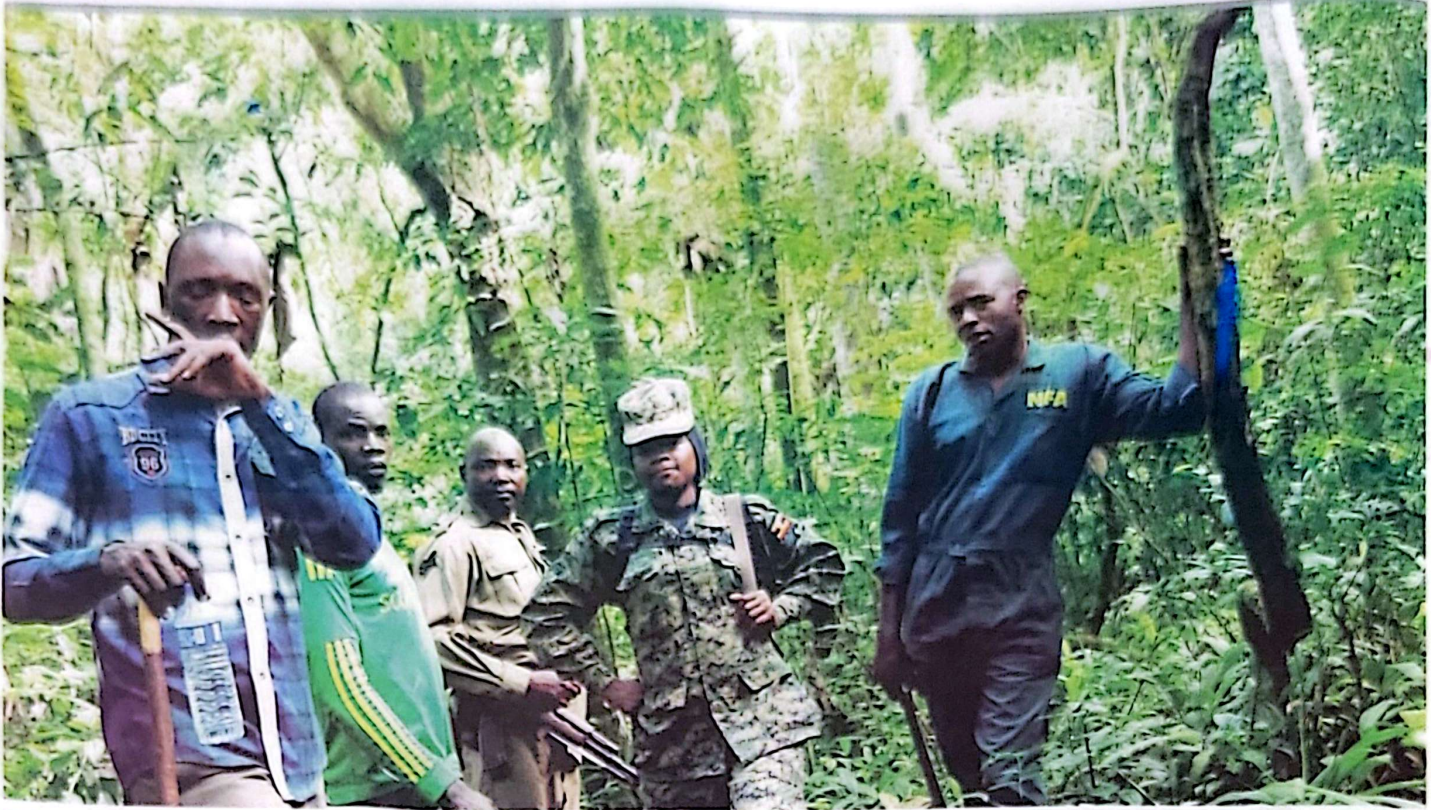




On duty. Mabira Forest tour guides conduct tourists on one of the famous Mabira Forest trails known as the Red Trail. PHOTOS BY MORGAN MUBAZI

How the protectors of forests are unprotected

Thankless job. Protecting forests from encroachment is not the most likely to be the most admirable occupation for most people, and, as **Bamuturaki Musinguzi** shows, the front line forest workers in Uganda and elsewhere in the world face serious threats and are not adequately protected by governments.

Forest guards, foresters, rangers, supervisors, scouts and watchers – those whose job it is to protect forests – are killed each year around the world – often at the hands, machetes and guns of poachers, illegal loggers, encroachers, or wild animals. According to the International Ranger Federation (IRF) 2016 report, at least 107 rangers died in the line of duty in 2015. The IRF said 42 per cent of rangers who died in 2015 were killed by poachers, while 17 per cent were killed by wild animals. And almost 90 per cent of them worked in the two most dangerous continents for rangers: Asia and Africa. The worldwide death toll over the past decade is over 1,000.

On January 14, 2009 in Jubia Forest Reserve in Masaka District, Alfred Ezati, a forestry supervisor and his patrolman Emmanuel Asimwe were hacked to death in their line of duty. Patrick Kalemera, another patrolman, was killed on July 22, 2009.

Jimmy Ayikobua, the forest supervisor for Lwankima Forest Station in Mabira Forest

Reserve, narrates his ordeal of April 2, 2015: "We went for our routine patrol that day in the Lwankima area and impounded charcoal that some community members were ferrying from deep in the forest to their loading site."

He adds: "Immediately after that, a mob of community members living nearby attacked us with the aim of taking the impounded charcoal. A soldier in our patrol team shot in the air to scare them away, all in vein. One man armed with a panga who attempted to cut our soldier was shot dead in the fracas. Thereafter, the villagers dispersed. We returned to the station without taking away the charcoal."

Mr Ayikobua recalls that this incident attracted the attention of the Ugandan press. And the concerned minister and the parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources visited Lwankima to verify the matter and calmed down the community.

"Our biggest daily threat is the hostility of the neighbouring communities who depend on the forest for their livelihood," the forest supervisor of the Maligita Forest Station in Mabira, Mr Zacharia Zema Okuni, observes.

"For example, the notorious Nakalanga and Kirugu villagers are hostile, that whenever we arrest their member for an illegal forest offence, they will attack us in order to rescue the culprit and the exhibits. They will even follow us up to the station and attempt

to disarm our security personnel. The worst scenarios are when we are not well armed," Mr Okuni adds.

"In some areas local leaders, agencies and civil society do not prioritise conservation efforts and side with the communities that are degrading the forests. This slows down our work of managing forests but where we have the support of stakeholders (and) our work moves perfectly and forests are conserved," the National Forestry Authority (NFA), executive director, Mr Michael Mugisa, observes.

Illegal forest loggers in Uganda carry power or hand saws, pangas and axes. "We are very careful with those that we arrest with power or handsaws. For a man who has bought a power saw at about Shs2.5m, he will want to escape with his machine. In resisting arrest, he may threaten to cut you with the power saw," the Mabira Forest, Lwankima Sector manager, Micheal Ojia, says.

"The illegal loggers transport the timber harvested in the forest from 5pm to 9pm in the evenings, or 5am to 6am in the mornings. They know these are the times when our staff are most likely not to be on duty or in the vicinity," Mr Ojia adds.

Big network

Mr Ojia says: "This illegal trade involves different people. After the timber is sawed from the logs, the carriers carry it on their

heads to the villages, from where the planks are ferried to the trading centres on motorcycles. In the past, they used vehicles but because of the increased alertness of informers, they have resorted to motorcycles to transport the timber."

Some NFA officials have connived with the criminals in the illegal timber trade in the past. "It is true that some officials employed by the Authority indulge themselves in criminal or illegal activities because it has been proven in some cases. When such situations come up, they are investigated and some officials have been suspected and suspended, while others are just allegations," Mr Mugisa admits.

Rangers are crucial to the protection of wildlife, forests and the natural world. Around the globe, there is a booming illegal wildlife trade that threatens the future of our natural places. It is a black market estimated to be worth \$19 billion per year, run by highly organised criminal networks who are using ever-more sophisticated techniques.

Rangers are the first line of defence in the battle against the illegal wildlife trade. They stand between poachers and the forest every day. Without rangers, species such as tigers, rhinos and elephants would have long vanished from the wild, WWF says.

Forest supervisors in Uganda are forestry degree or diploma holders. According to Mr Mugisa, NFA employs approximately 230 staff who are based in the field and these include range managers, sector managers and forest supervisors. "The numbers of forest managers are inadequate especially at the forest lower levels; initially there was a proposal to employ forest assistants which has never been achieved because of the huge wage bill."

Mr Mugisa says they intend to employ forestry assistants to swell up the numbers.

WWF notes that patrolling is a key part of a ranger's work. The patrollers are outdoors all day, every day to comb...

Numbers

42%

PERCENTAGE OF RANGERS
KILLED BY POACHERS IN
2015



230

NUMBER OF FIELD STAFF
NFA EMPLOYS



288,000

NUMBER OF CUBIC METRES
OF SAWN WOOD TRADED IN
UGANDA IS ILLEGAL.



ing and monitor wildlife. The conditions can be brutal, from blistering cold in the mountains of the Russian Far East and China, and indeed many parts of Uganda such as Kabale, to sweltering heat in India, among other harsh environments. They are often poorly paid too, in addition to spending a lot of time away from family and friends.

The 2016 "Ranger Perceptions: Africa" survey report by WWF found that 75 per cent of the rangers in Africa had been threatened by community members or other people because of their work, 82 per cent had faced life threatening situations, 59 per cent felt they were insufficiently provided with proper equipment and amenities to ensure safety, and 42 per cent felt they lacked sufficient training to do their jobs safely and effectively.

The first ever global ranger insurance report that surveyed 40 countries found that



Enforcement. NFA officials arrest a suspect in possession of illegal timber that he allegedly harvested in Mabira Forest Reserve.

35 per cent of government rangers have no life insurance despite the risks, 20 per cent had no health insurance and 45 per cent lacked long-term disability cover. Some rangers in Africa and Asia lack basic insurance cover.

Huge tasks, massive losses

Mabira is a rainforest area covering 30,000 hectares stretching over the districts of Mukono, Buikwe and Kayunga in central Uganda. It is located about 56 kilometres east of the capital city Kampala on the main Kampala-Jinja highway in central Uganda.

Mabira is the sixth largest forest in Uganda and was gazetted as a forest reserve in 1932. It is home to more than 312 species of trees, 315 species of birds, 23 small mammal species, 218 butterfly species and 97 moths species, among others. Some of these species are endangered.

According to Mr Ojja, Mabira is complex with several enclaves with people settled on their private mailo land. "When they were gazetted this forest they left out the private lands which do not comprise part of this forest reserve. Because of the many enclaves and 86 villages surrounding Mabira, managing this forest is a very big challenge as the adjacent communities heavily rely on the forest for their livelihood."

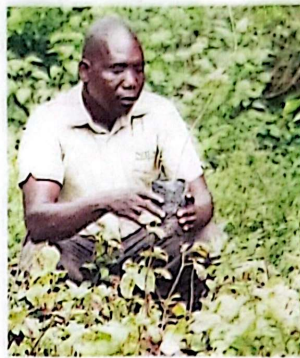
"Mabira Forest is huge and we lack appropriate transport to execute our patrolling and replanting duties. We need motorcycles as the appropriate means to move easily within the forest," Mr Okuni adds.

Forests are important but fragile ecosystems, and they are facing severe threat around the world, especially occasioned by commercial and illegal logging, mining, clearance of land for agriculture, human encroachment and road construction, among others.

The World Bank estimates that the annual global timber market loses \$10 billion annually from illegal logging, with governments losing an additional \$5 billion in revenues.

A 2012 WWF report titled "Timber movement and trade in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and destination markets in the region" showed that Uganda loses Shs23 billion (\$6.38 million) annually in uncollected fees and taxes on timber from the Eastern DR Congo.

The WWF report also showed that 80



Typical xxx xxx. NFA official in a nursery bed in Mabira.

per cent or 288,000 cubic metres of sawn wood traded in the Uganda is illegal. And illegal timber from eastern DR Congo affects the competitiveness of locally produced timber by lowering prices and reducing investors' willingness to venture into timber processing.

According to the State of the World's Forests 2016 report by Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), there was a net forest loss of seven million hectares per year in tropical countries in 2000-2010 and a net gain in agricultural land of six million hectares per year. The greatest net loss of forests and net gain in agricultural land over the period was in the low-income group of countries, where rural populations are growing.

Large scale commercial agriculture accounts for about 40 per cent of deforestation in the tropics and subtropics, local subsistence agriculture for 33 per cent, infrastructure for 10 per cent, urban expansion for 10 per cent and mining for 7 per cent. There are significant regional variations, however: for example, commercial agriculture accounts for almost 70 per cent of the deforestation in Latin America but for only one-third in Africa, where small-scale agriculture is a more significant driver of deforestation, the FAO report adds.

Forests are vital

According to WWF, about 30 per cent of the world's land surface is forest. Over two billion people rely on forests for shelter, livelihoods, water, food and fuel

security. Three hundred million people live in forests, including some 60 million indigenous peoples. More than 13 million people across the world are employed in the formal forest sector.

Forestry is crucial to the lives of millions of Ugandans, especially the poorest sections of society that depend on forests for energy, employment and incomes, among others. It is estimated that over 98 per cent of Ugandans depend on wood energy in homesteads and industries.

According to 2011 FAO data, 12,000 people are directly employed by the forestry sector in Uganda. According to the Global Forest Watch, the forestry sector contributed \$589.9 (Shs2.1 trillion).

According to the Joint Water and Environment Sector Review Report (2016), the major challenge for forest management in Uganda is deforestation, which is demonstrated by the decline of forest cover from 24 per cent in 1990 to 11 per cent in 2015.

NFA figures says on average, Uganda is losing about 92,000 hectares of forest cover annually: 20.2 per cent on private land, and 4.9 per cent on protected areas.

"There is increasing demand for wood products on the market and the people have almost finished forests on private land and now have resorted to illegally cutting timber in central forest reserves," Mr Mugisa observes. He adds that deforestation in Uganda has resulted in food insecurity, prolonged drought spells, adverse changes in the climate, hostile changes in rain patterns, occurrences of floods, landslides especially in mountainous areas where there has been deforestation, scarcity of wood energy, and rapid changes in prices of forest products.

Uganda's Vision 2040 targets restoration of the country's forest cover from 15 per cent to 24 per cent by 2040, while the Second National Development Plan (NDP II) targets to increase forest cover from 15 per cent to 18 per cent of the Uganda's land surface by 2021.

To achieve this, NFA supplies over six million tree seedlings free of charge to communities and individuals for planting annually. It also raises on average 10 million tree seedlings annually for sale which have translated into planted trees. And, it goes without saying, protecting those who protect forests will play a key role in helping to regenerate the forest cover.

Voices



"In some areas local leaders, agencies and civil society do not prioritize conservation efforts and side with the communities that are degrading the forests. This slows down our work of managing forests but where we have the support of stakeholders (and) our work moves perfectly and forests are conserved."

MICHAEL MUGISA,
NATIONAL FORESTRY
AUTHORITY EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR.