

The once-thriving ecosystems at Mujuzi and Nabajjuzi, long associated with clan totems, sacred trees, and indigenous knowledge systems, are rapidly disappearing.

BY ANTONIO KALYANGO

For generations, Uganda's cultural identity across its diverse cultural institutions has been closely intertwined with nature.

Forests, wetlands, rivers, and wildlife have not only sustained livelihoods but have also helped shape and preserve cultural heritage, beliefs, and traditional practices.

However, in the Greater Masaka region, this delicate relationship is now under serious threat as Mujuzi Forest Reserve and Nabajjuzi Wetland face escalating encroachment that conservationists and cultural leaders warn could erase both biodiversity and cultural memory.

The once-thriving ecosystems at Mujuzi and Nabajjuzi—long associated with clan totems, sacred trees, and indigenous knowledge systems—are rapidly disappearing under pressure from human activity.

Traditionalists and conservationists say the loss is already visible in the decline of native tree species and wildlife that once defined the landscape.

Wetlands are being drained for cultivation, while forests are being cleared for timber and charcoal burning, leaving wildlife with shrinking habitats.

Near Mujuzi Forest Reserve, residents describe a dramatic decline in wildlife populations.

Monkeys that once moved freely through tree canopies, antelopes that roamed the undergrowth, and birds that filled the skies are now rarely seen.

Some farmers bordering the forest, in efforts to protect their crops, have reportedly resorted to poisoning animals and birds, further accelerating ecological decline.

Encroachment threatens Masaka cultural heritage



A section of Nabajjuzi wetland in Masaka that has been degraded by clay mining. PHOTO/ANTHONY KALYANGO

Mr Dominic Nsereko, a resident who lives near Mujuzi Forest, recalls a time when the ecosystem thrived in balance with surrounding communities. Today, he fears total loss of the forest if current trends continue.

"Encroachment is driven not just by subsistence needs but by commercial interests. Large-scale pineapple farming and illegal logging operations continue largely unchecked, raising concerns about enforcement," he said.

Other residents accuse authorities of selective enforcement of environmental laws.

They allege that while small-scale farmers are evicted from protected areas, powerful individuals continue destructive activities with limited consequences. Conservationists estimate that Mujuzi Forest has now shrunk to less than half of its original size due to encroachment.

A similar situation is unfolding in Nabajjuzi Wetland, once a rich habitat for bird species including the Grey Crowned Crane, Uganda's national bird.

Mr Edward Waligo, an elder and resident of Masaka City, said bird populations have drastically declined, affecting even tourism-related activities.

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"The grey crowned crane is no longer a common sight. In earlier years, tourists would stop at Nabajjuzi to take photographs of different bird species, but that is now rare," he said.

For some families, the loss is deeply personal and cultural. Mr John Lutaaya recalls visiting a wetland in his ancestral village of Bugo-Kalisizo in Kyotera as a child to see otters, known locally as engonge, his clan totem. When he returned in 2023, he found the wetland cleared for farming and the otters gone.

At both Mujuzi and Nabajjuzi, traditional respect for nature, according to elders and conservationists, has weakened significantly. Indigenous plant species have vanished, while animals and

THE EXTENT OF CRISIS

The 2016 Uganda Red List report by the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities identified more than 500 species as vulnerable or endangered.

Data from the Masaka District Natural Resources Department shows that out of 320 square kilometres of wetland areas in Masaka, more than 42 square kilometres of buffer zones have already been degraded.

birds have migrated to safer areas or disappeared entirely.

Experts now warn that reversing this trend requires coordinated action from communities, government agencies, and cultural institutions.

Ms Prossy Nyanzi Kabanda of the Biodiversity Conservation Foundation (BCF), a grassroots initiative in Greater Masaka, stressed the need for stronger community involvement, particularly among young people.

"Conservation must be a shared duty, not one left solely to government agencies. Degradation is happening from all angles. Everyone has a role to play," she said.

The Buddu County Chief, Mr Jude Muleke, also called for stricter enforcement by agencies such as the National Environment Management Authority and the Uganda Wildlife Authority.

He warned about rising illegal wildlife trade, including pangolin scales and ivory trafficking, which threatens species tied to cultural identity.

He proposed stronger partnerships between cultural institutions, particularly clans, and conservation agencies to better protect endangered species.

500
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