

The President appeals to communities to support wetland restoration efforts and embrace alternative livelihood practices that do not degrade wetlands.

BY TONNY ABET

President Museveni yesterday launched the National Wetlands Strategic Plan 2026-2036, setting a national target to increase the coverage of intact wetland coverage from 9.3 percent to 11 percent in the next decade.

Mr Museveni, represented by the Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja, called for the wise and sustainable use of wetlands, urging Ugandans to draw on traditional knowledge that once effectively protected these ecosystems long before modern laws existed.

These remarks and the launch were made during the World Wetlands Day celebrations at National Forestry Authority (NFA) head offices in Bugoloobi, Kampala under the theme, "Wetlands and traditional knowledge: celebrating cultural heritage."

"Uganda is endowed with an extensive network of wetlands, which are vital for our survival. These ecosystems are important for rain formation, water purification, and act as habitats for a wide range of wildlife such as birds, fish, plants, and amphibians," the President noted.

Museveni launches new plan to restore wetlands



Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja together (left) with Beatrice Anywar, State Minister for Environment (in yellow), and other officials inspect different stalls at the National Forestry Authority headquarters yesterday during the World Wetlands Day Celebrations. PHOTO/STEPHEN OTAGE

STATUS

- Current intact (non-degraded) wetland coverage is 9.3 percent
- 2026 to 2036 intact (non-degraded) wetland coverage improvement target is 11 percent
- Overall wetland coverage (including degraded) in 2025 is 13.9 percent
- Overall wetland coverage in 1994 is 15.6 percent

"In the absence of wetlands, key sectors like agriculture, fisheries, tourism, the craft industry, and hydro-power generation would be negatively impacted. For generations, wetlands have shaped our people's customs, beliefs, and ways of life," he added.

The President further observed that across Uganda, wetlands have been protected as sacred sites and cultural landscapes. "Over the years, cultural norms and taboos have regulated access and prevented the overuse of these ecosystems. It is evident that long before modern environmental laws, our leaders understood and practised the principle of wise use," he said.

He explained that in many parts of Uganda, papyrus has long been used for making crafts, roofing materials, household mats, and for royal ceremonies, while many communities continue to rely on wetlands for traditional medicinal purposes.

"Indigenous practices, such as seasonal and restricted access to wetlands, protection of the fish breeding areas, et cetera, have ensured the wise use of wetlands for generations," Mr Museveni said.

"As Uganda moves towards modernity, we must ensure that development does not erase this wisdom, but rather uphold it. Uganda remains committed to conservation, sustainable use, and management of wetlands," he added.

The President appealed to communities to support wetland restoration efforts and embrace alternative livelihood practices that do not degrade wetlands.

"I urge communities living near wetlands to engage in fish farming at the edges of the wetlands," he said. "This commitment has been expressed through the restoration programs, enhanced enforcement, and the community engagement efforts, and the development of the National Wetland Sector

Strategic Plan to guide all conservation efforts."

Information from the Ministry of Water and Environment indicates that the main objective of the plan is to "increase national intact wetland coverage from 9.3 percent to 11.0 percent and sustainably manage wetlands for enhanced ecosystem services, climate resilience, and community livelihoods."

Data from the Ministry indicates that although the wetland coverage was 15.6 percent in 1994, the intact proportion (not degraded) has greatly declined to 9.3 percent as of 2022. But the overall wetland coverage, including those that are degraded, is now at 13.9 percent.

Role of wetlands

As justification for the new plan, the Ministry states that despite the known significant role wetlands play and tangible socio-economic benefits, the country is struggling to protect them.

Mr David Okurut, the commissioner for wetlands management in the Ministry, said wetlands contribute \$1b to the economy every year. He said socio-economically, wetlands sustain agriculture, fisheries, raw materials, and trade, supporting over 80 percent of Uganda's population either directly or indirectly.

The Ministry states that ecologically, wetlands regulate water flows, recharge groundwater, mitigate floods and droughts, and "store significant carbon-peatlands" alone store an estimated 192 megatons of carbon. This carbon sequestering is essential in mitigating climate change.

"Despite these benefits, wetlands continue to be undervalued and degraded. Weak enforcement, fragmented mandates, inadequate data on economic values, limited community incentives, and insufficient financing have accelerated wetland loss," the Ministry states.

"At the same time, growing opportunities such as climate finance, legal reforms, political commitment, and integration of wetlands into national planning frameworks create a strong case for renewed and strategic investment," the Ministry adds.

Mr Museveni, on his part, appealed to Ugandans to reflect on their actions and make a positive contribution towards wetland conservation.

"Protecting these wetlands not only means protecting the ecosystems but also our cultural heritage, identity, and social cohesion," he said.

"Let us take collective responsibility to raise awareness, restore degraded wetlands, promote sustainable land use practices, and adopt proper waste disposal practices," he added.

Degradation of wetlands in Uganda is driven by many factors, with some, especially in urban areas and for major projects, people get permits from the government to alter (degrade) wetlands as they do construction and other projects.

But in many rural communities, people are also degrading wetlands without first getting these permits. Many people have degraded wetlands for rice and vegetable farming, brick and sand mining, settlement, and over harvesting of wetland resources like papyrus for craft, among others.