

Mwandha: 30 years protecting wildlife

For over three decades, Sam Mwandha has safeguarded Uganda's forests, wildlife, and communities, leaving a legacy of integrity, dedication, and conservation leadership.

BY EDGARR BATTE

In Uganda's conservation story, some individuals shape the landscape quietly, steadily, and with purpose. Sam Mwandha is one such figure. For over 30 years, his life has been intertwined with the country's forests, wildlife reserves, and national parks.

From planting trees on the slopes of Mount Elgon to steering the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) through turbulent times for global tourism, Mwandha's career has been guided by two enduring principles: integrity and hard work. Those who know him describe him as measured, reflective, and deeply grounded in faith, a calm presence behind which lies a conservationist whose efforts helped shape Uganda's modern wildlife management.

Today, after seven years as executive director of UWA, Mwandha reflects on a career of stewardship with humility. Retirement, he says, has brought unexpected peace. Deadlines still exist, but they are now his own, no longer dictated by the relentless demands of public office. For a man who spent decades safeguarding the country's natural heritage, that calm is well earned.

Roots of integrity in rural Busoga

Mwandha's story begins in Mayuge District, eastern Uganda, where life was modest but his household rich in discipline and integrity, traits that would later define his career. His father, a primary school head teacher, impressed on his children the value of diligence, working in the fields before and after teaching. For Mwandha, that routine became a lifelong compass.

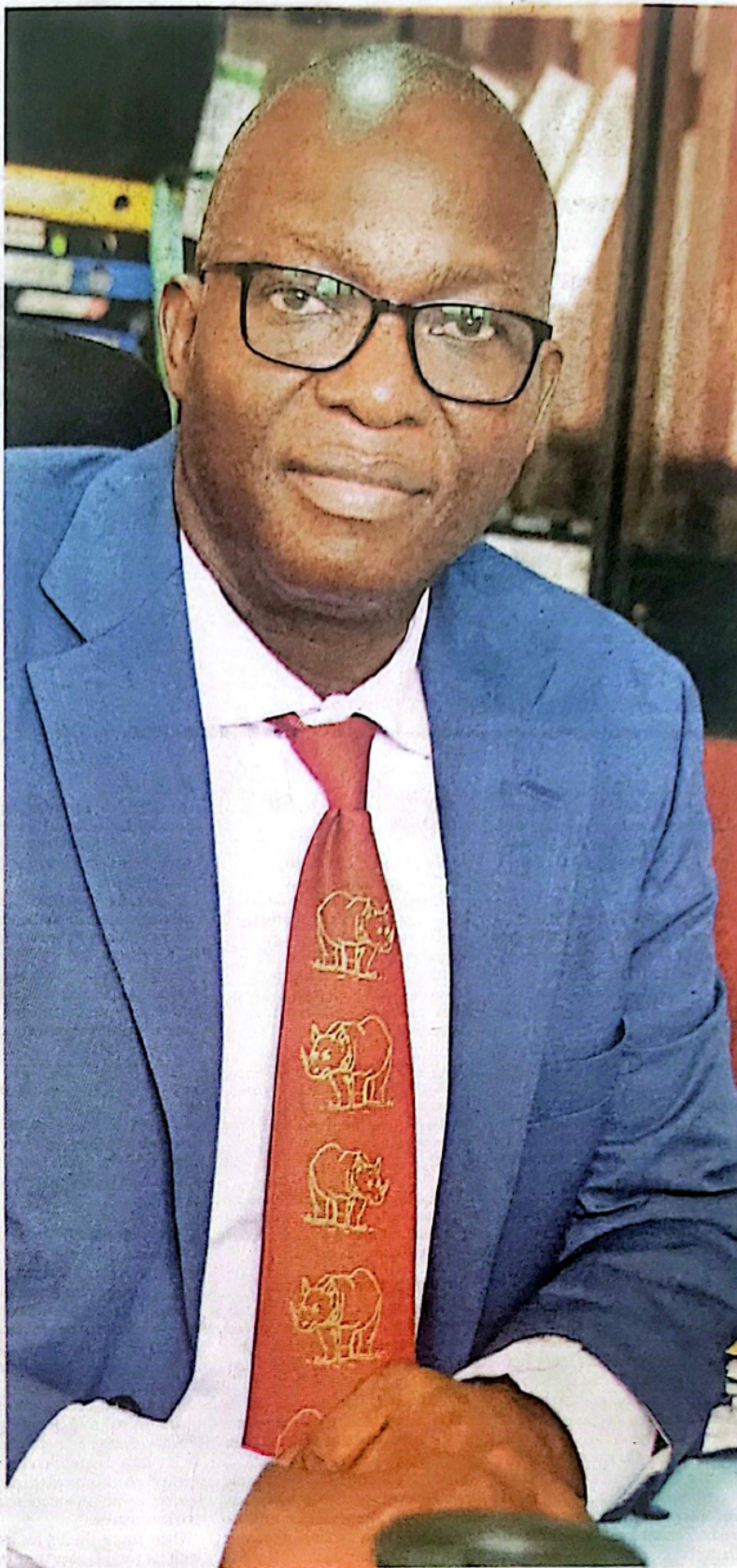
"Being able to manage resources with integrity is the biggest problem we have in this country," he says. "If you are given responsibility and misuse the resources entrusted to you, that is where our problems begin." These words would guide his decades in public service.

An unexpected start in the classroom

After earning a degree in Forestry in the late 1980s, Mwandha's first job was teaching at Nkuutu Memorial Secondary School in Busoga. Assigned to teach mathematics and physics despite specialising in biology, he spent nights revisiting textbooks and preparing lessons long after midnight. His diligence paid off; the class he taught became the school's best-performing cohort. These years, he says, taught humility and reinforced a lesson that would shape his leadership: excellence begins with preparation.

Planting the first seeds

Three years later, Mwandha moved from the classroom into community forestry, joining the Busoga Diocese as an extension worker. He travelled across villages, encouraging tree planting, often overcoming community hes-



Sam Mwandha, Uganda's wildlife guardian for more than 30 years, reflects on a career spent protecting forests, wildlife, and communities. PHOTO/EDGAR R BATTE.

Values

Retirement has given Sam Mwandha time to reflect on a life protecting nature. He remains active in conservation consultancy, while also prioritising family, church, and lifelong friendships. Every evening at 7:30pm, he gathers with his family for prayer, a tradition reflecting the faith that has anchored his life. Through restored forests, protected wildlife, and strengthened institutions, Mwandha leaves more than a professional record. He leaves an example, a reminder that leadership and conservation itself is built patiently, one honest decision at a time.

itation. Early struggles led to a simple solution: planting seedlings on church land. Many of these woodlots still thrive today, providing income for churches and communities.

In 1994, he joined Uganda National Parks to rehabilitate Mount Elgon National Park after gazettement. Large sections of forest had been cleared or degraded. Together with colleagues, he planted trees across more than 6,000 hectares, much of which has regenerated into thriving forest.

His work later extended to Kibale National Park and other protected areas. When Uganda National Parks merged with the Game Department in 1996 to form UWA, Mwandha's responsibilities grew, including roles in planning, environmental assessment, and management coordination across nearly every national park and wildlife reserve in the country.

A regional perspective

Mwandha's expertise eventually led him to regional conservation work. He served as executive secretary of the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration in Kigali, coordinating efforts between Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Later, he joined the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) as senior conservation planner and eventually country director for Uganda.

By the time he returned to UWA in 2018 as executive director, he brought a rare combination of technical knowledge, international perspective, and institutional memory.

Steering UWA through crisis

Mwandha's leadership coincided with a period of profound change. When he took office, UWA's budget stood at about Shs67 billion; by retirement, it had grown significantly, reflecting improved revenue collection and greater trust in the institution.

Then came the global shock of Covid-19. Tourism collapsed almost overnight, yet UWA endured. Rangers remained in the field, salaries were paid, and wildlife populations continued to grow. Under his guidance, UWA also expanded revenue-sharing initiatives, directing more than Shs30 billion to communities around protected areas.

For Mwandha, conservation and community welfare are inseparable. Tourism, he notes, supports a wide chain of livelihoods, from taxi drivers and hotel workers to farmers and artisans. Uganda's natural wealth, he believes, remains one of its greatest untapped assets.