square km across the mountain.

But why bring the sweat, dust and crazy speed of a mountain bike race to tranquil Mount Kenya? Jamie Roberts, founder and managing director of Tropic Air, 10to4 title sponsor, sums it up: “We love the mountain for all it represents to Kenya – not only an iconic peak but also a lifeline for thousands. 10to4 is a key fundraiser for the Mount Kenya

BELOW

The 10to4 Mountain Bike Challenge, now in its 21st year, raises funds for Mount Kenya Trust (MKT), a Kenyan based charity that aims to drive collaborative action for the sustainable management of Mt Kenya's biodiversity and natural resources through partnerships with government, communities and civil society.

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The year 10to4 was established and over \$600,000 that has been raised to support the Mount Kenya Trust.

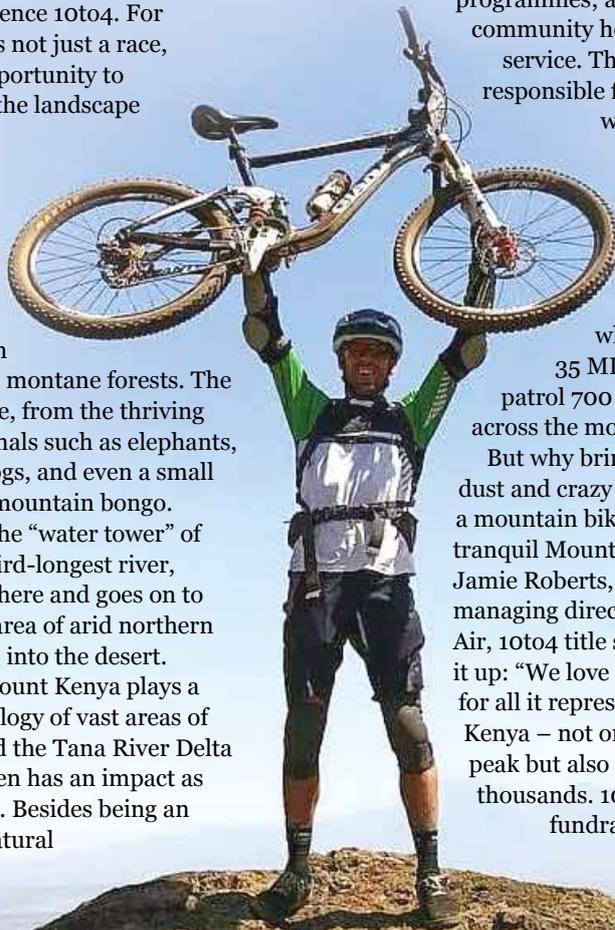




PHOTO BY TOM MARTIENSEN

Trust and we are proud partners, working together not only for the event but all year round, through fire-fighting training or ranger support.”

In recent years, this partnership has become increasingly important as fires on Mount Kenya are becoming a more regular threat. Most are caused by people, but it is the weather that determines the size and severity of the resulting blaze. Fires are fought with a combination of manpower, fire breaks and water doused from helicopters or spray planes, but in dry, windy conditions a small fire can very quickly become an inferno, almost impossible to extinguish.

In 2019 over 100 fires devastated hundreds of square kilometres of the mountain, and sadly 2022 is shaping up to rival that. Fires tend to start in the heathland, where vegetation is adapted to burning and recovers within a couple of seasons, but there are wider ecological effects to consider, particularly if a fire spreads to the forest. These include increased erosion and water run-off which lead to long term damage, not to mention the unacceptable wildlife losses during and immediately after the fire. Edwin Kinyanjui, one of MKT’s elite firefighting team, is visibly distressed as he describes the numbers of dead chameleons, snakes and butterflies he encountered while he and his team battled to control a particularly fierce blaze in mid-March.

But while the current situation seems dire, there is hope for the future. Alongside MKT’s robust community and education programmes, events like the 10to4 Tropic



PHOTOS BY MOUNT KENYA TRUST

Air Mountain Bike Challenge raise wider awareness of the issues as well as vital funds for the Trust. “The 10to4 event is an intense experience with every pedal stroke giving power and freedom,” says Peter Maina, 23, a member of the Tropic Air-sponsored Youth Team. “We appreciate the opportunity to compete as young riders, and most importantly the funds raised through the event, for the protection of Mount Kenya’s flora and fauna. We would like to thank the Mount Kenya Trust for organizing this unique event, and for their commitment to conservation.”

For more information on the Mount Kenya Trust, please visit <https://mountkenyatrust.org/>

TOP
A 10to4 Mountain Bike Challenge participant cycles past a rhino spectator.

BELOW
Firefighters battle a blaze on Mount Kenya. Fires on Mount Kenya are a regular occurrence, but the size, number, and severity varies from year to year depending on weather conditions.



JEMMA BATTEN is a British environmental consultant who also works at Mount Kenya Trust as a volunteer.