Lake Victoria and the story of six blind men

Two stories in the Thursday edition of the daily newspapers caught my attention. First was *Daily Monitor's* "Residents suffocate as Lake Victoria chokes on pollution" and then *New Vision's* "Lake Victoria turns green, foul smell hits communities".

I read both intently and clearly, the sourcing was more or less the same. The reporters and editors should be commended for the environmental vigilance and the importance they attached to this story by giving it prominent space inside the newspapers and flagging it on the cover so it is not easily missed.

Lake Victoria, as both stories mentioned, is an important ecological and geographical feature of Uganda and the two other countries it sits in (Kenya and Tanzania).

The stories painted a graphic and grim picture of the Lake Victoria today reinforced by voices of residents that endure the putrid smell wafting from the lake in the Murchison Bay area. The impact of this pollution was also well illustrated; showing the loss of everyday business, particularly food and hospitality, as well as tenants migrating thus leaving real estate properties empty.

The stories also pointed to the cause of this malaise, quoting expert opinion from the Ministry of Water and Environment, who indicated that discharge of industrial and domestic effluent as well as degraded wetlands and prolonged warm temperatures are largely to blame.

In many ways, this was great environmental journalism that ticked most of the boxes – i.e. problem well described, multiple sources spoken to, the "so what?" question answered in voices interviewed, responsibility assigned, etc.

However, there was one failing and it reminded me of the old tale of the blind men and the elephant. The blind men touch different parts of an elephant – the side, trunk, tusk, leg, ear, tail, etc. – and describe what an elephant looks like.

> Yes, it is possible the water in the entire lake has turned green and smelly, but there was no evidence of that in the stories.

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Public Editor



One describes an elephant as similar to a wall (he touched the side), another as a snake (he touched the trunk), another as a spear (he touched the tusk, another as a tree (he touched the leg), another as a fan (he touched the ear) and another as a rope (he touched the tail), etc.

These weird and conflicting descriptions where understandable because the elephant is a huge animal and the blind men had opportunity to touch only one part of the animal.

Figuratively speaking, Lake Victoria is an elephant of a lake occupying 68,800 km^2, which makes it the second largest lake by area in the world and first in Africa. To paint a picture of just how huge it is, both Rwanda and Burundi snuggly fit into it with more space left.

Journalists are not like the proverbial blind men that had opportunity to touch only one part of the lake. So in describing the ecological state of Lake Victoria, they should have gone beyond Murchison Bay (one leg) or should have confined the story to the bay (e.g. "Murchison Bay turns green") rather than scream the entire lake is smelling – at least going by the headlines!

Yes, it is possible the water in the entire lake has turned green and smelly, but there was no evidence of that in the stories. A little more work that should have included getting a picture from key places along the shore of the lake like Entebbe, Bukakata (in Masaka), Kiyindi (in Buikwe), Jinja, Bwondha (in Mayuge), Majanji (in Busia), Ssese and Buvuma archipelagos, etc could have painted a more holistic perspective of the ecological state of Lake Victoria on the Ugandan side and in relation to the present predicament identified in the Murchison Bay.

And this could easily have been achieved by leveraging the correspondents/stringers network in these places. The story would then have been able to explain well how widespread the problem is and the peculiarity of Murchison Bay in relation to the rest of the lake.

Right now, a Ugandan sailing on Lake Victoria from Katosi landing site may wonder what the newspapers are writing about. Conversely, a Ugandan standing at Ggaba reading these stories will go away convinced that indeed an elephant is like a tree – i.e. the entire lake has turned green and is stinking.

A great environmental story was therefore undermined by limited perspective and generalisation. Hopefully, journalists will take another shot at this story with greater perspective.

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