**The Sokoke Forest MTB Challenge – 4 May 2019**

**Riding for Conservation**

*A Biking Fest to Support Needy Children & Save Threatened Species*

**Summary**

Mountain biking is one of the fastest growing popular outdoor sports in Kenya. A number of annual race events are now held in Kenya and have a committed following of ardent bikers including international riders. A Rocha Kenya, Turtle Bay Beach Club and Ocean Sports Resort have joined together to organise the first annual mountain bike race for the Kenya north coast: the **Sokoke Forest MTB Challenge**. 100% of proceeds from the event will be used to provide eco-bursaries for needy children living adjacent to the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and Mida Creek. A close connection is made between the bursary and conservation action for the forest and creek.

A Rocha Kenya is looking for sponsors to make the race an annual reality—in joining us in this venture you will be giving needy children an education and a future together with contributing directly to conserving some of Africa’s rarest and most unique wildlife.

**Concept**

Mountain Bike riding is fast becoming popular in Kenya and the past 15 years has seen a mushrooming of interest in the sport and rapid increase in the number of people keen to try out their skill in a bike race over interesting and challenging ground. Never before have there been so many events and regular weekend training and social rides. New comers are starting at an easy pace, setting themselves targets of 30-40kms on weekends whilst others are fast emulating their own cycling heroes, local and international. As a result, Bike Races have also become very popular and there are now at least ten bike races on the annual sports calendar in Kenya and many more shorter events organised in between. However, the Kenya coast has a dearth of such events despite combining the challenge of the heat, rocks and sand with the beauty of panoramic views, thick forest, white beaches and the azure water of the Indian Ocean as a backdrop and finish.

The **Sokoke Forest Challenge** is a unique ride starting and ending at Turtle Bay Beach Club, Watamu. The first half of the race takes riders through coconut and cashew nut plantations and farmland before climbing up beside the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest to a plateau overlooking the Sabaki River. A series of single-track footpaths ensue including three ascents up the plateau escarpment. This leads competitors to the north-western entrance to Arabuko-Sokoke Forest at Jilore where the route enters the forest and you have a hard-
packed fast road through dense forest that holds Africa’s smallest owl, the Sokoke Scops Owl, the bizarre and threatened Golden-rumped Elephant-shrew as well as buffalo and elephant before dropping down to the white sandy soils with the beautiful, open miombo woodland habitat. These sands can be soft, making for tough cycling though being in the wet season and therefore with rain around they should be compacted enough to allow bikes to pass.

18 km of forest riding brings riders back to the edge of the mangroves of Mida Creek for a brief ride on fisherman trails before the final run down through the coconuts again to finish by the sparkling blue sea and white sand of Turtle Bay Beach Club. Total distance: 70 km

The Sokoke Forest MTB Challenge 2019 will include a ‘fun ride’ suited for children and families on day two as well as the more extreme Challenge on day one so as to suit riders of varying stamina spread over a full weekend in an event that will attract a good number of enthusiasts.

**Supporting Children & Conservation**
Apart from a great biking event, the Sokoke Forest Challenge aims to conserve rare and unique wildlife and give children living in poverty a chance of an education and a future.

Funds raised through the event will be used to provide “Eco-Bursaries” for children in communities living adjacent to Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and Mida Creek through ASSETS – the Arabuko-Sokoke Schools & Eco-Tourism Scheme. These “Eco-Bursaries” support children through four years of secondary school and are closely linked to practical conservation action to protect the unique yet threatened habitats of the forest and creek. ASSETS is an initiative of A Rocha Kenya, a conservation organisation with a long-standing track record in research, community work and education around Arabuko-Sokoke and Mida.

**Arabuko-Sokoke Forest & Mida Creek**
Arabuko-Sokoke (meaning ‘thin elephant on red soil’) is the largest remaining patch of East African coastal forest in the world. It is home to a rich and diverse array of rare and fascinating wildlife including six species of birds which depend on it for their survival. Mida Creek is a large tidal inlet of mangrove forest and open sand flats that is reckoned to be the most productive mangrove ecosystem on earth and is the single most important feeding grounds for up to 10,000 migrant waterbirds from Asia. The creek and forest together have been recognised as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve due to the rich wildlife they harbour.

However, there are significant threats facing these unique habitats. High poverty levels amongst the surrounding community mean that, in order to get cash to pay for school fees, many are pushed to enter the forest to cut trees for timber or charcoal, or to snare animals to sell as bush meat. ASSETS was started and is managed by A Rocha Kenya, a Christian conservation organisation based in Watamu, in order to both meet this need through providing ‘eco-bursaries’ and raise standards of living through introducing other income-generating activities. In so doing A Rocha Kenya seeks to reduce the pressure of unsustainable exploitation of the trees and wildlife in the forest and creek and thus preserve the integrity of these unique habitats.

[www.arocha.or.ke](http://www.arocha.or.ke) — [www.assets-kenya.org](http://www.assets-kenya.org)
Since 2001 A Rocha Kenya has supported over 650 students through secondary school with funds channelled through ASSETS. These are raised either through local eco-tourism or from donations from tourists and supporters.

Costing only Ksh 3,500 per month to put a child through secondary school with an ASSETS eco-scholarship, funds generated by the Sokoke Forest Challenge will make a very significant difference to both local families and to the conservation of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and Mida Creek.

While the scheme is run overall by A Rocha Kenya, bursaries are managed and children selected for bursaries by a committee made up of local community elders, the District Education Officer, KWS and KFS staff and A Rocha Kenya staff. ASSETS Committee members take an active role in encouraging and motivating students in their studies and conservation action.

**Logistics & support**

Turtle Bay Beach Club have successfully hosted an annual triathalon and other sporting events in Watamu and have put their support 100% behind hosting and running the Sokoke Forest Challenge initiative. Ocean Sports hotel have similarly supported and facilitated such sports events.

Shafiq Ebrahimjee, Finance Director for TBBC, is a regular competitor in bike races around Kenya and has contacts within the mountain biking fraternity that will make the difference in promoting and getting the Sokoke Forest Challenge on the calendar and map for bike races in Kenya. Interest has been expressed by some mountain bike competitors from South Africa in coming to join the event both for the ride itself and to support the eco-scholarship initiative. Alex Tibwitta is not only a regular participant in MTB races around Kenya but also organises such events. A Rocha Kenya has a long-standing good relationship with KFS and other members of the forest management team.

Sponsorship is being sought to both cover the costs of hosting the event in order for it to be a success. We are looking to raise Ksh 2 million to cover the costs and logistics for the race including publicity and contribute directly to the eco-bursaries and conservation of the forest. We have already had commitment in contributing to sponsorship from Lordship Africa of the KarenHills Development and are looking for other sponsors to join us in making this exciting event happen so as to support local children and help protect some of Kenya's most precious biodiversity.

*Colin Jackson*
*A Rocha Kenya*