



Encroached on. A degraded section of Rwakasirabo wetland in Kamwenge District. Vast sections of wetlands in the district have been turned into farmlands. PHOTO BY SCOVIA ATUHAIRE

Destroyed. Some sections of the wetland have been converted into farmlands, causing drought.

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Leaders battle to save Biguli wetland from degradation

KAMWENG. Huge expanses of Biguli wetland have been degraded by people seeking land for farming.

It is shrinking rapidly, exposing residents of Biguli Sub-county in Kamwenge District to adverse climate change effects such as drought.

"We used not to experience drought because our wetlands were not tampered with. We had water for animals throughout the year," Benon Betubiza, a resident of Kabale Village in Biguli Sub-county, says.

Some sections of the wetland have been converted into farmlands, negatively impacting on its functionality.

"Farmers come and burn the wetland to create space for agriculture. The more they dig it, the more it dries up," Betubiza adds.

Dr Daniel Babikwa, the director of district support coordination and public education at the National Environment Management Authority (Nema), says wetlands are one of the many natural features that influence 40 per cent of rainfall received in Uganda. Destroying them, therefore, translates into either no rainfall at all or diminished amounts.

The other 60 per cent of rainfall received in Uganda is influenced by the Central Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean.

Wetlands also provide various benefits to the surrounding communities, including provision of water through recharging springs, boreholes, grass for thatching, pasture for animals, providing fish, climate modification, control of floods and filtering water, among others.

Mr William Kasango, the Kamwenge District natural resources officer, says a quarter of the wetland has been destroyed by cultivators.

However, as the saying goes, a man's strength is determined in times of trouble, some of the residents of Biguli Sub-county have taken it upon themselves to preserve the wetland.

"We identified the hotspots and came up with a water resource management plan as a basis of protecting the water catchment areas where wetlands fall," says Ronald Mugume, the Biguli Sub-county chief.

The hotspots include Kizikibi, Rwakasirabo and Kagasha wetlands, among others.

According to Biguli Sub-county LC3 chairperson, Mr Simeon Kamaho, the crusade to save the wetland was launched in the wake of persistent onslaughts, which saw residents burn huge sections of the wetland with a view of using the cleared areas to plant crops.

As if the obliteration of the vegetation was not bad enough, the encroachers also tampered with the water flow channels.

"Cultivators dig trenches to allow flow of water and by doing this, the wetland is drained, causing water scarcity in the long run," says Mr Komaho.

In an earlier effort aimed at saving the environment around Biguli, residents were advised to plant trees, but it would appear that they were never advised on which species would be suitable for their mission.

Voices

"We used not to experience drought because our wetlands were not tampered with. We had water for animals throughout the year," BENON BETUBIZA, RESIDENT OF KABALE VILLAGE IN BIGULI SUB-COUNTY

"I appeal to the public to abide by the laws governing the wetlands and urge you to voluntarily evict yourselves from the wetland or else, we shall forcefully begin evicting you," SIMEON KAMAHO, BIGULI SUB-COUNTY LC3 CHAIRPERSON

A local leader, Mr Sirivano Isingoma, says they ended up planting eucalyptus trees in the swamps. They did not know that eucalyptus drains water and would, therefore, not be appropriate.

"We are now telling those carrying out bad practices in swamps to stop; those who already introduced the exotic trees in swamps to remove them," Isingoma says.

Mr Kasango says the district will not let encroachers destroy Biguli wetland which is a catchment area for River Katonga and Lake Victoria.

Biguli boasts of three rural piped water supply and sanitation systems.

"We have got funds to restore the entire wetland. When we conserve this wetland, we are also protecting the River Katonga and Lake Victoria catchments," Mr Kasango adds.

He says the district has given residents upland rice, with the aim of enticing them out of the wetlands,

adding that there are also ongoing sensitisations on how to keep soil fertile through manure use and intercropping, among others.

Komaho says a team from Kamwenge District headed by the environment officer came on the ground to educate the public on the role of the wetlands.

They also sensitised the locals on good methods of farming and taught them how to dig channels through which they can tap water from the wetlands into their gardens.

Unfortunately, the locals seem to have "misunderstood" the instructions.

They opted to dig trenches in the swamps, which has left many leaders angry and frustrated.

Now armed with the law, local leaders have made some cultivators to restore the swamps, a deterrent measure that has slightly caused fear to the potential degraders to abandon their intentions of invading the wetland.

"We are in the buffer zone and we shall agree on the activities like bee-keeping which can be carried in the wetlands without degrading them," Komaho says.

In January during the launch of a 38m Euros (about Shs163b) water pumping station and pipeline in Gaba, Kampala, President Museveni gave all those who had encroached on wetlands one month to leave or be forced out by the police.

"All those occupying swamps should leave in peace before police

comes for them. If you have planted crops, harvest, and go away," said Mr Museveni. He blamed water shortages that were being experienced in the country at the time on degradation of the environment.

The President's directive has never been adhered to by some of the residents of Biguli and the police have never moved to evict the encroachers.

However, Mr Komaho says the law against encroachment on wetlands will be enforced to not only to save the environment but also ensure smooth operation of the piped water projects.

The threat to the initiatives is, however, a scarcity of land for cultivation. Biguli Sub-county has 34,560 people, a population that Mr Kasango says is high.

"But that does not mean invading the wetland. The best option is to maintain the fertility of the soil," Kasango says.

Given the numbers, the LC1 chairman of Kabale Village, Mr Kananoti Kamusiime, says some of the residents are hesitant to vacate the wetlands, saying they do not have any other land on which to grow their crops.

WHAT LAW SAYS

Section 36 of the National Environment Act provides for protection of wetlands and prohibits any person from reclaiming, erecting or demolishing any structure that is fixed in, on, under or above any wetland.