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## **Background on Ms. Guddy Birkigt 2003 United Nations in Kenya Person of the Year**



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### **Contribution to the Conservation of Robinson Island**

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Ms. Guddy Birkigt, this year's United Nations in Kenya Person of the Year, is credited with contributing to the conservation of Robinson Island, located 30 kilometres from Malindi off the coast of Kenya.

The island has been under environmental threat from two major salt mining and processing factories that turn out highly concentrated brine, thus killing large stretches of mangroves. The companies created a dyke that blocked the entrance to the island for the local people, and a dam that blocked the only source of fresh water to the island. The local Giriama and Bajuni inhabitants had to wade through a creek to purchase fresh water sold by the same salt mining companies. The salt mining companies also contributed to the degradation of the mangroves in the area because of the waste which infiltrated the environment.

A resident of the island since 1982, Ms. Birkigt formed a community-based organization, known as Friday's Arm in 2000, through which she has been working with the local community to conserve the island's mangroves, indigenous trees and sea turtles. Together with the community, she has to date planted 150,000 mangroves and has a target of one million.

Between 1998 and 2002, Ms. Birkigt travelled twice to State House in Nairobi, to seek audience with former President Daniel Arap Moi and to lodge complaints about the powerful individuals who were interested in acquiring the island. To this day, Ms. Birkigt is still challenging the issue of ownership of the island.

In 2002, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as part of its Global Environment Facility, gave a small grant to Friday's Arm to plant mangroves, take care of the sea turtles, introduce wind-generated electricity for refrigeration in the school and community, and to set up an eco-tourism venture based on a sustainable development plan. With the funds, Ms. Birkigt purchased two boats which are used by the people in the community to cross the creek to the mainland.

Ms. Birkigt and her husband Kay have also built a school on the island which today has 60