

Uganda's National Parks Embrace Sustainable Tourism Practices

By Mary Mwendwa

Uganda's 10 national parks which contain a variety of habitats, ranging from snow-capped mountain peaks, vast papyrus swamps, tropical forest and open savanna plains, which receive thousands of tourists annually, have embraced sustainable practices which have resulted in a huge economic benefit for the tourism sector.

Josy Muhangi, Public Relations Manager from the Uganda Wildlife Authority says that as an authority mandated to oversee all activities related to wildlife conservation in Uganda, they have embraced sustainable practices in their facilities. "For example, we have advised all our parks to share at least 20% of the conservation revenues to go to the communities that live around the parks to help them in various community projects. This has helped the community to view wildlife conservation as a venture that has economic benefits to them and therefore they don't encroach that much to the protected areas." He adds that they record a very high number of tourists who come to see some of the primates they have in Kibale and Bwindi Impenetrable national parks which have Gorillas and chimpanzees.

The Uganda Wildlife Act 2013, which has just been reviewed, imposes heavy fines for poachers. Emma Nahayo Mugizi, Public Relations Officer from the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities views wildlife issues as complex when it comes to enacting laws. She says that as a tourism sector, they are now shifting to focus in local tourism as a measure to embrace and sustain their tourism sector. "We have an annual cultural event centered on the circumcision of males at Mbale District and as a ministry we take this opportunity to promote local tourism. This event has become a tourist attraction and we use this forum to educate people on various sustainable practices in regard to conservation."

For example, Lake Mburu National Park in Western Uganda boasts of hosting animal species including 68 mammal species and around 315 bird species. Some of the animals include Impala, Burchell's Zebra and Eland, that are not found elsewhere in Western Uganda. The park covers a 370 kilometres square in size with a gallery of forest, open savanna, acacia woodland, rock kopjes, seasonal and permanent swamps.

Tourists here are treated to boat rides, nature walks and game drives within the park. Nakayenze Christine, Warden Tourism said, "We believe in sustainable

tourism practice and here at our park we advise our visitors to embrace the same, like as you see we use green energy within the park cottages. We use solar power and solar heaters to heat water for the energy here. We don't have any form of street lighting in this park. We want our wildlife to remain in the original habitats as much as possible. Any artificial lighting would interfere with some wildlife especially during breeding or mating season. We usually do some orientation for our visitors here when they arrive and they have all responded positively towards the plan. Our lighting for the cottages goes off immediately after 11:00pm. This is a measure to save on the energy that we get from the sun."

According to Julius Tusuubira, Conservation Manager from Lake Mburu National Park, they receive at least 22,000 tourists annually, with half from East African Countries. He says this is because of the services offered at five of their high class lodges and what they offer in terms of tourist attractions. "We work with the pastoralist community here very closely. As you can see this park is not fenced, people interact with wildlife freely, we have many buffaloes here and we have educated this community on how to coexist with these animals. We have very few cases of human wildlife conflict here," he happily confirms.

Julius confirms how they allow the community to do fishing at Lake Mburu in a very professional regulated manner. "We have so many acacia plantations in this park and we discovered they have interfered with habitats for wildlife because initially this was a savanna grassland area. We have embarked on an exercise where we allow the community to come and uproot the acacia trees. They also have designated days to come and collect firewood in the park. For the fishermen we have licensed them through the fisheries department and therefore we don't have any issues of overfishing in this lake. All these activities have helped us in terms of conserving Lake Mburu collectively. Our park resources are not overused and therefore we see a future in conservation in Uganda."

At Queen Elizabeth National Park, the oldest and most visited park in Uganda, the story is not any different. They have embraced the use of smart card which allows their tourists to carry less cash with them while on visit. Designated as a Ramsar site and famous for the tree climbing lions and over 50 crater lakes, with 3000 elephants, 10,000 buffaloes and 6,000 hippos. They have several lodges and cottages which use renewable energy. All lighting and heating is done through solar powered energy. All game drives are done with the help of tour guides who advise on the dangers of off-track driving within the park. "We have well-trained tour guides who are members of the neighbouring communities. We use them as

they understand the ecology of the park better. They have lived with wildlife and also it is a way to give back to the community,” said Nelson Guma, Conservation Area Manager from Queen Elizabeth National Park.

The same script is reflected at Semuliki National Park, lying in the isolated Bundibugyo District, beyond the famous Rwenzori Mountains. The Bwatwa and Bamaga indigenous groups found within the cultural landscape of Semuliki National Park have done a lot in terms of conserving the forests within the Park in which they hold cultural beliefs. With their ancestors who originally came from Congo and settled in the forest they believe the forest should not be destroyed in anyway. The tropical forest houses all their medicinal plants and a small hut is for their sacrifices. The Batwa forest experience is an exciting expedition that gives some insights into the rich forest life that Batwa lived. The experience comprises of a long walk and a medicinal trail, stopovers at burial grounds, a palace and various dance grounds. The forest vegetation serves various purposes such as clothing, food, medicine or for rituals such as rain making and ceremonial cleansing. Edidah Atukwase, a guide at Semuliki National Park says the cultural group has helped conserve the forest. “The Batwa cultural group together with the Semuliki National Park has a joint program where they involve both local and international tourists who visit the forest in sustainable practices that are geared towards the conservation of Semuliki National Park.”

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