LAKE VICTORIA TURNS GREEN, STINKS

By Gerald Tenywa and Ibrahim Ruhweza

Port Bell, a Kampala lakeside metropolis that was a byword for beauty and a nice aroma in colonial Uganda currently stinks; and the surrounding waters have turned green, a sign that the lake is dirty, experts say.

Hassan Bogere, the chairperson of the fishermen at Port Bell in Luzira, says wetlands surrounding the lake have been destroyed, worsening the floods problem and the stench.

"Because of the smell, customers who visit our stalls have gradually reduced and our children have started suffering bouts of diarrhoea," he says.

Moses Nsobya, a lorry driver, says he used to enjoy fish in the area, but no longer eats it because of the strong stench from the lake.

"Whenever I drive towards Port Bell, I psychologically prepare for the stench; sometimes covering my nose at intervals. People always come to the lake expecting fresh air, only to be greeted by a foul smell," he says.

Racheal Arinaitwe, a bar attendant, says customers have since stopped patronising her joint since the smell started at the beginning of the dry season.

"My bar used to be full of patrons, but like you see now, it is empty. Everything changed. Nowadays, I struggle to get even a quarter of the customers I used to get," Arinaitwe says.

She says the stench peaks during the dry season and reduces when the rains start.

Ruth Nakandi, a car park manager, who has lived in Luzira for years, also agrees.

"It normally starts during the dry season, in January-February. But this year's is the worst and we can no longer stand this," she says.

Nakandi also says the stench has chased away her customers.

"I used to have many customers; the number has dropped. They are just countable, even weekends that used to be good days are no longer the same. Our businesses are dying," she adds.

The algae sometimes makes the water look like green paint or porridge. It gives off a bad smell when it dies.

Murchison Bay is near Ggaba where Kampala's water is extracted, but the same place where wastewater including sewage is discharged into the northern part Lake Victoria. Murchison Bay also covers parts of Munyonyo, Port Bell or Luzira in Kampala, Bukasa near Namanve Industrial Park to the east. Namanve and Port Bell are also home to some of the biggest industries in Uganda.

The neighbouring expansive wetlands such as Nakivubo, Kansanga, Kinawataka and Namanve that used to filter some of the waste before it gets into the lake have thinned out. They used to filter the wastewater from Kampala before releasing clean water into Murchison Bay.

PHOTO BY IBRAHIM RUHWEZA

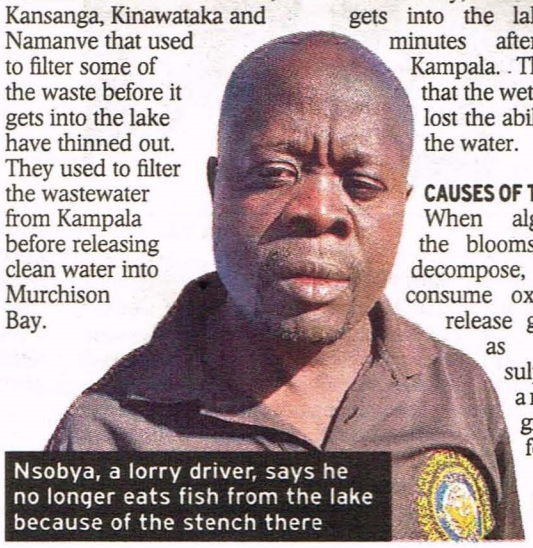
Lake Victoria's green water and choking odour is driving away business and threatens the health of the locals

MEASURES TO PROTECT LAKE

To address the persistent odour and green discoloration of the lake, the ministry said it is actively working on restoring the wetlands between Kampala and Murchison Bay. This restoration aims at enhancing the natural filtration of wastewater before it enters the lake.

Additionally, enforcement of the 200-metre buffer zone around the lake has been prioritised. These measures are intended to intercept pollutants before they reach the lake, thereby helping to preserve its ecological health.

Industries within the lake's catchment area are also being mobilised and supported to adopt cleaner production techniques that minimise wastewater at the source, promote recycling and reuse of wastewater, and thereby reduce the amount of effluent discharged into the the lake.



Nsobya, a lorry driver, says he no longer eats fish from the lake because of the stench there

In Murchison Bay, where Nakivubo Channel ends its 9km jouney from the hills of Kampala, the wastewater as well as stormwater from Kampala comes into the lake directly along with solid waste, including plastics.

In the past, the wastewater used to take weeks to reach the lake. Today, the stormwater gets into the lake a few minutes after leaving Kampala. This means that the wetlands have lost the ability to filter the water.

CAUSES OF THE STENCH

When algae from the blooms die and decompose, they consume oxygen and release gases such as hydrogen sulphide and ammonia, giving off a foul smell.

In a two-page statement released yesterday, the Ministry of Water and Environment attributed the foul-smell and green water in Lake Victoria to pollution. The ministry said pollutants are seeping into the lake following the destruction of the wetlands which used sieve flood water before it gets into the lake. This has severely degraded the water quality and ecological system, especially at Murchison Bay, according to the water and environment ministry.

This bay, located at the northern part of Lake Victoria near Kampala, serves as the lake's mouth, making its contamination particularly concerning for the overall health of the lake and surrounding communities.

This area is also where the National Water and Sewerage Corporation draws water, which is then treated and distributed to various parts of Kampala and the surrounding areas.

In addition to Murchison Bay, the water and environment sector has also concerned about pollution in Entebbe's Kitubulu and Nakiwogo areas, as well as in Napoleon Gulf in Jinja.

Additionally, the ministry identifies industrial waste from factories and agricultural runoff as significant contributors to the pollution.

MONITORING OF THE LAKE

The ministry has 23 monitoring stations in Murchison Bay Kampala and 10 in Entebbe for assessing the water quality.

The data is collected quarterly and is used to inform policy, decision-making and designing of remedial actions for sustainable management of the lake.

The studies undertaken by the ministry and its stakeholders reveal persistent rise in nutrient (nitrogen and phosphorus) concentrations in the bays, especially the inner Murchison Bay.

"These nutrients are a critical requirement for algal growth, and hence the blooms observed. The dry season and high temperatures experienced over the last one month precipitated the matter," the ministry stated.