

Farmers have been growing several types of crops here over the years

BY GEORGE BITA

Bugweri district last year planned to destroy a 31-hectare wetland along the Iganga-Tororo highway; however, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) stepped in to block the move.

The attempted clearance of swamp vegetation, under the guise of land development by investors, would only spell doom for the already affected natural ecosystem. Farmers have been growing several types of crops here over the years.

Similar farming activities involving rice, yams and other food crops exist at Walugogo wetland in Iganga, Bugembe marshland in Jinja and Kanambatiko swamp in Kaliro district.

William Makune, the Bugweri chief administrative officer, says since locals had been planting rice in the wetland every season, the district had opted to commercialise the venture.

However, David Okurut, the commissioner wetlands management department at the water and environment ministry, believes otherwise, arguing that local governments lack the mandate to develop a marshland.

"It is the Ministry of Water and Environment's responsibility to conserve Uganda's natural resources for the population and future generations. Our duty is to maintain and conserve

CURRENT STATUS

Yusuf Namadowa, a farmer at Busulumba swamp in Kaliro district, says most farmland in Busoga is being used to grow sugarcane, which left wetlands as the last resort to sustain the sub-region's food demands.

"If we are chased away from the wetlands, then I do not know what we will do. Where else will farmers find enough land for planting much-needed food crops?" Namadowa asks.

Sam Cheptoris, the Water and Environment Minister, observes that almost half of the entire wetland space is currently being used to grow sugarcane in Busoga sub-region alone.

"Pesticides and fertilisers applied in wetlands to facilitate crop growing indiscriminately kill off natural vegetation. This is of far-reaching consequences," Cheptoris warns.

He expresses concern over the widespread sugarcane growing, which dictates that natural vegetation cover must be eliminated to guarantee effective trapping of

NEMA MOVES TO PROTECT WETLANDS IN BUSOGA

PHOTOS BY GEORGE BITA



Gardens in foreground and factory (background) constructed on Bugembe swamp in Jinja district



A rice farmer checks his field standing next to a wetland mark stone at Nawangisa swamp, Bugweri district

sunlight by the crops grown.

According to Cheptoris, the Government is in the process of enforcing a wetland demarcation exercise countrywide to stop encroachment on this crucial natural resource.

"We are to set up mark stones that will define where the wetland territory ends. This will equally enable encroachers to realise they are illegally using public space," he assures.

Moses Batwala, the Jinja district chairperson, notes that arrangements are in place to demarcate all wetland boundaries, in a bid to have all encroachers kicked out of swampy areas.

IMPORTANCE OF SWAMPS

David Okurut, the Commissioner – Wetlands Management Department at the Ministry of Water and Environment, explains that natural swamp vegetation has the capacity to control floods which could easily wash away houses, bridges and railways.

"These marshlands purify water and support wildlife. They are home to several tree species too," he notes.

The trees consume a lot of Carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, which if not removed would damage the ozone layer above the earth and culminate into global warming. The resultant extreme high temperatures lead to melting of polar ice as well as mountain peak ice to cause flooding.

"Hence well-maintained natural swamp vegetation averts potential risks of adverse climate change conditions like heat waves, storms, and flooding. The onus is on man to respect nature," Okurut cautions.

WHAT IS WRONG?

The laws of the land should steer clear of double standards, as it doesn't make sense to chase locals and then an investor shows up next day with clearance to develop a swamp.

President Yoweri Museveni, while presiding over Labour Day festivities at Namutumba district headquarters in 2023, instructed all people farming in wetlands to vacate.

"We are appealing to you, people still growing rice and other crops in wetlands, to leave. This is important so that the natural setup of such swamps is restored," he implored.

WAY FORWARD

Okurut warns against the draining of the critical wetlands or forest reserves for the selfish practice of growing rice for both domestic and

commercial purposes.

"Such a wrong move on the part of Bugweri district or any other entity poses a serious threat to the conservation efforts so far attained. So, I instruct the local authorities to suspend all processes that may compromise the hydrological and ecological integrity of wetlands," Okurut says.

Henry Naabye, the Namutumba district planner, says urban planning must take into consideration the conservation of wetland space, with offenders made to face the full wrath of the law. Additionally, Batwala argues that the laws of the land should steer clear of double standards, as it doesn't make sense to chase locals and then an investor shows up the next day with clearance to develop a swamp.

George Wamunga, the regional wetlands manager for eastern Uganda, confirms that he has been tasked by the water and environment ministry to carry out a status assessment of the affected local swamps in the sub-region.



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