

Marabou storks set Byaruhanga on a journey to conserve nature

PASSIONATE. Achilles Byaruhanga hardly remembers when he first considered taking a birding excursion but he recalls finding a pigeon as he went out with his siblings to hunt for mammals. He built a cage for it and started feeding it. Years later, birding became his career and hobby and he took on conservation as a natural passion. Today, he is the director of Nature Uganda, a research and conservation organisation. He told **Edgar R. Batta** about how he developed love for nature

Achilles Byaruhanga's office tells about his character and work. Above his seat are a number of certificates, saying a thing or two about his achievements in the areas of conservation or birding. Adjacent to his working table, which is fairly organised, is a fully-stocked library of literature on conservation and birding. On another cabinet, is a flask of tea and a water jar. His face lights up when I ask him to talk about his work.

Talking about his childhood memories, conservation is part of the culture that he picked up when he was a child. His parents always cautioned them to keep clean and be mindful of how they disposed of waste. They were not strict parents though and as such Byaruhanga recalls going out to hunt with his siblings every Saturday, for small mammals and birds to keep as pets. "I always kept grasshoppers. Birds were hard to get. I got pigeons. I think that is where my love for wildlife started. It was not conservation but I tend to think liking of nature was developed at that time. That is when I planted my first tree, which was eucalyptus," he recalls.

His father planted trees for timber trade. Recalling this, he wishes he had planted more because timber trade is now a booming business. This was in 1983 and Byaruhanga was in Primary Seven.

But he is grateful that his first tree inspired him to join the Wildlife Club at St Paul Seminary, Bukinda in Kabale where he had started his journey into priesthood. He did not succeed at becoming a priest but continued on a journey to become an avid lover of nature. When a trip was organised to visit Queen Elizabeth National Park, he was excited, and asked his father to give him money to pay for the trip. When he got to the park, he recalls seeing an elephant, big and mighty, and it was a thrill.

Making sense of zoology
As a student of zoology at Makerere University, he studied about plants and animals. While there, he met a professor who gave him an assignment of counting marabou storks in Kampala at the time. "I used to look at marabou storks as dirty

birds and I wondered why they would stay in Kampala. To do the assignment, I borrowed a bicycle from one of the university custodians and rode around Kampala to points where the marabou storks were breeding. At that time, there were not as many cars in the city and drivers were more responsible. I could easily ride a bicycle in town," he narrates. He visited Nakasero, Rubaga, Namirembe and Makerere. He was surprised that the marabou storks were breeding in affluent parts of the city. It is where they could find food since they are scavengers. He also learnt that the only available food in Katanga was for people and locals there did not have the luxury of throwing away food.

The discoveries were interesting for Byaruhanga. He also saw them in big trees and any one tree would have up to 10 nests,

each weighing up to seven kilogrammes.

Deepening the interest

A tree would averagely carry up to 100kg. It saddens the conservationist that he no longer sees such trees in town because they have been cut down. To his confession, this assignment triggered off his interest in nature and motivated him to make meaning of the course he was pursuing.

"Since then, I have kept making sense of conservation. The problem is that even people who have studied zoology or subjects to do with wildlife, ecology or conservation, do it as a subject," he says. He went on to do research and in 2001, he produced his first book about the Important bird area of Uganda.

About Nature Uganda

Along the way, Nature Uganda came up. And whereas it is a name that is simultaneous with him, Byaruhanga says he did not start the organisation. He says it is an operational name of East

Achilles Byaruhanga, a renowned conservationist and birder, with his binoculars on a birding excursion.

PHOTO BY EDGAR R. BATTA/COURTESY

Africa Natural History Society, a bigger organisation which was established in 1989. This was the first conservation society which was started in Uganda. In 1972, people interested in nature, mainly expatriates, left because of political turmoil. In 1980, some of the surviving members at Makerere University revived the club through talks.

When Byaruhanga graduated in 1995,

one of the professors interested him in rejuvenating the society in Uganda. The hands and he took on the challenge. "We started in a small corner in Makerere and within a year, they had a programme to survey Uganda and identify the most important areas in the country which culminated in a book," he recalls adding that he is happy to have revived

the heritage of Uganda. In 1998, Byaruhanga led members to start an organisation that was attractive to all members of society. That is when Nature Uganda came up. Coincidentally, Kenyan conservationists were also rebranding to Nature Kenya. "Our rebranding was very important because it brought the society back to the people," he argues.



Shoebill stork is a rare bird species most tourists come to see in Uganda. Right, Byaruhanga with one of his children



the challenges

Conserving comes with a price and Byaruhanga cites the general attitude of the populace. At the time they were rebranding the society, people did not appreciate conservation as a Ugandan tradition. He adds that dealing with conservation misrepresented him as someone looking for money because it was a western idea. "It was difficult to bring people on board. It took every long to embrace the membership. We cannot compare to our counterparts in the UK's Royal Society for Bird Protection who

have a membership of 1.2m people and collect £10m every year. We raise Shs10m every year and we are not supposed to depend on hand-outs. It is not about money. It is our thinking that conservation is not our responsibility," he narrates. He also cites departmentalisation of nature into many organisations. He argues that Nature Uganda should bring together all organisations dealing with nature. He also looks at policies which he says are good but are not well-implemented. There are many contradictions, for example the Mabira Forest. There were contradictions between raising employment and income and

conservation, which was within government departments," he explains. He adds, "Dewasa has been a big problem but for someone to come and construct a sewerage plant in its midst is a big problem." Byaruhanga observes that whereas they work with government, as civil society, they always come up when there are issues that need to be talked about as resisted. This sometimes comes at a cost, as being called names such as 'saboteur'. Although he has been arrested some times while birding, when the politicians get lost, Byaruhanga grabs his binoculars, Canon 70 and goes for a birding experience in the wild.

PASSIONATE BIRDER

"I have been arrested more than five times out there doing my work. People ask me what the problem with birds is. They cannot comprehend why I would leave my family to go and look at birds," he says with a smile.

Many people are yet to appreciate that bird watching is the fast growing tourism sector that is worth more than \$2b, so there is money to be made. Today, tour guides and operators have included birding on their itinerary.

"That has been one of my biggest achievements. Bird-watching alone brings in \$50m," he reveals.

His best birding experience was during an excursion in Kibale National Park where he saw a green-breasted pitta. He was amazed by its beauty. After a long time, he saw its nest. He published a bird guide book and put the bird on its cover.

He observes that Uganda is one of the special places for bird watching with 1,060 species, with 50 per cent of the birds in Africa living here. Every year, Uganda receives five to 10 million birds every year from all over the world.

Close to Kampala, Byaruhanga recommends Mabira Forest where one can see more than 300 bird species. He says within an hour, one can see more than 100 birds in the forest. There could have been more nest, he says, much of Mabira has been cut down.

Mabamba at Lutembe Bay on Lake Victoria, as you head to the airport is ideal. It is home to the shoebill, one of the most attractive birds to tourists. It is a small area but is a place where migrant birds rest. When you have more time and can head out of town, Byaruhanga recommends Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest in the Southwest.

In the North East, he points birders to Kidepo Valley National Park, and then Semliki National Park, with birds from the Congo Basin. Budongo Forest is another place to watch birds.

Family

And when he gets back home, it is to a beautiful family, of a wonderful wife and five children. The eldest is at university while the youngest is a teenager.

He finds thrill in being an old and new parent at the same time, highlighting the fact that raising teenagers is quite an experience. He helps his teenager while he undergoes all the hormonal changes and self-discovery.



Achilles is an admirable conservationist who has played a key role in promoting bird conservation and tourism. He has spearheaded different initiatives such as birding which encourages the public to participate in counting the bird species across the country. This has helped in creating and widening conservation and local tourism constituencies. Mr Byaruhanga also, is one of few local conservationists I admire. He is knowledgeable about birds and their habitats. Through Nature Uganda, he has been working hard to ensure that young people are nurtured into wildlife lovers. He has taken this campaign to schools and I'm always humbled when I visit some schools around protected areas and I find a Nature Uganda Club. We need Ugandans who care about our diversity and wildlife including birds in our identity, with over 1,000 bird species."

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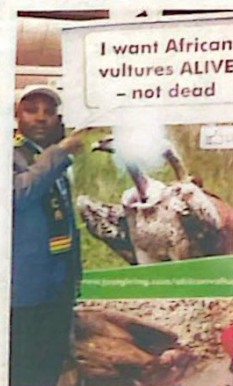
Byaruhanga receives an award for Best Conservation Personality at the Uganda Tourism Expo which took place last year.

Growing numbers of conservationists

Under Nature Uganda, he has raised public awareness programmes through the organisation's membership in most parts of the country. "We have 3,000 members in five categories. We have corporate, institutions, family and programmes, individuals and student membership which describes members before or up to university students," he explains.

The student members constitute the biggest number, which accounts for more than 50 per cent of the organisation's membership. Here, Byaruhanga trains cadres that can take care of the environment and its sustainability. He says the challenge in talking to adults is that some of them have already purchased plots in wetlands which is not the case with young people who will take messages and practice it.

The conservationist is asked by adults who throw away water bottles because they use nothing wrong with it. He has taught his children to desist from such behaviour, and he has explained to them that it affects the environment in the long run as plastics cannot allow water sink into the ground and affect its composition.



Byaruhanga after attending a African vulture conservation conference