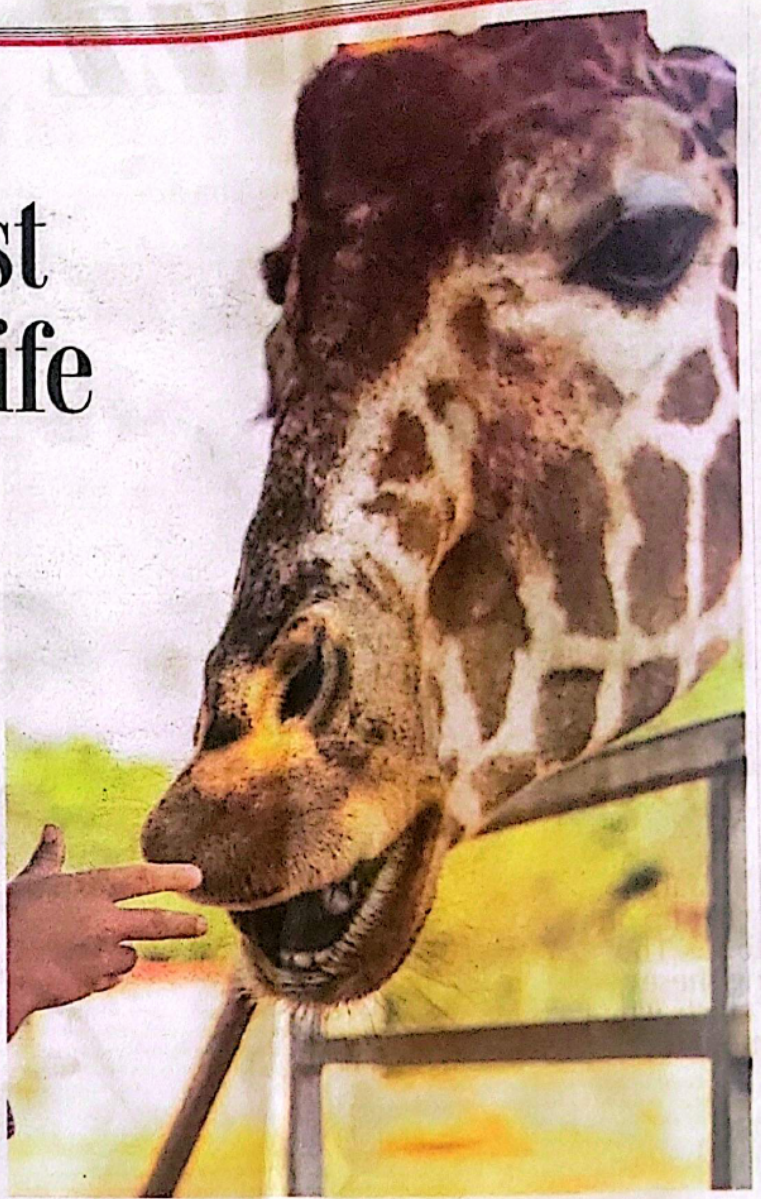
How teens can co-exist with wildlife

While encounters with animals in the communities we live in can be exciting, frightening, or even frustrating, they raise an important debate on how young people can live peacefully alongside wildlife.



BY DAPHINE NAKABIRI

In Kagoma, a small village in Wakiso District with a largely residential setting, monkeys have become part of the daily afternoon scene. They leap from compound to compound and perch on fences, drawing mixed reactions from residents. Children, teens, and even mothers throw sticks at the animals to chase them away, while others show affection by offering bananas.

For 17-year-old Moreen Nangobi, these encounters are far from amusing. Each time she steps out to buy items from nearby shops, she braces herself for the familiar sight of monkeys along the way. "They scare me," she says, admitting that she often runs away whenever she sees them.

Yet for many teens, wildlife is no longer something seen only on television documentaries or school trips. It is part of everyday life, from animals crossing roads, gorillas invading gardens, to others wandering near homes and schools. While these encounters can be exciting, frightening, or even frustrating, they raise an important debate on how young people can live peacefully alongside wildlife instead of clashing with it.

Dr Joshua Rukundo, a conservationist, says in a country where communities and wildlife share borders, learning to co-exist is no longer optional, but a necessity.

What co-existing means

Co-existing with wildlife means learning how humans and animals can share the same environment without harming each other. It is not about pushing animals far away from people, nor is it about allowing wildlife to roam freely without boundaries. Instead, it is about sharing a home with respect, balance, and responsibility.

Uganda is home to some of the world's most iconic species such as mountain gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, elephants in Queen Elizabeth National Park, chimpanzees in Kibale, and countless birds, reptiles, and smaller animals across the country.

As human populations grow and places expand into urban spaces, forests are cleared, wetlands are drained, and natural animal habitats shrink.

This forces wildlife closer to human settlements, increasing encounters and sometimes conflict.

In Kakumiro District, farmers watch their crops disappear as chimpanzees wander out of nearby central forest reserves.

Beyond Kakumiro, across Uganda's Albertine Rift Valley, forests, water sources, and other fragile ecosystems are steadily degrading, putting both wildlife and human livelihoods at risk.

Yet at the heart of this growing tension is human encroachment and the steady loss of natural habitats.

For teens, co-existence means understanding that wildlife is not invading "your" space, often, you have expanded into theirs. It also recognising that animals behave according to instinct, and not intention.

For instance, if an elephant destroys crops, this does not mean it is being cruel, but the animal is searching for food and a monkey snatching a snack is not mischievous but for it own survival.

During her research while living in the wild Jane Goodall (RIP), a protagonist, discovered that animals are capable of making and using tools, an ability thought to be uniquely human.

This revelation highlighted the deep similarities between humans and animals, placing a responsibility on humannity to respect, protect and co-exist with other species.

Therefore true co-existence starts with changing how you think about wildlife, not as enemies or entertainment, but as neighbours.

Why teens matter in this co-existence

While teens are not just future leaders, but current influencers, the attitudes you form today can definitely shape how Uganda treats its wildlife tomorrow. This means you play a vital role in promoting coexistence, conservation and respect for nature.

Additionally, teens are often the first to adopt new ideas, challenge harmful practices, and spread information through peer networks and social media. If a single teen came out to speak against bush burning or plastic pollution, this can inspire others to rethink their actions, and such acts begin with the wildlife club your school, mobilizing members who are passionate about conservation, and then these can help in influencing the entire community to change their mindset.

As teens, learning about conservation early builds lifelong habits of respect for nature. It ensures that future farmers, engineers, politicians, journalists, and parents grow up understanding that development and conservation are not enemies, as these can actually work together.

Teens also matter because you are able to inherit the consequences of today's decisions. If wildlife disappears, it is young people who will grow up in a country poorer in biodiversity, tourism and natural beauty. However, if wildlife is protected, you will inherit a Uganda where people and wildlife thrive side by side.

How to co-exist with wildlife

Co-existing with wildlife begins with understanding that humans and animals share the same environment. As towns expand and forests shrink, encounters with wildlife are becoming more common. Instead of reacting with fear or hostility, young people can help create balance through informed and responsible actions. These include the following.

First, wildlife should always be respected from a distance. Wild animals are not pets and should never be chased, fed, teased, or used as entertainment for photos or videos. However, keeping a safe distance can protect you, other people and animals from harm.

Teens can also engage in protecting natural habitats. This can be done through avoiding activities such as tree cutting, bush burning, wetland encroachment, and careless waste disposal as these tend to destroy animal homes and force wildlife into human settlements. You can create change by participating in tree-planting initiatives, avoiding littering, and speaking up against environmental destruction in your communities.

Understand the human–wildlife conflict as theis is vital in coexistence. Animals that destroy crops or wander to villages are often responding to habitat loss rather than acting aggressively. Learning this helps you respond with empathy rather than anger and only you are able to discourage harmful practices like poisoning or killing animals.

You can also use information responsibly, such as relying on credible sources, supporting community conservation efforts, and sharing accurate reports on social media. By doing this, you can promote peaceful co-existence and reduce fear-driven reactions.

Opportunities

Co-existing with wildlife is not only about avoiding harm, it also opens doors to opportunity, especially for young people.

In the education and career path, wildlife conservation offers many paths in tourism, veterinary science, environmental law, research, photography, journalism, and community development. Teens who develop an early interest in wildlife may find mentors protecting the very animals that grew up around.

Today, many youth are engaging in conservation initiatives, and as a teen, this can be one of the chances to turn your passion into action while making a real impact. This is because many organisations in Uganda and across the globe are supporting youth-led conservation clubs, school wildlife groups, and community clean-up projects.

Creative expression can also help. Teens can use writing, art, drama and photography to tell powerful stories. A poem about disappearing forests, a short video on littering, or a school debate on conservation can influence peers more powerfully than a lecture.

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