

UWA opens forensic laboratory

MASINDI

By Benedict Okethwengu

A genetic and forensic laboratory, the first of its kind in Uganda, has been opened in Murchison Falls National Park to help prosecute wildlife crimes by poachers.

Statistics from the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) reveal that at least 104 poachers have been arrested in the park, while over 75 were convicted in the last five years.

Elephants, buffaloes and lions are among the animals highly targeted by poachers in the park in a growing illegal wildlife trade driven by demand for bush meat and ivory.

Last year, UWA, with the help of Uganda Revenue Authority, seized 800kg of game meat destined to the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, according to Dr Andrew Seguya, the executive director of UWA.

In Uganda, a kilogramme of raw ivory on the black market fetches about sh300,000, while that of bush meat goes for about sh10,000.

Lt. Col. Martin Melia, the defence advisor to the United Kingdom, opened the facility recently.

Also commissioned at the



Melia (left), Seguya and Keigwin during the opening of the modern laboratory at Murchison Falls on Wednesday. Photo by Benedict Okethwengu

park was a sh210m six-room housing unit for rangers at Kololo, Tangi Valley, a notorious spot for illegal poaching of elephants and an anti-trafficking centre.

"Safeguarding Uganda's natural treasure for the benefit of the future generation is the interest of the United Kingdom. It is not just for Uganda, but a global initiative. This is why we consider it an to be important

BETWEEN THE LINES: Facility to track poachers

Dr. Eric Morris Enyel, the head of the laboratory, said the new facility will collect and analyse deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) samples from recovered specimens to enable investigators identify the poached animal species.

project," Melia said.

Dr. Eric Morris Enyel, the head of the laboratory, said the facility will be run by a team of

five personnel, who will also be using genetic technology to map and diagnose diseases among wildlife in the park.

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"Previously, it was difficult to prove a case in court because suspects claimed the animals in their possession at the time of arrest were part of their domestic flock, such as cows, explained Enyel, adding that the new technology is able to identify different species.

Over sh310m, through donations from partners, such as the Uganda Conservation Foundation (UCF) and the British High Commission was spent to develop the laboratory.

Michael Keigwin, the director of UCF, said illegal poaching is threatening Uganda's wildlife heritage and Africa as a continent.

He said Murchison Falls National Park once had the greatest number of elephants per square kilometre in Africa.

Keigwin, however, noted that the situation has since changed, with the number reducing to only 14,000, from 200,000 over the last 50 years. He attributed the decline to illegal poaching and the endless war that ravaged the country.

"Murchison Falls was the

most visited park in Africa and this is what we want to go back to, and, I think, we are almost getting there," Keigwin noted.

Keigwin called for the sensitisation of the community to appreciate the importance of conserving wildlife.

According to Keigwin, Uganda wildlife safari tourism contributes about 80% of the total tourism earnings.

Last year, UWA contributed sh2b to districts neighbouring the parks. The contribution benefits the local population through employment, transport and market for local products.

Agnes Nakidde, the UWA head of tourism at Murchison Falls, said the number of tourists at the park has increased from 64,000 in 2015 to 75,000 in this year.

The tourists, Naiade said, are interested in sightseeing the falls and animals, such as lions, elephant, giraffes, and endangered species in the park.

Seguya thanked UCF and the British High Commission for helping UWA to put up the facility.

Julius Bwona, the warden law enforcement officer in the park, said they are faced with the challenge of poachers from Nebbi, Pakwach, and Nwoya districts.