

Women leaders to advance conservation initiatives in Uganda

Conservation experts thus emphasized that lasting restoration can only be achieved when women are fully included, supported, and empowered to lead.

BY DAPHINE NAKABIRI

In Kakumiro District, farmers, according to Kasibante Emmanuel, a local leader, continue to lose their crops to chimpanzees straying from nearby central forest reserves, and across Uganda's Albertine Rift Valley, forests, water sources, and other fragile ecosystems continue to degrade, threatening both wild-

life and human livelihoods.

This mounting conflict is driven by encroachment and shrinking habitats. In 2022, the Uganda Wildlife Authority reported that the wild chimpanzee population had declined by 30 percent, from an estimated 5,000 in 2006 to about 3,500, highlighting the urgent need for conservation interventions.

Against this backdrop, the Jane Goodall Institute Uganda organized a public dialogue under the theme, "Carrying Forward Jane's Green Hope Legacy: Restoring Ecosystems for People, Planet, and Prosperity."

This was aimed to explore practical solutions for protecting Uganda's fragile ecosystems and ensuring a sustainable future for both communities and wildlife.

Speaking during the event, James Byamukama, Execu-

tive Director of the Jane Goodall Institute Uganda, reflected on an iconic image of Dr. Jane Goodall, the renowned primatologist and environmentalist, gently embracing a chimpanzee from a cage. He explained that the image symbolizes peace born from compassion and intentional action, which should be carried as a reminder by humans, too, that they can only coexist harmoniously with nature when they unite in collective efforts to protect and restore it.

He said, "Hope is not passive, it is something we demonstrate through action. In practical terms, this means choosing sustainable ways of living and taking part in activities that secure a healthier environment for future generations."

Strengthening ecosystem restoration

Whereas restoring Uganda's degraded ecosystems remains one of its most urgent environmental challenges, the country continues to lose tens of thousands of hectares of forest every year, estimated at 38,000 hectares, due to encroachment, deforestation, charcoal production, expanding settlements, and rapid population growth. Yet despite ongoing efforts, reforestation activities replace only a fraction of what is lost, with experts estimating that less than 7,000 hectares are replanted each year.

Another emerging approach is conservation through public health which recognizes that the wellbeing of people, wildlife, and ecosystems is deeply interconnected.

HEALTH PRACTICES

According to Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, Executive Director of Conservation through Public Health (CTPH), the health of human communities cannot be separated from the health of the animals and natural environments they live alongside.

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While great apes are genetically similar to humans, this makes the former highly

susceptible to respiratory cross-species infections, such as flu, tuberculosis, and other airborne diseases that can be transmitted through close contact, poor sanitation, or unregulated tourism.

Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka emphasized that improving community health, promoting good hygiene, and strengthening disease surveillance are therefore critical not only for protecting people, but also for safeguarding endangered wildlife whose populations are already under immense pressure.

In such circumstances, she added that the COVID-19 pandemic offered a clear example of how simple public health measures like mask-wearing, improved hygiene, and basic disease-prevention practices can significantly reduce transmission risks between humans and wildlife.

"As such, regular mass screening in areas bordering ape habitats, should be embraced as part of broader ecosystem restoration efforts, since protecting people's health ultimately protects the species and ecosystems they live alongside." Dr Kalema-Zikusoka said.

Beyond health, she emphasized that conservation can thus only be sustained