

Environment

How conservation is transforming communities in Bwindi, Mgahinga

GEOFFREY SERUGO

For decades, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park have been globally known for protecting endangered mountain gorillas.

But beyond wildlife conservation, the two parks, jointly managed under the Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Area (BMCA) by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), are increasingly transforming lives in surrounding communities.

Through the Investing in Forests and Protected Areas for Climate-Smart Development (IFPA-CD) project, conservation efforts are now being linked to clean water access, tourism, livelihood support, and empowerment of marginalized Batwa communities.

At the foothills of Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, water tanks installed under IFPA-CD have reduced dependence on unsafe water sources inside the park.

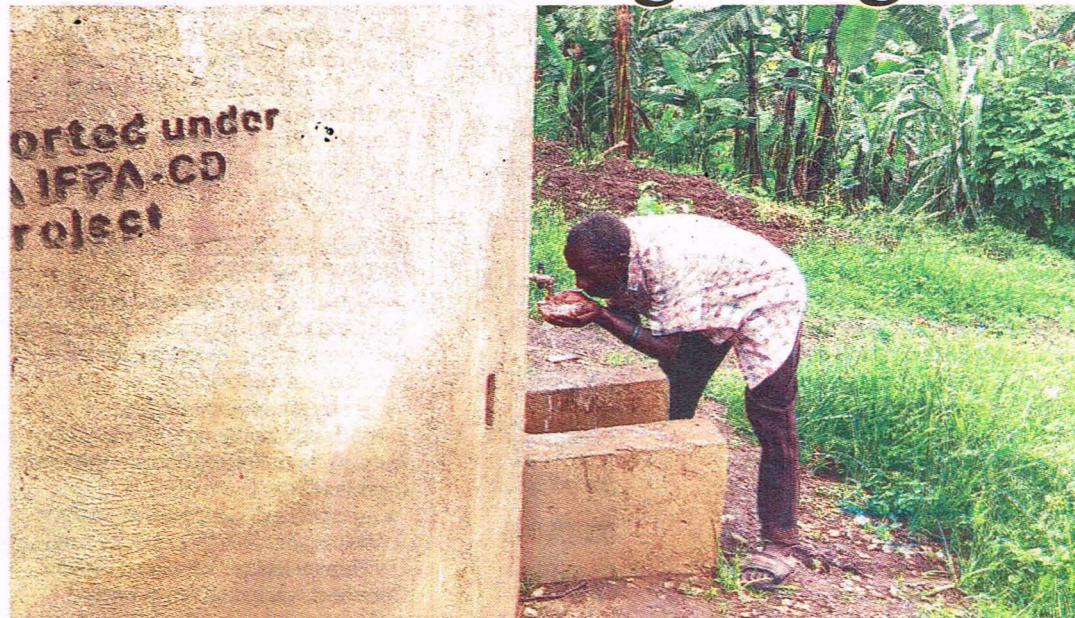
"We used to get dirty water from the park, but now they gave us water tanks providing clean water," says Hope Nyiraguliro, a community beneficiary.

"Our children no longer go late to school because of searching for water."

Residents have also been trained in making energy-saving stoves to reduce dependence on firewood.

"I learnt to make energy-saving stoves from IFPA-CD," says Yosephina Nyatsenga. "We also get medicinal plants from the park."

For the Batwa community, conservation has historically carried painful memories after many families



A water tank provides steady supply of water

were displaced from ancestral forests following the creation of protected areas in the 1990s.

Today, some Batwa communities are beginning to benefit from conservation-linked projects.

"The project gave us beehives in the national park," says Mitchell Nzabulimana, chairman of the Batwa community in Mgahinga. "Tourists visit our community, we get money and food that help our children."

In Byumba Batwa settlement near Bwindi, education is also changing lives.

Byumba Primary School, established in 2013, now has more than 835 pupils, including over 150 Batwa children. Last year, two Batwa pupils scored first grade and joined Kinkizi High School.

"We are trying to copy the ways of the non-Batwa so that we are not left behind," says settlement chairman Yosamu Besigaensi.

In nearby Mukongoro Cell, Batwa families say water tanks installed under the project have improved household welfare.

"Children used to get injured while walking long distances to fetch water," says Violet Nyamihanda, a 58-year-old mother of four. At Bwindi, conservation authorities say sustainability remains the priority despite growing tourism.

Richard Muhabwe, the chief warden of BMCA, says IFPA-CD has helped remove invasive species such as eucalyptus and lantana camara that threatened gorilla habitats.

NEW PUSH TARGETS 60,000 HECTARES TO RESTORE DEGRADED LANDSCAPES

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As climate pressures intensify across Uganda, an ambitious plan has been unveiled to scale up community-led restoration efforts, targeting at least 60,000 hectares of degraded land over the next five years.

The initiative comes as the country grapples with rising deforestation, land degradation and biodiversity loss, which continue to threaten livelihoods and environmental sustainability.

The commitment was announced ahead of celebrations marking 27 years of ECOTRUST's work in conservation finance and community-based environmental management.

ECOTRUST is a not-for-profit conservation organization established in Uganda in 1999 to conserve biological diversity and enhance social welfare.

Over the next five years, the organisation aims to improve livelihoods and strengthen climate resilience for more than 16.5 million people across 33 districts.

Pauline Nantongo Kalunda, the ECOTRUST executive director, described the organisation's journey as one defined by resilience, innovation and long-term impact.

"Twenty-seven years is a significant milestone, especially in a sector where many institutions struggle to survive beyond their early stages," she said.

"Our focus has always been to ensure that conservation is not only environmentally important, but also economically beneficial to the communities that depend on these ecosystems."

Founded in 1999 with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), ECOTRUST has evolved into one of Uganda's leading conservation financing institutions.

At the heart of its work is the "Trees for Global Benefits" programme, launched in 2003, which remains one of Africa's earliest cooperative carbon offsetting initiatives.