



XN IRAKI

Associate professor at the
University of Nairobi

Kenya's coastal economy depends on tourism as foreigners and locals visit the beaches to enjoy the warm weather and nature.

There is something sentimental about seeing the waves break or crabs hide under the sand, something surreal about walking along the beach at sunrise or sunset. Swimming in the ocean is another experience, the water is denser and floating easier. Remember Archimedes Principle?

Our coastline is open throughout the year, unlike oceans or lakes in the far north or south that freeze in winter. Even golf courses are closed in winter in these cold and far away places. We need to travel to appreciate what we have in this country. We take our strategic location on the equator for granted.

Kenyans dream of owning beach plots, houses or retiring there. Some eventually do but the vast majority are born, live and die in the same place, hardly ever visiting their dream destinations.

For some, myths of mermaids fire the dream of a beach experience. This dream raises the price of land along the coast. Let's add scarcity too as another factor in pricing: beach land is limited. We have 536 kilometres of coastline; if we assume only 50 feet beach frontage for each plot, that

Our coastline's economy is more than sandy beaches



Holidaymakers at Jomo Kenyatta Beach in Mombasa. [Omondi Onyango, Standard]

370
KILOMETRES
KENYA'S exclusive
economic zone from the
coastline

translates to
35,380
plots only.

If you own a
beach plot,

please walk with a swag.

But I think we have focused too much on beaches, yet the coastal economy would benefit and expand more if we diversified it away from the sand. Why so much focus on beaches, a tiny fraction of the oceans? The Indian Ocean — always wondered why it's not called the African ocean — is Kenya's least exploited resource.

We have 200 nautical miles (370km) of exclusive economic zone from the coastline. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea says that States also have rights to the seabed of what is called the continental shelf up to 350 nautical miles (650km) from the coastal baseline. My countrymen, just breathe in and out.

Our 536km of coastline by 370km gives you 198,320 square kilometres. If you add the continental shelf, that gives us 348,400 sq km. That's lots of 'land' because we have access to what's below the water. The beach is only a few metres wide.

Kenya's total area is 580,367 square km. To make your life easier, the exclusive zone is 34 per cent of land area. If we add the continental shelf it goes to 60 per cent! My fellow countrymen, I have bored you with numbers but that's a fact. Still thinking about the beach?

Below the ocean waters lies lots of wealth — fish and other sea life. Oil and gas, too. The ocean is also a free highway. For over 1,000 years, dhows have sailed across the ocean from India and Arabia, even China. Yet I still can't take a ship or ferry from Mombasa to Malindi or Lamu!

Too focused on the beach, we have missed the bigger picture. Why are we not a leading nation in naval architecture? We should be exporting ships like the Japanese export cars. We should be exporting fish, not importing. With all this ocean frontage, why does Kenya suffer food shortage when the waters never run dry?

We should be competing with other nations to transport goods across the globe with our ships. We should be a cruise ship nation. Think of getting all East Africans into cruise ships and their money. All the world's leading countries and cities are by the coast. Why is Mombasa smaller than Nairobi?

Any time I visit our beaches and see the vast ocean, I see the economic potential we have neglected. I fear we have been tethered to the beach, its hotels and sand when the real opportunities lie in the vast ocean beyond. Even in academia, not much research focuses on the sea or ocean.

We have a State Department for Maritime and Shipping Affairs. That's not enough, we need to exploit our exclusive economic zone.

Fishing, mineral exploration, water transport and water games are low-lying fruits. If we are flying to space, exploring the outer fringes of the solar system and discovering exoplanets, why are we afraid of leaving our shores?

And where does all the plastic at the beaches come from? Can seaweed be turned into fertiliser? Our lakes, dams and rivers are also not exploited to maximum potential.

When will we stop fearing water?