

Explainer

Wildlife populations may be increasing inside protected areas, but the landscapes around them, the corridors that allow animals to move, breed, and access food, are under enormous pressure.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

Uganda's wildlife is recovering, but not all of it. From the return of rhinos to the steady rise in buffalo, giraffes and zebras, the country's conservation story is, on the surface, one of success. Yet beneath that progress lies a more complex reality: shrinking habitats, rising human pressure, and worrying declines in some of the country's most iconic species.

The newly released State of Wildlife Resources in Uganda Report 2026 captures this contradiction clearly. It is, as the Tourism minister, Mr Tom Butime, described it, "not merely a compilation of wildlife statistics and ecological observations," but "a strategic national mirror reflecting the health of Uganda's natural heritage, the effectiveness of our conservation systems, and the choices we must make as a country."

What reflections come up on the mirror in question?

Well, the mirror in question shows both progress and growing risk. The progress has been widely described as a conservation success story, and it is plain to see why this is the case. There is no doubt that Uganda has made measurable gains.

Populations of several large mammals have increased in recent years, supported by stronger protection, improved monitoring, and sustained government investment. Rhinos, once extinct in the wild in Uganda, are now making a comeback. Buffalo, zebras, giraffes and antelope species are also rebounding.

"This report demonstrates that Uganda has continued to register measurable gains in wildlife conservation. Several key mammal populations have shown positive growth trajectories. Monitoring systems have improved," the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) Executive Director, Dr James Musunguzi, said.

At the centre of this progress is a shift toward science-led conservation. UWA now uses aerial surveys, camera traps, digital databases and satellite-based tools such as EarthRanger to track wildlife movement and threats in real time.

"Remember, if you cannot measure it, you can't manage it. This report is giving us data that is helping us to manage wildlife in the country," Dr Musunguzi said.

The Tourism ministry says these gains are not accidental. They reflect deliberate policy choices, increased funding, and a growing recognition of wildlife as a national economic asset.

"Wildlife remains one of the strongest pillars of Uganda's tourism economy. One of the key anchors of our national capital and one of the most important contributions to ecosystem services that support agriculture, water security, climate regulation, and livelihoods," Minister Butime said.

What are the warning signs, if any?

Yes, there are warning signs. The same report that celebrates recovery also raises red flags. Some of Uganda's most iconic

Is wildlife recovery being met with growing threats?



Elephants play a critical role in shaping ecosystems by dispersing seeds and opening up landscapes. PHOTOS/FILE



Lion numbers continue to plummet, an indication that conservation gains are not evenly distributed.

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Elephant populations have dropped, and lion numbers continue to plummet, an indication that conservation gains are not evenly distributed.

More worrying, experts say, is what these declines represent. Large predators like lions sit at the top of the food chain. When their numbers fall, it often signals a deeper ecological imbalance.

Elephants, meanwhile, play a critical role in shaping ecosystems by dispersing seeds and opening up landscapes. Their decline is not just about species loss; it is about ecosystem health. Dr Musunguzi warned against complacency.

"Conservation success cannot make us complacent. The pressures on wildlife are increasing in both scale and complexity," he said.

What is the real problem then?

At the heart of Uganda's wildlife paradox is a simple but powerful issue: land. As Uganda's population grows and development expands, the space available for wildlife is steadily shrinking. Forests are cleared for farming, wetlands are

drained, and infrastructure projects cut across migration routes.

"Habitat loss arising from human settlement expansion, agriculture, infrastructure development and extractive activities continues to reduce wildlife space," Minister Butime said.

This is creating a new kind of conservation challenge. Wildlife populations may be increasing inside protected areas, but the landscapes around them, the corridors that allow animals to move, breed, and access food, are under enormous pressure.

"In many cases, wildlife populations are recovering in islands of protection, while the surrounding landscapes that support ecological connectivity are becoming more constrained," Dr Musunguzi explained.

The result is fragmentation, ecosystems broken into smaller, isolated patches. Over time, that isolation can undermine even the most successful conservation efforts.

So are we looking at some kind of conflict on the frontline?

Yes. As wildlife space shrinks, conflict

Conservation.

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— Mr Tom Butime, Tourism minister

between people and animals is becoming more common. In districts bordering national parks and reserves, farmers face crop destruction from elephants, buffalo and other animals. In turn, communities sometimes retaliate, leading to further losses.

"Human-wildlife conflict remains a major concern in several interface districts," Minister Butime said.

The report also highlights a troubling trend outside protected areas.

Dr Carol Asiimwe, UWA's Assistant Commissioner for Research and Monitoring, said animals that are commonly hunted for food are declining in these areas, while so-called vermin species are increasing.

"Most of the animals that are edible to humans are declining, but the vermin are increasing," she said.

This shift has implications not only for biodiversity but also for rural livelihoods and food systems.

Are there any other [new] threats that officials are grappling with?

Beyond human pressure, Uganda's ecosystems are facing another growing threat, invasive plant species. These fast-spreading plants are taking over large sections of protected areas, altering habitats and making it harder for wildlife to survive.

"Invasive and problematic species are taking over most of our landscapes," Dr Asiimwe said, warning that traditional wildlife counting methods are becoming

less effective as vegetation thickens. "The thickets are too thick, and the counts we see now may not be truly representative of what we are finding," she added.

This has created new scientific challenges. To get accurate data, researchers now need to combine multiple monitoring methods, ranging from ground surveys to advanced technologies, to track elusive and nocturnal species.

What else comes across strongly in the new report?

One of the most significant shifts in the 2026 report is its broader focus. Unlike previous assessments that concentrated largely on large mammals, this report looks at the full spectrum of biodiversity, plants, birds, insects, fungi and more.

This reflects a growing understanding that conservation is not just about protecting animals, but about safeguarding entire ecosystems.

"This report demonstrates that conservation is not only about protecting wild animals. It is equally about safeguarding plant life, habitats, ecological services and the natural systems upon which tourism, climate resilience, water security and community livelihoods depend," Minister Butime said.

Plants, in particular, are gaining new attention. Wild relatives of crops, medicinal plants and indigenous species are now seen as critical national assets, key to food security, climate adaptation and ecological restoration.

What purpose will the new report then serve in the grand scheme of things?

For policymakers, the report serves a practical purpose.

"It will go a very long way in guiding the institution in planning. We need to know where we are coming from, where we are, and where we are likely to go," said Prof James Kalema, the chairman of the UWA Board of Trustees.

This includes decisions on tourism, conservation investment, and even biotrade quotas. But Prof Kalema also raised concerns about how often such data can realistically be produced.

Current law requires annual reporting, but experts argue that meaningful ecological changes take longer to measure.

"It's a rigorous exercise which cannot realistically be done every year if we are to do justice to the state of flora and fauna," he said, proposing a shift to five-year reporting cycles with interim updates.

What of the bigger picture?

It can be encapsulated in a broader national question: How can Uganda balance development with conservation? The country is investing in infrastructure, expanding agriculture and pursuing economic growth, all necessary for development. But these same activities are putting pressure on natural ecosystems.

"Wildlife conservation can no longer be treated as a peripheral sector issue. It must be mainstreamed into national development planning, land use decisions, climate adaptation strategies, infrastructure designs and financing frameworks," Minister Butime said.