Conservationists rally youth to restore Uganda's shrinking forests

Forest cover in Uganda has declined sharply over the past three decades, dropping from roughly 24.1 percent in 1990 to 12.6 percent in 2025.

BY DAPHINE NAKABIRI

Although he had been raised on the edges of the Budongo Forest Reserve, in a remote village found in Masindi district, Michael Jurua, now a conservation planner and youth ambassador, did not understand the value of the forests around him. As a child, he barely noticed the animals and trees, and like many youth in Uganda, conservation was the last thing on his mind.

However, in 2008, Jurua was introduced to a youth environmental club. Through mentorship, hands-on projects, and exposure to conservation ideas, he discovered that the natural world was a living, vital system that needed protected. When he later joined the university, he pursued a course in Geomatics, the science of using satellites and mapping technology to understand and care for the earth.

He recounts, "With this course, I was able to estimate how much carbon is stored in the canopy of the Congo forest. I started identifying deforestation underlying issues, and in my current role, I not only monitor these changes, but also help design and advocate for strategies that protect our forest and wildlife."

Jurua's journey reflects a broader challenge and opportunity. In Uganda, young people form 75 percent of the country's population, yet only a small fraction are actively involved in conservation initiatives, as many are preoccupied with agriculture, informal sector work, education, or unemployment pressures.

Concurrently, forest cover in Uganda has declined sharply over the past three decades, dropping from roughly 24.1 percent in 1990 to 12.6 percent in 2025.

According to the National Forestry Authority, this decline is largely driven by encroachment, rapid population growth, illegal logging, charcoal production, and agricultural expansion, threatening ecosystems, wildlife, and the livelihoods of communities that depend on forests.

Speaking during the celebration of the 35th anniversary of the Roots and Shoots programme that took place at International School of Uganda, Mr James Byabakama, Executive Director of the Jane Goodall Institute Uganda, highlighted the critical role of youth in addressing the co untry's underlying environmental challenges.

Mr Ronald Ddungu, (2nd left) the Principal Education Officer, leads members of the Roots & Shoots Club in launching the nationwide drive to plant 35,000 trees at the International School of Uganda. PHOTOS/ DAPHINE NAKABIRI

He said, "The youth are the energy of change. By learning to identify problems in their communities and taking practical action through various conservation activities, young people can make a real difference for people, animals, and the planet."

Mr Byabakama explained that this vision traces back to Dr. Jane Goodall, a renowned conservationist and primatologist, who dedicated her life to understanding and protecting wildlife.

In 1991 when approached by a group of 12 teanagers about the concerns for their community in Tanzania, she encouraged them to take action locally.

Inspired by their achievements, Dr. Goodall shared their story with youth around the world who were equally eager to make a difference, ultimately launching the Roots & Shoots programme to empower young people globally to become compassionate leaders and active environmental stewards.

In Uganda, the initiative has grown over the years into a network of more than 200 clubs involving over 12,000 members, engaging youth in activities ranging from tree planting and reforestation to wildlife protection, community clean-ups, and eco-friendly liveli-

CamScanner