

Gulu wetlands degraded for farming



Cutting. A farmer clears papyrus at Layibi stream, one of the encroached wetlands in Gulu Municipality recently. PHOTO BY JULIUS OCUNGI

Farming. The high population growth has put pressure on the land and the residents have resorted to destroying wetlands for survival.

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GULU. About 300 metres from Layibi main roundabout in Layibi Division on Gulu-Kampala highway are sugarcane and vegetable plantations on both sides of the tarmac road leading to Gulu Municipality.

The plantations sit on what was once a wetland formally covered with thick papyrus swamps in Layibi and Pece divisions.

But due to population pressure, hundreds of farmers have since encroached on the wetland and turned it into farmland.

Statistics from the municipal environment department indicate that 60 per cent of the more than 400 hectares of papyrus swamps coverage have been destroyed in the past years in Gulu Municipality.

Mr Oyar Koyo, a resident of Cubu Village in Pece Division, recalls that the area once endowed with plenty of papyrus in the late 1980's was degraded due to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency, where many people who fled to the towns to cultivated in the swamps for survival.

"The papyrus swamps were vacant and used to cover the entire Layibi stream belt. We only cultivated near the swamps but when the war intensified, people who had nowhere to live started using them," Mr Koyo says.

He notes that the wetland also played a key role in conserving the environment and providing a habitat

to aquatic species and that to date, the amount of rainfall in the area has greatly reduced.

"In the nineties, this land used to be a haven for catfish. We called it a fish basket because you could not fail to catch fish. But there is nothing currently. People have destroyed all the papyrus swamps which used to be their habitat," Mr Koyo says.

Papyrus mats market

Mr Koyo says though many people are harvesting the papyrus plants to make mats, the activity is less dangerous compared to turning it into farmlands.

Mr Amid Wazemba, a farmer, intends to grow vegetables on half an hectare wetland he recently acquired from another local in Cubu Village.

Mr Wazemba has already prepared the swamp to grow tomatoes and cabbage. He says he had grown vegetables before and got good yields in Holy Rosary Parish, one of the endangered wetlands in the municipality.

Mr Wazemba says though he knows the dangers of destroying the wetlands, he has no other alternative but to use the available land for agriculture to sustain his family.

"I have children at home who need to eat. They also have to go to school. The only areas that can support growing vegetables are wetlands," Mr Wazemba says.

Car washing bays

The papyrus swamps are also being threatened by numerous activities springing up near them, mostly car washing bays.

Mr James Amuku Ochora, a casual worker at Northern Link car washing bay in Layibi Division says the high rate of unemployment has forced many people to rely on the wetlands for economic benefits.

At the washing bay started about 15 years ago, Mr Ochora says 22 youth are earning a living from washing cars, which he says would not be possible if they did not encroach on the wetland.

"We are aware of the dangers this activity poses to the environment. But if one is to also think critically, without us working here, where would we be? We would not have decent lives," Mr Ochora says.

He notes that they have currently embarked on restoring the papyrus plants by conserving the available plants.

Environmentalists have warned that the rapid destruction of the papyrus plants on the wetlands could see the plant depleted.

Authorities speak out

Gulu Municipal environment officer, Mr James Ocaka, says human pressure on the available land coupled with ignorance on the importance of wetland conservation is aiding the current papyrus plant destruction.

"Illegal activity is likely to set a bad precedent to the environment. Papyrus swamps play key roles in sewerage purification, water conservation and act as habitat for aquatic lives," he says.

EXPERTS' TAKE

Environmentalists have warned that the rapid destruction of the papyrus plants on the wetlands could see the plant depleted.

Uganda loses about two per cent of its wetlands annually, which is equivalent to 752 square kilometres countrywide.

In January this year, President Museveni ordered wetland encroachers in the country to vacate within one month or be forced out by the police.

Voices

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GULU MUNICIPAL
ENVIRONMENT OFFICER

brief

Police warn

KAMPALA: As the festive season approaches, Kampala Metropolitan police commander Frank Mwesigwa has asked public to increase security around their homes. Mr Mwesigwa urged people to have a permanent person staying at home saying during such days, criminal elements usually target homes since many people travel to the villages. Police said those going upcountry for Christmas should hire at least a private security guard or write to the police in the area to provide security so that their homes are not broken into. Mr Mwesigwa who was addressing the media on Monday also challenged the public to increase security light around their homes to avoid being waylaid by thugs in the dark. [Joseph Kato]

New traffic law in offing

KAMPALA: The proposed amendment of the road safety and traffic Act has been received with excitement among drivers. According to the minister for Works and Transport, Ms Monica Azuba Ntege, the new law will see motorists and motorcyclists use one permit as opposed to the current law that requires a person with a motorcycle and car to have a permit for each. Mr Rashid Ssekindi, the chairman of Kampala taxi stage operators association, on Monday said they had for long been advocating for the same. The new law would also ease renewal of expired permits as drivers won't have to repeat the process afresh. [Joseph Kato]

Bars, malls cautioned

KAMPALA: Police have warned bar and mall owners to increase security, especially during this festive season as terrorists and other criminal elements could take advantage of the excitement to cause havoc. Kampala Metropolitan police commander Frank Mwesigwa said all bars, supermarkets and malls that would not increase security face closure purposely to prevent putting citizens' lives at stake. Mr Mwesigwa urged all managers of these places to liaise with police to ensure enough security is provided. He also challenged the public to desist from flocking places that do not have adequate security. [Joseph Kato]

Conman arrested

KAMPALA: Police in Kiwatule, Nakawa Division, in Kampala have arrested a man suspected to have conned several people in fake land deals. His arrest came after a man he allegedly duped of Shs70m with a forged land title opened a case at Kiwatule Police Post. The suspect has also been using fake land titles to dupe people in Seeta, Naalya and Namugongo. Police urged the public who have fallen victim to come out and help them in investigations. Last week police in Kajjansi arrested another man who had duped a lady of Shs22m with a forged land title. [Joseph Kato]