LETTERS

World Wetlands Day: Bridging culture and conservation



Every year on February 2, the world pauses to reflect on the value of wetlands—those often-overlooked ecosystems that quietly sustain life.

This year's World Wetlands Day, themed "Wetlands and traditional knowledge: Celebrating cultural heritage," invites us not merely to look at wetlands as ecological assets, but as living archives of culture, wisdom and identity. In Uganda, this theme could not be timelier.

From the papyrus-fringed shores of Lake Victoria to the seasonal wetlands of the cattle corridor, Uganda's wetlands have long been shaped, protected and interpreted through traditional knowledge systems. Long before policy instruments, environmental impact assessments or Ramsar designations, our communities understood wetlands as sacred spaces, sources of livelihood, and buffers against environmental shocks.

Among fishing communities around Lake Victoria, traditional norms governed when and how fishing could take place, often linked to seasonal cycles and cultural beliefs. Certain breeding areas were respected and left undisturbed, not because of written law, but because of inherited wisdom passed from one generation to the next.

In central Uganda, papyrus wetlands were carefully harvested for crafts, roofing and mats, guided by practices that ensured regeneration rather than depletion. In eastern and western Uganda, wetlands played a critical role in drought resilience, providing dry-season grazing and water for livestock—used wisely and communally.

These practices were not accidental. They reflected a deep appreciation of ecological balance and interdependence. Traditional knowledge recognised that wetlands are not wastelands, but lifelines—filtering water, controlling floods, storing carbon and supporting biodiversity. Today, science affirms what culture has long known.

Yet, despite this rich heritage, Uganda's wetlands are under unprecedented threat. Rapid urbanisation, industrial expansion, unsustainable agriculture and weak enforcement of environmental laws have led to widespread encroachment. In Kampala alone, wetlands that once acted as natural flood controls have been drained or built over, with devastating consequences—annual flooding, water pollution and loss of livelihoods.

The tragedy is not only ecological; it is cultural. As wetlands disappear, so too does the traditional knowledge associated with them. Burgeoning generations are increasingly disconnected from indigenous conservation practices, while development narratives too often dismiss culture as incompatible with progress.

World Wetlands Day 2026 challenges us to rethink this false dichotomy. Protecting wetlands in Uganda is not just about restoring ecosystems; it is about restoring respect for culture, community and collective memory. Policymakers must go beyond technocratic solutions and meaningfully integrate traditional knowledge into wetland governance. Community elders, cultural institutions and indigenous knowledge holders should not be treated as symbolic stakeholders, but as co-creators of conservation strategies.

Concomitantly, documenting and transmitting traditional knowledge is essential. Schools, universities and civil society certainly have a role in ensuring that cultural heritage becomes a living resource for sustainability, not a relic of the past.

Let us remember that Uganda's path to environmental resilience may well lie in rediscovering what we already know. When culture guides conservation, wetlands thrive—and so does humanity.

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