

The initiative seeks to empower park-edge households through structured community projects and nature-friendly enterprises aimed at reducing pressure on protected forests.

BY ROBERT MUHEREZA

Communities living along the boundaries of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park are benefiting from a conservation approach that combines environmental protection with livelihood improvement.

The initiative, spearheaded by the Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust (BMCT), seeks to empower park-edge households through structured community projects and nature-friendly enterprises aimed at reducing pressure on protected forests.

Speaking on Friday, BMCT Chief Executive Officer Wilberforce Tumwesigye said the trust has refined its strategy to better align conservation goals with community development.

"Four years ago, we decided to change direction in our approach to improving livelihoods among communities. We now use a model called Conservation, Development and Business (CODAB), which focuses on group formation, business development services, partnerships and market linkages," Mr Tumwesigye said.

Addressing conflicts

In 1991, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park were gazetted, a move that restricted access to forest resources for neighbouring communities and led to the eviction of some residents who had lived within the forest boundaries.

For many households, the forests had long provided grazing land, timber, charcoal, basketry materials and bush meat.

The restrictions sparked resentment and, in some cases, persistent poaching as communities struggled to meet basic needs.

New model gives lifeline to locals around parks



The entrance to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, which is renowned for its mountain gorillas. PHOTO/ROBERT MUHEREZA

Under the CODAB model, communities are supported to establish income-generating enterprises funded through an endowment for environmentally sustainable businesses.

The goal, according to BMCT, is to improve household incomes while discouraging activities that degrade forest ecosystems.

Mr Tumwesigye said BMCT recognised the need for more equitable sharing of conservation costs and benefits.

"BMCT engaged communities more meaningfully by promoting livelihood projects and grants. We are working with local communities to improve their livelihoods sustainably while conserving ecosystem services," he said.

Since 2022, BMCT has supported 98 community projects worth \$187,582 (Shs675.5 million), benefiting 2,940 households.

Many beneficiaries belong to village savings and loan associations, enabling them to access affordable credit to sustain small businesses and meet household needs.

Social infrastructure and resettlement support Beyond livelihood projects, the trust has invested in social infrastructure within the conservation area. BMCT has constructed 72 classroom blocks, two school laboratories, 45 rainwater harvesting tanks and six

equipped medical centres. It has also provided scholarships to 700 children from the Batwa community, who were displaced following the creation of the parks.

Additionally, 406 acres of land have been acquired to resettle 303 Batwa households. So far, 57 semi-permanent and 17 permanent houses have been constructed for the affected families.

To mitigate human-wildlife conflict, BMCT has partnered with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) to construct a stone wall around Mgahinga and plant Mauritius thorn hedges around Bwindi to prevent wild animals from straying into community gardens.

Despite the progress, challenges remain. Mr Tumwesigye cited high population density around the parks, soil

BACKGROUND

Established in 1994 under the Uganda Trustees Laws, BMCT operates as an endowment fund dedicated to biodiversity conservation in Bwindi and Mgahinga. Its founding partners included the Government of Uganda, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through the World Bank and a Trust Management Board.

erosion and community expectations of handouts as ongoing concerns.

As conservation models continue to evolve, stakeholders say empowering communities living at the forest edge remains critical to protecting one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots while ensuring that local populations share in the benefits of tourism and conservation.

The two parks, located in southwestern Uganda along the borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, form part of the Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Area within the Albertine Rift.

The ecosystem, believed to have evolved more than 50 million years ago, is home to more than 120 mammal species, 260 bird species, 200 butterfly species and 324 tree species.

The area is globally renowned for its mountain gorillas, harbouring nearly half of the world's remaining population. Gorilla trekking in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park generates approximately \$15 million (Shs54 billion) annually from permits, with a similar amount earned from related tourism services such as accommodation and transport. The parks were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994 and safeguard about six percent of Uganda's water catchment area.

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BIRD SPECIES
AT BWINDI