

Regional News

The 663-hectare natural highland forest in Mbale and Sironko districts and adjacent to Mount Elgon National Park, had been stripped nearly bare.

BY FRED WAMBEDE

Deforestation, agriculture and unchecked grazing had turned the Namatale Central Forest Reserve in the Bugisu Sub-region into a barren wasteland.

The 663-hectare natural highland forest in Mbale and Sironko districts and adjacent to Mount Elgon National Park, had been stripped nearly bare.

Encroachers had taken over nearly 80 percent of the reserve, turning large portions into farmland and settlements. In some areas, forest cover had almost completely wiped out as nearby communities claimed the land.

Five years ago, however, residents living near the forest in Bubyangu Sub-county, Mbale District, formed the Bunyafa Forestry Conservation Association and began mobilising locals to abandon activities that were degrading the reserve.

The forest, part of the Greater Mount Elgon ecosystem, is a critical water catchment area. It supports downstream communities through water provision, soil stabilisation and biodiversity conservation.

Mr Milton Wofeda Sande, a resident of Bunamoli Village in Bubyangu Sub-county, told *Daily Monitor* that the community had to change its mindset as the forest was becoming "a shadow of its former self" due to illegal logging and other human activities driven by high urban demand for timber.

"At first, our colleagues thought we had been compromised by the government to give away our forest, but that was not the case. We realised we needed to intervene because once-clear streams had turned muddy and wildlife had started to disappear," Mr Wofeda said.

Locals breath new life into Namatale forest



A section of Namatale Forest Reserve that has been restored in Bubyangu Sub-county, Mbale District. PHOTO/FRED WAMBEDE

ABOUT NAMATALE

Namatale was originally gazetted in the early 1950s to protect highland ecosystems and watershed functions around Mount Elgon. After Uganda's independence in 1962, rapid population growth and increasing land pressure accelerated encroachment. Management of the reserve was transferred to the National Forestry Authority in 2003 following the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act.

da said.

Mr Julius Kabale, a resident of Bumasiswa Village, said early community interventions were fragmented and insufficient to reverse the large-scale degradation.

"When the government stepped in to provide alternative livelihoods, community support for agro-forestry and conservation agriculture to reduce pressure on the forest, we welcomed the gesture as God-sent. Now the forest has started to blossom," he said.

Four years ago, the government launched a restoration initiative under the Strengthening the Adaptive Capacity and Resilience of Communities in Uganda's Watersheds - Awoja Catchment (SACRIAC) project. So far, more than 434 hectares of the 663-hectare reserve have been restored.

Ms Agnes Nandudu, a resident of Maje Village, said the restoration has improved access to freshwater sources and revived medicinal plants that had disappeared.

"There are also improved crop yields from our gardens because we now re-

ceive more reliable rainfall," she said.

Under the project, communities received support for alternative livelihoods, agro-forestry and conservation agriculture, including supply of coffee seedlings to ease pressure on the forest.

Mr Leonard Cherop, a forest officer at the Ministry of Water and Environment, said Namatale is transitioning from a heavily degraded landscape to a recovering secondary forest ecosystem.

"With more than 450 hectares restored, the reserve is regaining its ecological function as a water catchment for surrounding communities and a biodiversity corridor linked to Mount Elgon," he said. However, Mr Cherop noted the need to reinstall boundary markers to prevent future encroachment.

Mr Muzamiru Magomu, an elder in Bumasiswa Village, attributed the extensive degradation to population growth in Mbale and Sironko districts.

"Communities encroached on the forest for subsistence farming, informal pit-sawing and fuel wood harvesting degrading forest edges," he said, adding that political instability in the 1970s and 1980s further weakened forest governance.

Ms Martha Akia, the senior regional communications officer at the Ministry of Water and Environment, said community members are now champions of restoration because they see tangible benefits in income, water security and resilience to climate shocks.

"The restoration of Namatale has demonstrated that when communities understand the direct link between healthy forests, reliable water sources and their livelihoods, conservation stops being a government directive and becomes a shared responsibility," she said.

She added that the SACRIAC project is being implemented in four districts: Bukedea, Sironko, Kapchorwa and Bulambuli, within the Awoja Catchment.

"The project aims to build the adaptive capacity of rural communities, reduce vulnerability to climate change and improve livelihoods and food security through integrated watershed management, climate-resilient infrastructure and sustainable agriculture," she said.