

Workers use boats to remove the water hyacinth at Owen Falls dam in Jinja. The weed has persisted on the lake. Photo by George Bita

Water hyacinth clings onto Busoga waters

By George Bita

A group of workers aboard wooden boats scoop the leafy green weed out of the River Nile waters adjacent to Nalubaale (formerly Owen Falls) dam in Jinja.

Once they have picked up a manageable load for the water vessels, they head to the shore on the Buikwe side of the river to offload. At the dumping site, lie several heaps of the water hyacinth in different states of decomposition.

However, the labourers' efforts turn out insignificant given that more floating vegetation keeps flowing downstream from Lake Victoria. In a matter of hours, the accumulated green mass calls for a seemingly repetitive removal cycle.

This is just a tip of the iceberg as far as the water hyacinth problem is concerned in the entire Busoga sub-region and beyond.

Genesis of the menace

Records at the Jinja district environment office indicate that water hyacinth, known by the scientific name Eichhornia crassipes, is a native of South America and considered the world's worst aquatic weed.

It possesses glossy green, leathery leaf blades which are up to 20cm long and about 15cm wide.

It is not quite clear how the water weed finally found its way to Africa and Uganda in particular, but its ornamental properties could have lured somebody into relocating it here.

Many Americans grow it in home ponds for decoration purposes and with increasing popularity of water gardening some grow the weed for sale.

"The hyacinth's attractive inflorescence is a loose terminal spike with showy bluish-purple petals joined at the base to form a short tube. One of the petals boasts of an ornate yellow spot," explains Paul Diogo, the Kaliro district environment officer.

Diogo adds that all water bodies in Busoga, including some swampy stretches, have been invaded by the water hyacinth.

"It forms a mat-like structure on the surface which deprives native floating vegetation of nutrients, causing their death. The resultant low oxygen scenario equally annihilates organisms such as fish that live in water," he discloses.

Current situation

Aisha Nalumansi, a local leader at Namoni landing site, reveals that huge chunks of the weed wash up on the lake shores daily.

"Management at most landing sites now charge boats sh5,000 during each landing to cater for the water weed removal. It is the best way to control the large volume of weeds involved," Nalumansi assures.

Paul Samanya, the Namutumba district environment officer, says the weed has spread to swampy areas.

"It is conspicuous on Mpologoma River as well as marshlands in Nsinze and Kibaale sub-counties. The quantity keeps increasing by the day," Samanya laments.

Jackson Malinzi, a councillor at Bugoto landing site in Mayuge, expresses concern that the weed has invaded lakeside swampy gardens leading to low crop yields.

"Our rice is often struggling to with water weed grow well. The extraction by hand seems to be useless as the water waves keep washing the weed into the farmlands," Malinzi says.

Moses Maganda, the Jinja district environment officer, explains that the weed is a threat to water vessels especially at Kisima I on Napoleon gulf.

"Kiira dam authorities set up floating metallic barricades to keep off the hyacinth that could ruin the power-generating turbines. But the offensive weed at times breaks through," he says.

Nasser Kyobe, a weed extraction worker, says on average 30 boatloads of the weed are extracted from the dam site on a daily basis.

"It is not an easy task as numerous risks are involved. There are snakes and other poisonous creatures like crabs hiding in the vegetation," Kyobe laments.

Challenges in control

According to Abdul Samanya, the Iganga district natural resources officer, the water weed that reproduces using seeds and vegetatively through budding or production of stolons is among the most reproductive plants.

"Its seeds can germinate in a few days or remain dormant for 15-20 years. Little wonder, therefore, that it has survived against all odds and reappeared with vigour when it had been almost written off," Samanya observes.

Diogo says there are chemicals like aquatic herbicides; 2, 4-D, diquat, complexed copper and Endothall dipotassium salt which even though effective are disputed by experts.

"It is alleged that their usage may compromise the safety of other living organisms dependant on the water including humans. But reports show Endothall dipotassium has been in use on American water bodies," he says.

Maganda argues that mechanical harvesting employed at Nalubaale dam is ineffective for large scale weed control.

"Such type of weed removal cannot keep pace with the very high plant growth in expansive water bodies like lakes, seas or gulfs. Little wonder, those harvesting the weed appear to be almost doing nothing by the end of the day," he adds.

Way forward

Moses Maganda, the Jinja district environment officer, explains that biological control of the water hyacinth has been deployed on international scale by use of weevils.

"A moth called Sameodes albiguttalis have shown good results. Once they are introduced on the affected waters, they destroy the hyacinth," he says.

However, Paul Diogo, the Kaliro district environment officer, believes the option of introduction of the insects needs sometime so as to study the ecological impact.

"These are foreign living organisms being brought into a new habitat. There is need to first analyse possible environmental effect caused by their presence," he says.

He says some locals are harvesting water weeds which are dried and taken to gardens as manure.

"The hyacinth is being applied just like the compost pit manure vital in rejuvenating the soil fertility," he says.



Sameodes albiguttalis

VIEWS

Residents speak out



Rose Kagoya, Nakalama, Iganga
All means should be employed to get rid of the weed. Let us not wait to act after a boat has capsized.



Abdu Mpwayo, Namoni landing site
The water weed at times floats at night and by morning the entire shoreline at the landing site is covered. Authorities need to work on it urgently.



Doreeen Kataike, Jinja
Someone could have maliciously introduced that weed onto our water bodies.

CamScanner