

'Wildlife education is a first step towards co-existence'

George Owoyesigire, the acting Commissioner of Wildlife Conservation at the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, tells Trevor Lutalo that what people don't understand about wildlife, they are quick to destroy.

Some days in Jinja City might have you thinking it is always calm and tranquil, but trust not your feelings: that city is an enigma, full of activity and adventure if you care to listen and see inside.

On a warm afternoon, I finally sat down with a man whose work sits at the centre of one of Uganda's most coveted spaces, wildlife conservation and the often misunderstood shadowy edges of the exotic pet trade.

We had crossed paths earlier at the newly opened Crested Crane Hotel, exchanging pleasantries and promises of a later conversation. That conversation finds its place hours later, inside the calm, brightly lit walls of Mpumudde Lounge, inside the same hotel.

Over cups of coffee, George Owoyesigire, the acting Commissioner of Wildlife Conservation at the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, settles into his seat with an ease that reflects both experience and authority.

Of a fair complexion compared to my own, with a subtle moustache and thin-rimmed glasses, he speaks with confidence, occasionally punctuating his points with a little humour. But beneath that calm demeanour lies a man tasked with navigating one of the most complex and often controversial sectors in conservation, the regulation of wildlife ownership in a country where the line between preservation and exploitation can be dangerously thin.

Globally, the exotic pet industry is one of the largest within the broader wildlife conservation ecosystem. Yet, its illegal counterpart is believed to be even bigger, operating in the shadows with devastating consequences for biodiversity.

In Uganda, this duality presents a unique challenge: how do you regulate an industry that exists both as a legal framework and an underground network?

Owoyesigire does not shy away from the complexity.

"The law is very clear," he begins, leaning slightly forward. "Under the Uganda Wildlife Act, Cap 315, individuals and entities are allowed to own pets. But there are conditions."

What the law allows

He explains that Ugandans can legally own certain indigenous species, provided they are acquired from licensed breeding facilities or, in rare cases, collected from the wild under strict supervision. A licence from the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) is mandatory. The law also extends to exotic or foreign species, but here, the requirements become even tighter.

"You are required to conduct a risk assessment," he says. "We must understand the potential impact of whether these species could breed, multiply and compete with indigenous wildlife. That assessment guides us on whether to allow them, and in what numbers."

It is a careful balancing act. On one hand, there is growing interest among individuals and private entities to own exotic animals, from parrots and mon-

keys to iguanas and even snakes. On the other hand, there is the ever-present risk of ecological disruption and illegal trade.

Uganda already hosts a handful of exotic species in controlled environments. Tigers at the Uganda Wildlife Conservation Education Centre (UWEC), peacocks within conservation facilities, and lemurs under specialised projects are all part of a tightly regulated system. But beyond these spaces, a quieter trend is emerging, private ownership and small-scale "zoos" that blur the lines between conservation, business, and personal fascination.

Recognising these shifts, the government is working on a new set of regulations to tighten oversight.

"We realised the law needed clarity," Owoyesigire says. "We needed to define the application process, the fees, housing requirements, and even the number of animals one can keep. You cannot have 50 or 100 animals as pets."

The draft regulations, expected to be finalised in the coming months, will also specify which species are strictly off-limits. Elephants, buffalo, and mountain gorillas, for instance, remain firmly in the wild, untouchable as pets due to their conservation status and ecological importance.

Yet, the motivations behind exotic pet ownership are as varied as the species themselves.

"Some people are attached to specific animals," he explains. "Others keep them as part of cultural identity, like totems. But many simply want to relate to these animals."

Who gets to own the wild?

This idea of "relating" to wildlife is central to Owoyesigire's philosophy. He believes that controlled pet ownership, when properly regulated, can actually foster appreciation and conservation.

"In many developed countries, when people get closer to animals, they begin to protect them," he says. "Here, many Ugandans see wildlife as a threat. If you see a snake, your instinct is to kill it. But not all snakes are dangerous."

He mentions pythons as an example, often feared, yet largely non-venomous. "If people understand these animals, they will appreciate them," he adds.

But this argument is not without its critics. Conservationists have long debated whether domes-

OWNERSHIP OF WILDLIFE

Section 3 of the Uganda Wildlife Act, 2019 states; (1) The ownership of a wild animal or wild plant existing in the wild habitat in Uganda is vested in the Government on behalf of, and for the benefit of, the people of Uganda. (2) Where a wild plant or wild animal is lawfully taken by any person, the ownership of that plant

or animal shall, subject to this Act, vest in that person. 12 Act 17 Uganda Wildlife Act 2019

(3) If a protected species is lawfully taken under a permit or a licence issued or wildlife use right granted under this Act, the ownership of that animal or plant shall, subject to this Act and to the terms and conditions of the licence, vest in the licensee or a holder of a wildlife use right.

tication of wildlife truly leads to protection, or whether it risks normalising ownership and fuelling demand, especially in regions where enforcement remains a challenge.

And enforcement, Owoyesigire admits, is no small task. To own an exotic pet legally in Uganda, one must meet a detailed set of requirements. Prospective owners must submit proposals outlining how they intend to care for the animal, including feeding, housing, and health management. They must obtain the necessary licences for trapping or acquisition and allow regular inspections by authorities.

"There are technical teams at UWA who guide applicants," he explains. "We look at cage sizes, feeding plans, and disease control. You must also allow inspections and report regularly."

Importantly, the government discourages the capture of animals from

the wild, instead promoting acquisition from licensed breeders. This approach aims to reduce pressure on natural populations while supporting controlled breeding systems.

But even with these safeguards, the question of illegal trade looms large. Across Africa, wildlife trafficking remains a persistent threat, driven by demand for exotic pets, animal parts, and traditional medicine. In Uganda, Owoyesigire insists that significant measures have been put in place to curb this trade.

"We have invested heavily in enforcement," he says. "We have trained customs officials, the police, and the UPDF. We have sniffer dogs at the airport."

Uganda is also part of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), a global agreement that enables cross-border enforcement.

"Even if someone tries to bypass us and goes to another country, they will still be arrested," he says. "There is cooperation."

Rise of private zoos

At the domestic level, monitoring is equally rigorous. Licensed facilities, including private zoos, are subject to regular inspections. Authorities keep detailed records of the number of animals held, tracking births, deaths, and movements.

"If an animal dies, you must report and show us where you disposed of the carcass," he says. "We verify everything."

Some animals are even fitted with tracking chips, particularly those considered high-risk for illegal trade. Yet, despite these sys-

tems, the reality is that regulation often plays catch-up with innovation and demand. The rise of private zoos, small, privately owned collections of wildlife, has added another layer of complexity.

Facilities like the City Sea Conservation Centre and others represent a new model of wildlife interaction, blending conservation, tourism, and private enterprise. While they operate legally, their growth raises questions about oversight and long-term sustainability.

"We licence them, we inspect them, and we monitor their operations," Owoyesigire says. "We know how many animals they are allowed to keep. We track any new ones that are bred."

Still, the potential for leakage into illegal markets cannot be ignored. Owoyesigire, however, believes that licensed operators have little incentive to break the law. "These are people who have invested," he says. "Why would they risk losing everything when they can operate legally?"

Beyond regulation, there is another battle Owoyesigire is keenly aware of, the perception battle. "Many Ugandans do not understand wildlife," he says. "They see animals as enemies."

To address this, the ministry has developed a national conservation education and awareness strategy aimed at reshaping public attitudes. The approach is both structured and unconventional, targeting schools, communities, media platforms, and even churches.

"Churches are already gathering people," he says with a smile. "You just ask for 20 minutes."

Culture, belief, everything in between

Through these engagements, the goal is to teach Ugandans about animal behaviour, ecological roles, and safety measures. From identifying venomous species to understanding how to respond when wildlife encroaches on human spaces, the strategy is designed to bridge the knowledge gap.

He recalls instances where communities have mistaken harmless animals for dangerous predators, triggering unnecessary panic. "Someone calls you about a leopard, you drive 400 kilometres, and you find it is a civet cat," he says, shaking his head.

Education, he believes, is the first step towards coexistence. But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of our conversation is what remains largely unspoken, the cultural and spiritual dimensions of wildlife use.

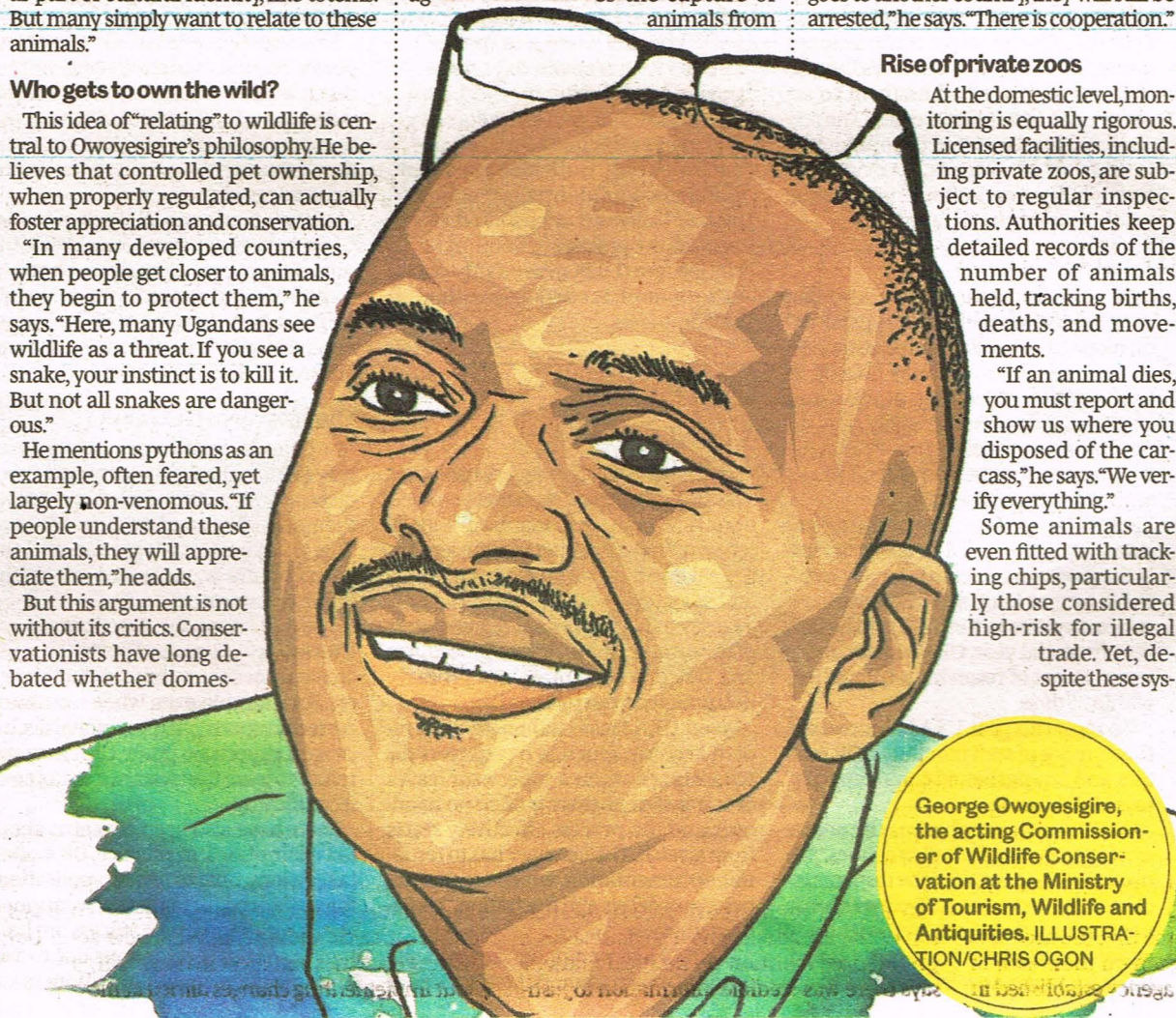
"There are long-held beliefs, yet they rarely enter formal systems," he says. "In my 20 years, I have not received any formal request for wildlife for ritual use," he says. "If it happens, it is not through official systems."

In the final stages of our conversation, Owoyesigire reflects on the future of wildlife conservation in Uganda. The ongoing review of the Wildlife Act seeks to address emerging issues, from climate change to community involvement and the integration of indigenous knowledge.

"We want to strengthen benefit-sharing with communities," he says. "We want to involve them more."

There are also plans to introduce conservancies, designated areas where private landowners can collectively manage wildlife and benefit from tourism. It is a model that has gained traction in other parts of Africa and could redefine conservation in Uganda.

At its core, however, the challenge remains the same: how to protect wildlife in a rapidly changing world where human interests, economic pressures, and cultural practices constantly intersect.



George Owoyesigire, the acting Commissioner of Wildlife Conservation at the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities. ILLUSTRATION/CHRIS OGON