

STAKEHOLDERS DOUBT THE FINDINGS ON WETLAND COVER UGANDA'S WETLANDS: SO MUCH MORE TO DO

By Gerald Tenywa

For the first time in many years, Uganda has registered a reversal in wetland degradation, a top official in the Ministry of Water and Environment has said.

David Okurut, the commissioner of the wetlands management department, said the cover of intact wetlands across the country increased from 8.9% in 2015 to 9.3% in 2026.

He further said the decline in wetland cover has been halted in many regions across the country.

"I am pleased to report that in recent years, we have made significant progress in wetland conservation.

"We have successfully reversed the trend of wetland loss through sustained protection and restoration efforts, the official gazettement of all wetlands, and increased political support for restoration initiatives. As a result, the extent of intact wetland cover has risen from 8.9% to 9.3%," Okurut said.

He, however, said as the country celebrates such gains, Ugandans must also acknowledge the persistent threats facing wetlands, especially encroachment for agriculture and settlement, unsustainable extraction of resources, pollution and the impacts of climate change.

"These threats remind us that conservation is a continuous journey, one that must be informed by both scientific understanding and indigenous



Prime Minister Nabbanja (third-left) and environment state minister Anywar (centre) inspect exhibition stalls during the World Environment Day national celebrations in Kampala recently

WHAT STAKEHOLDERS SAY

Dr Anthony Mugeere, a research fellow at the Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment, however, disagreed with the findings, saying wetland cover has instead reduced.

"As observers, our concern is quite the opposite. The encroachment is actually increasing. How exactly is this rise in wetland area being measured? As a scholar, I am interested in understanding the methodology behind these claims. Wetlands are being encroached upon, with settlements and industries expanding into these areas. So, where is the increase

that the Government is referring to?" Mugeere said.

Richard Kimbowa, the executive director of the Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development, said although there have been pockets of interventions by the Government and development partners, degradation around lakes Victoria and Kyoga is still massive.

"In urban areas and around Lake Victoria and Kyoga where the population is increasing, there is massive destruction. Such places are outside the restoration efforts of the Government," Kimbowa said.

Beatrice Anywar represented her senior colleague, Sam Cheptoris.

In her speech, she appealed to Ugandans to embrace the 2026 slogan, *Conserve Wetlands; Protect Our Heritage*.

Anywar urged everyone to realise that wetland degradation results in the loss of biodiversity, ecosystems, cultural identity, indigenous knowledge and inter-generational wisdom.

PRIME MINISTER'S REMARKS

During the same ceremony, Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja – who represented President Yoweri Museveni, – said Uganda's wetlands play an important role, especially in flood regulation, water purification and providing habitats for animals.

"In the absence of wetlands, key sectors like agriculture, fisheries, tourism, the craft industry and hydropower generation would be severely impacted," Nabbanja said.

She said for generations, wetlands have shaped African customs and ways of life.

Museveni, in his speech delivered by the Prime Minister, said many local clans in places such as Buganda derive their names from aquatic animals such as lung fish (*Mamba*), otter (*Ngonge*), sitatunga (*Njobe*) and hippo (*Nvubu*).

"Therefore, members of these clans had an obligation to protect these species and their habitats due to the cultural connection to them," the President said.

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The commissioner made the remarks during the World

Environment Day national celebrations at the National Forestry Authority grounds

in Kampala. The day was celebrated under the theme: *Wetlands and Traditional*

Knowledge: Celebrating Cultural Heritage.
 Environment state minister