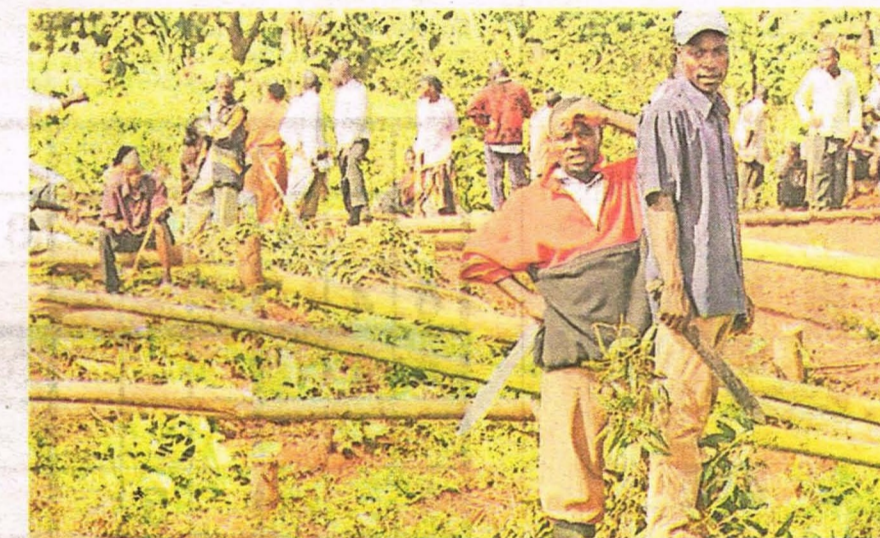




Pupils of St Theresa Primary School showcase their conservation initiative during the celebration of the 35th anniversary of the Roots & Shoots programme, an initiative of the Jane Goodall Institute.



Residents cut down trees from Namanve Forest reserve. Several forests across the country have fallen prey to encroachment. PHOTO/FILE

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

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

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 country's underlying environmental challenges. 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 teenagers 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-

hood projects. Additionally, it has not only provided hands-on conservation experience, but also fostered leadership, innovation, and a sense of responsibility among young people, giving them tools to effect tangible change in their communities. Schools at the frontline Although schools and learners play a vital role in shaping the country's environmental future, they are at the frontline of challenges that contribute to degradation. According to Mr. Ronald Ddungu, Principal Education Officer, he explained that as new schools are built, they frequently result in bare grounds and tree loss. Additionally, across Uganda, there is heavy reliance on firewood in school kitchens which further accelerates deforestation. As a key initiative, the government, through the Ministry of Education and Sports led by Janet Museveni, the First Lady, launched the Nehemiah Greening Schools Program, which focuses on planting shade and fruit trees, boundary trees, and integrating environmental awareness into school curricula. Mr Ddungu noted that through school programs that directly engage learners, schools become hubs for conservation, empowering the stu-

dents to act as stewards of their environment. He encouraged young people especially students, to take action and seek support from the ministry for their initiative, reminding them that as the leaders of tomorrow, they cannot stand by while the current generation degrades the environment they hope to inherit. "The Ministry is willing to support any kind of conservation initiative. However as young people, do not tolerate our ways, speak against us, make it uncomfortable for us and make us understand that we must conserve, re-green and protect this environment." He advised. Pathways to restoration At International School of Uganda, learners in the Roots & Shoots club expressed their interest to launch their first project aimed at supporting the community and promoting environmental responsibility. Across other schools, many students are exploring a range of initiatives, from tree planting, waste management campaigns, wildlife protection and eco-friendly livelihood projects, reflecting a growing commitment among youth to make a tangible difference in their communities. Despite their energy and enthusiasm, young people continue to face significant barriers in forest restoration and conserva-

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can help them document local environmental issues, engage communities, and influence decision-makers. Panelists also highlighted the importance of schools and clubs in equipping youth with practical conservation skills. Since these connect learners to networks of peers, teachers, and community leaders, schools can serve as spaces for environmental action, fostering collaboration, knowledge sharing, and leadership development. Similarly, Joyce Nalubega, an educationist encouraged the involvement of the girl child, in training, waste management,

greening, and anti-littering practices. She also emphasized on accountability in local institutions as a critical step to empower youth as effective stewards of the environment. Celebrating 35 years of Roots and Shoots During the 35th anniversary celebration, the Roots and Shoots showcased the program's achievements while inspiring the next generation of environmental leaders through exhibitions highlighting students' creativity and commitment to conservation. As such, the Jane Goodall Institute in Uganda launched a nationwide tree-planting campaign, aimed at restoring 35,000 trees across the country. Mr Ddungu, who led the ceremony by planting the first tree, was joined by learners and teachers, to mark the beginning of a drive that Roots & Shoots clubs will carry forward in schools and communities across Uganda. Additionally, learners displayed projects made from recycled and up-cycled materials, including dustbins crafted from plastic bottles, flowers fashioned from polythene bags, decorative plastic trees, miniature houses from recycled paper, and fabric items such as shoes, bags, and belts. Students also presented artwork honoring Dr. Jane Goodall, adorned with heartfelt messages reflecting. The launch also included a wildlife exhibition, which displayed animal skulls, including specimens from endangered species, as well as models of islands and habitats visitors can explore, emphasizing the importance of protecting Uganda's wildlife and natural heritage. Over the past years, the Roots & Shoots program has made a lasting impact on youth leadership, environmental conservation, and community development in Uganda. Some of its key milestones include, 204 clubs with over 12,000 members registered across schools, universities, and community structures in 20 districts, actively engaging pupils and students in conservation efforts, 46,348 tree seedlings mobilized and planted through reforestation and afforestation projects in schools and communities. The program has also prioritized women inclusion, reaching 3,527 girls, including 1,179 empowered in sexual and reproductive health, 401 provided with scholastic materials, 193 mentored by peers, and 1,754 trained in making reusable sanitary pads, and trained 78 women in tailoring skills and supported them with 44 sewing and knitting machines across 6 women's groups. This has also included mentoring and training patrons, matrons, and district volunteer coordinators (DVCs) from 21 districts to strengthen youth leadership in environmental conservation, and globally, the program has grown into a platform with local chapters in over 75 countries, more than 8,000 local groups, and nearly 150,000 youth participants worldwide.