

Concern over rampant tree felling in Bukedi

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BY MUDANGHA KOLYANGHA

What begins as a routine morning in many villages across Bukedi Sub-region is quietly turning into an environmental crisis, as the steady hum of chainsaws signals the rapid disappearance of tree cover to feed growing industrial demand in Mbale.

Each day, trucks snake through rural roads, loaded with freshly cut logs destined for the Sino Industrial Park.

For many landowners, the trade offers quick cash to pay school fees, medical bills and other household needs. But across Bukedi Sub-region, the practice is rapidly depleting tree cover, raising fears of long-term environmental damage.

North Bukedi, which includes Budaka, Kibuku, Pallisa and Butebo districts, has traditionally depended on agriculture. However, tree cutting has in recent years emerged as a lucrative side business, with dealers moving from village to village buying woodlots and transporting logs to the industrial park.

"Every day trucks pass here loaded with logs; people are selling trees because they need money, but now many gardens of trees have been left empty not knowing that this is likely to cause a catastrophe in the near future," said Mr James Kyagha, a resident of Budaka Town Council.

For households with limited income opportunities, trees have effectively be-

come a form of savings. Farmers can earn significant amounts depending on the size and number of trees, with some opting to sell entire woodlots at once.

"When a buyer offers cash immediately, you cannot refuse. Schools fees are expensive and farming alone cannot cover everything. Yet the speed at which trees are being harvested is raising alarm. The situation in Bukedi reflects a wider national challenge," said a farmer in Kibuku District.

Traders say the business has expanded rapidly. Mr Abasa Machali, a timber dealer in Budaka, said a tonne of eucalyptus logs sells for about Shs85,000 at the Sino Industrial Park, while other species fetch around Shs75,000 per tonne.

"Each day, it's a bee-hive of activity for vehicles ferrying tree logs to the Sino. More than 100 vehicles roll down to the factory on daily basis, implying that many dealers have joined the business.

We are so many now who have registered with the factory to supply tree logs upon payment of Shs50,000 as registration," Mr Machali explained.

He added that an entire eucalyptus plantation can be sold for between Shs3 million and Shs4 million, depending on the size and maturity of the trees.

However, environmentalists warn that the economic gains are coming at a high cost. According to the National Forestry Authority, Uganda loses about 122,000 hectares of forest cover annually. Forest cover has declined from about 24 percent of the country's land area in the 1990s to roughly 12 percent today.

Experts say the effects are already visible in parts of Bukedi, where communities are experiencing rising temperatures, stronger winds and erratic rainfall patterns.

"We are losing our natural protection because the environmental im-



Some of the tree logs awaiting to be loaded onto vehicles in Budaka District. PHOTO/ MUDANGHA KOLYANGHA

pact is becoming visible. Farmers have observed that areas which once had thick tree cover now experience stronger winds and hotter conditions because of the massive tree cutting," said an environmental activist.

They warn that if the trend continues unchecked, the region could face in-

creased soil erosion, declining agricultural productivity and long-term ecological degradation.

Challenges

The growth of the Sino Industrial Park has been widely welcomed as a driver of industrialisation and job creation in

THE NUMBERS

Uganda has experienced a dramatic decline in forest cover, losing nearly half of its forests since 1990. According to the National Forestry Authority, Uganda loses about 122,000 hectares of forest cover annually. Forest cover has declined from about 24 percent of the country's land area in the 1990s to roughly 12 percent today.

eastern Uganda. The park hosts several manufacturing firms that rely heavily on timber for energy, creating a steady market for wood supplies.

However, regulation remains a challenge. Ugandan law allows landowners to harvest trees on private land, making it difficult for authorities to control the scale of logging.

"Many trees are cut without proper replacement. If this trend continues, the long-term environmental impact will be severe," experts warn.

Local leaders have begun encouraging communities to plant fast-growing tree species such as eucalyptus and grevillea to replenish the lost cover. But experts say replanting efforts are far too slow compared to the rate of harvesting.

In many areas, landscapes once covered with trees are now reduced to open land dotted with stumps. The transformation is visible across villages, where chainsaws continue to echo as trucks collect fresh loads of timber.

While the trade provides immediate economic relief, residents are increasingly worried about the future.

"We are earning money today but the future effects would be too big. But if we cut everything, our children will inherit bare land," said a community elder in Kibuku.

The Budaka District Forest Officer, Mr Patrick Okiddi, described the trend as alarming, noting that private forest cover is being depleted at a fast rate.

"All along, I have observed this trend. This requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders to scale down the rapid harvest of the available trees. It's likely to cause a catastrophe in the region because of the massive tree cutting," he said.

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