

Watoto Wa Amani (“Children of Peace” in Kiswahili, the national language of Kenya)
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Children are the gatekeepers of the future and the key focus of our project, ***Watoto Wa Amani*** (‘Children of Peace’ in Kiswahili, the national language of Kenya). ***Watoto Wa Amani*** is committed to listening and to being sensitive to changing experiences and realities in Kenya and, in particular, to empowering children to heal the bridges connecting communities and ecosystems—to sculpt a brighter future. More specifically, the overarching goal of the project was to raise awareness about the problem of land degradation in Kenya and the threat it presents to the peace and prosperity of the country in both the present and future.

The main issue that the project was responding to was the sociopolitical problem of land degradation caused by overgrazing and exacerbated by the prolonged drought and invasive cactus species, *Opuntia stricta*, that has spread rapidly and diminished coverage of indigenous flora. *Opuntia*’s fruit is covered in small spines and when consumed by the domestic animals with fatal consequences.

Through various field research, I learned the limitations of our initial model. The main limitation to sustainability of the model was exemplified by the main complaint felt by local stakeholders in the community. The community recognized that by paying people to uproot the *Opuntia*, the model induced dependency syndrome. Furthermore, by defining *Opuntia* as a problem, it was difficult to see past it as a potential resource. This inspired me to take a multidisciplinary and cross-cultural approach and to look at the cultures that have developed with the plant in Mexico. The model is centered around a traditional method of extracting mucilage from *Opuntia*. It is made to be sensitive to the availability of water, fluctuating between wet and dry seasons in the region, to make bricks and briquettes, as well as the culinary use for the plant and cultural use of the seeds as beads.

The initial plan of the project to uproot large numbers of *Opuntia* was further made unfeasible to implement due to COVID-19 restrictions and low vaccination rates within the Makurian Group Ranch and Loisaba communities. Due to COVID-19 and political unrest, we assessed that in the short term, it was not logistically possible to continue to work in the Laikipia region. However, in response to this short-term obstacle, through working with the UWC Alumni team, we were able to make a project proposal for the Makurian community to connect with potential local funding networks for various land restoration projects, and is currently under consideration by the Finnish Embassy in Kenya.

Building on the core idea of using art to promote peace and sculpt a brighter future, I organized two shows of artwork made through working with children. I produced two art shows in Lamu and Nairobi to raise awareness of the problem of land degradation. During the events, I successfully introduced the project to local and international potential stakeholders and donors that further contributed to the project by purchasing the art. The art shows and gallery exhibitions were in the spirit of my definition of peace as personal and interpersonal resilience in the future. They intended to convey a sense of the strength of the Kenyan people and communities and their harmonious relationship with their environment. By raising awareness and making new connections, we were able to bring together an even greater network of different local communities to aspire the continued common goal for peace through strength of resilience.

Showcasing the diversity of members of the Kenyan people through art stimulated discussions around the philosophy of Ubuntu. In diversity, we look for commonality; in commonality, we look for differences. I realized through art that diversity is a source of resilience and community through unity. Unity is fundamental for building peace in Kenya. Inspired by the reception of our exhibition, together with local

communities and UWC alumni, I hope to carry on with my work and develop the concept of art for peace and conservation by painting the beauty of diversity in Kenya.

Although some changes had to be made for the implementation of the project, by listening, we were able to pivot our original idea while preserving its spirit. Connecting to an even larger community through art demonstrated the tangible power to change the future by creating art to heal the land and strengthen the community through connection. The strengthened network inspired by the art show in Lamu and Nairobi gives confidence and trust to the future of the project. The seeded ideas for briquettes pose a promising future where no more trees need to be cut to make fires for cooking. Furthermore, by burning the spines off the opuntia, the invasive species would be safely used as livestock fodder, restoring the livelihoods and important traditional source of nutrients to their diet.

The most important lesson I learned through this project was the importance of listening and the power of art to communicate across cultures and language barriers—the power of art to connect. In the face of difficulties, art enabled **Watoto Wa Amani** to achieve our goals in ways we never imagined possible. With the generous support of the Davis scholarship, we cultivated peace. **Watoto Wa Amani** taught me the importance of listening in understanding the ecology of the moment, the power of art to connect, and to build bridges across language-cultural barriers to build a sustainable future of peace.

