OPUNTAI IN LAIKIPIA



Opuntai has been known to be a very dangerous plant in Laikipia, North Eastern Kenya in the recent past and has been listed by a global environmental organization as one of the a hundred top most dangerous to human and animal life globally. Over the years and even at the moment Opuntai is grown in many homesteads as a flower and Laikipia is one of the places where it is grown. Its adverse effects to the environment is not yet known and this is what this presentation will try to bring out.

Opuntai is a plant in the family of cactus and so grows in desert and semi arid areas. It must be understood that any plant growing in such hardship areas can perfectly thrive in non-desert areas. Like most plants of cactus family it has a thick bark. Upon maturity the barks turns from green to purple or brown. Opuntai is green in colour and has feathery thorns. It produces yellow flowers which later convert into purple fruits which are edible and are sweet. Opuntai came into existence in Laikipia as a single or few Flowers just like it is the case in many places where flowers may be grown in homesteas, othet than that it was used in fencing homesteads because its thorny just like many fencing plants. Opuntai regenerates quickly and so in a few years a larger part of Laikipia has been covered by this dangerous plant! Thus reducing land covered by pasture or other crops. The worst part of it is that this plant kill any pant around it once it is existing in large number. Above all it must be known that this plant is long lasting and does not die easily as many known hardy plants.

Most people in areas of Laikipia are pastoralists with a range of animals which include goats and camels. Due to large number of animals in the community around this place, there has been an increased need for pasture. But as told earlier this is the plant covering the probably reasonable part of the area, so there is scarcity of pasture and because of this, animals are forced to feed on the purple fruits of Opuntai covering a better part of the land. At first animals were thought to love these fruits. Goats, camels, sheep and cows keeps feeding on these fruits all over the day while they look for any possible existing grasses around. Over time animals finds it difficult to feed on any other plant apart from Opuntai and this means that it is addictive —this has been observed in camels and even goats. When this is happening, pastoralists are looking for a better place with grasses somewhere else and at the same time trying to kill this plant through cutting and burning. This tends to be difficult and some of the community members are giving up day and day added to the fact that this plant is thorny, takes time to dry, does not burn completely and has seeds that survives all kind of soils— these fruits can stay in soil for long period of time waiting for the right time to grow!

Because of the addition, animals fail to eat in the new pasture area i by chance its found.

Animals are observed eating these fruits forceful even after the addiction and after sometime they die. Many animals in this area have been lost in this way. Animals that were slaughtered after dying of eating these fruits have been found to have possibly suffered digestive system failure—rotting intestines and other parts of the system being evidence.

As told, the efforts of the community in fighting this plant seems to be a failure, it has left the area with no land for pasture, no plant for other purposes and this means both food crops and cash crops has no place and the plant is now encroaching into settlement areas. The big question remains, "what should they do?" If this can't be answered by now then its important to take precautions.

Allow me to repeat that this plant was first grown as a flower, which wasn't wrong by then, because its impressive around homesteds. It will be very important if people will stop growing this plant and if they will try to kill the few ones already grown, lest that area be like Laikipia areas.

I found it very important to present this in brief as highlighte by KTN on date Monday 05/10/2020.

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