

WATOTO WA AMANI
Taki Wells – Kenya – May 15 – August 15, 2021
Ringling College Of Art and Design

Children of Peace' in Kiswahili, the national language of Kenya.

Children are the gatekeepers of the future and the key focus of our project, Watoto Wa Amani.

Our Goal:

To empower children to heal the bridges connecting communities and ecosystems - to sculpt a brighter future.

'Immediate and long-term effect benefits'

The beauty of this project is that the land sculptures have both an immediate and long-term effect on the health of the community and ecosystems. The land art sculptures are designed to create fertile soil that naturally retain rainwater and organic matter. Together we will plant native grasses, shrubs and trees. By bringing together different local communities to work for a common goal, Watoto Wa Amani will nurture connection through loving care.

'Growth'

Watoto Wa Amani is committed to listening and to being sensitive to changing experiences and realities in Kenya. Watoto Wa Amani is built upon flexibility with the understanding that uncontrollable variables may cause idiosyncrasies in the plan. These variables are expected and welcomed lessons that are important for the health and growth of our project. Land degradation is a widespread phenomenon threatening peace in Kenya. Overview goals to ensure the growth of our project through methodology backed by quantitative scientific research in land restoration. The initiative is designed to spread by example. As my Kenyan grandmother would say, "If it is any good, darling, it will advertise itself." It is therefore important that we use local and readily available tools.

'Peace'

The visual art of sculpture has a physical and symbolic significance. Children can visually demonstrate their tangible power to change the future by creating sculptures that heal the land and community. The size of these sculptures will be visible from the heavens. Aerial footage will be provided through the research programs - made available online and printed for each participant through a local eco-friendly printing company. We do this to promote peace in Laikipia, and to spread the peace throughout the neighboring communities and forward to all of Kenya. The act of promoting peace will not only be encouraged and felt by many, but also spread. With the generous support of the Davis scholarship, this project cultivates peace that advertises itself.

Communities - expressions of ecology

An ecosystem cannot truly be separated into 'parts'. The separation is superficial - a linguistic and philosophical distinction. Each 'part' is inextricably connected to every other 'part'. They are *interdependent*. It follows that the health of communities is not merely determined by the health of its ecosystems. Rather, the health of a community is inseparable from the health of its ecosystems. They are inherent to one another. A strong and healthy community is possible in a strong and healthy ecosystem.

Opuntia stricta - threat livelihood

The Makurian community identified *Opuntia stricta* as the main threat to their land and community. It is an invasive cactus species that has spread rapidly due to land degradation and diminished coverage of indigenous flora. *Opuntia's* fruit is covered in small spines and when consumed by the domestic animals on which the Maasai depend for their livelihoods, causes infections in their mouth and digestive tracts, often resulting in death.

Opuntia stricta - threat to endangered wildlife.

Opuntia also exacerbates human-wildlife conflict. Elephants are attracted by *Opuntia's* juicy fruit, causing them to come into more frequent contact with people as the cactus is most prevalent around homesteads. Elephants are vulnerable to extinction according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List. In order to enable peace in the community, we must control and stem the spread of *Opuntia* while integrating sustainable restorative land practices such as Holistic Rangeland Management. We will create natural land art structures saturated with seeds of native grasses, shrubs and trees that promote ecological resilience and to help the land retain rainwater and organic matter.

Program

The team will spend four months in Laikipia operating with the support of local organisations such as the Laikipia Permaculture Centre and ten different communities from the Makurian Region. Children from each community will come together to design and create land art sculptures. This is critical to the success of this project. Every child, every person has a voice and we have come to listen. We are there to share, and forever strengthen their ability to have a respectable and reliable measure to a future of peace and harmony with the wildlife, local ecosystems and the greater surrounding communities. We marry ancient and contemporary ways to sustainably empower the community and heal the resilience of the landscape. . The creation of these sculptures is community building. Unemployed youths from each participating community will be offered employment to help us bring forth the childrens' vision. Our budget is structured to accommodate this employment, which is critical in a region with high rates of youth unemployment, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.