

Conservationists turn to schools to fight



Students of Gulu High School in Gulu City offload part of the 2000 seedlings issued to the school for planting under the new initiative. PHOTOS/TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

In the Acholi Sub-region, high energy demands, infrastructural development, and the construction industry have been cited as the key drivers of the rapidly depleting natural forest cover and environmental degradation in the East Acholi Sub-region.

BY TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

Environmental conservationists have derived a new approach to revive the severely dwindling tree cover and restore the degraded environment in northern Uganda following indiscriminate deforestation for commercial charcoal production and timber trade, the *Daily Monitor* has learnt. The approach, which offers hope on reforestation and the dangers of environmental degradation and severe climate impacts, is a systematic shift from the traditional protection methods and restoration initiatives, which are said to have of-

IN CHARGE

The initiative, spearheaded by My Tree Initiative Uganda and Absa Bank, Uganda, seeks to establish over 50 indigenous and fruit tree forests across 12 districts of the north, including Gulu, Lira, Arua, Kitgum, Pader, Agago, Apac, Oyam, Dokolo, Nebbi, Yumbe, and Adjumani in the Acholi, Lango, and West Nile.

ferred limited impact. Last week, several schools, political and cultural leaders camped at Gulu High School in Gulu City for the launch of a three-million-tree seedling planting drive aimed at averting the negative climatic impacts of severe deforestation that the region now experiences. The initiative, spearheaded by My Tree Initiative Uganda and Absa Bank, Uganda, seeks to establish over 50 indigenous and fruit tree forests across 12 districts of the north, including Gulu, Lira, Arua, Kitgum, Pader, Agago, Apac, Oyam, Dokolo, Nebbi, Yumbe, and Adjumani in the Acholi, Lango, and West Nile.

In the Acholi sub-region, high energy demands, infrastructural development, and the construction industry have been cited as the key drivers of the rapidly depleting natural forest cover and environmental degradation in the East Acholi sub-region. Human activities are compelled by increased demand for charcoal as a major source of energy, including poor farming practices, among others. In Amuru District, over 1,000 acres of forest reserve land in Keyo, Wii-Ceri and Labala forest reserves have been lost with about 60 per cent of tree cover depleted, majorly due to settlement, agriculture and commercial charcoal burning and logging, it is established. Today, commercial charcoal dealers have destroyed all the tree cover in the villages of Coro, Aker, Luro, Apaa, which was a resettlement camp, Goro B, Kalacut, Acut, Zoka, and Kamdini, among others, in Amuru district. For the villages of Acholi-ber, Gaji, Oyangga and Rwot-Oromo, a neighbourhood of Zoka Central Forest Reserve, where tree



Accountability

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Mr Francis Topacho, the Absa Bank's Communication

cover had remained intact until early 2023, and the dealers have descended on these villages and cleared trees, leaving behind tree species known to produce poor-quality charcoal. In Kitgum, Lamwo and Agago districts, the landscape of the two districts is endowed with rich natural resources like forests, rivers and mountains/hills, although hills and rock outcrops occur in private land, for example, Lagoro, Akara, Okol and Onyala hills, including those in protected areas such as Orom and Ogili mountains, referred to as Central Forest Reserves (CFR).

Major rivers include Pager (running from the hilly areas of Mt. Moroto and Orom mountain rangers and Aringa (running mainly from the hilly areas of Agoro hills), among other small streams, to form the bigger Aswa Catchment Management Area managed under the Ministry of Water and Environment's Upper Nile Water Management Zone program.

However, these natural resources have been degraded over time, for example, in natural forest reserves, deforestation problems have remained persistently high due to impacts of commercial charcoal production, poor farming practices and human settlement. "It is common that people are cultivating inside the river banks and penetrating wetland areas during the dry season to cultivate rice and vegetables. As a result, most parts of these major rivers are now getting silted." Kitgum district's Development Plan 2021-2025 document states. Whereas natural resources and climate change management are critical to the reduction of disaster losses, achievement of increased household incomes and im-

provement of the quality of life of the population, deforestation in the region has progressed at a staggering 1.8 per cent per year, it is established. Under the theme "Growing 700,000 Trees in 300 Schools across Northern Uganda," the programme will engage approximately 150,000 students. Beyond environmental restoration, the initiative is expected to deliver broader community benefits. The trees will improve tree cover will enhance soil conservation and reduce reliance on firewood in surrounding communities. To ensure sustainability, Green Club champions are meant to be trained in each participating school to lead ongoing tree care and environmental education, embedding a culture of environmental stewardship long after the planting phase is complete.

For example, at Acet central forest reserve (255 acres) in Acaba sub-county, Ojwii (269 acres) in Aleka sub-county, where 31 acres have been encroached, and Opit (1,593 acres) in Abok sub-county, where up to 100 acres, among others, have been encroached. However, according to Mr Enger Ashraf, the executive director of MyTree Initiative Uganda, students are the best examples to inspire the elders in the community to take initiative and preserve the trees in the communities. According to him, northern Uganda has remained vulnerable to climate shocks due to massive environmental degradation in the past decade. "Today, every effort must count, and one of the approaches is to deploy learners who will champion tree planting in their communities after learning from school because trees are being cut down for various reasons, but the response to efforts to have these trees replaced is poor," he said. According to conservationists, whereas Northern Uganda holds immense poten-

tial, it is one of the regions most affected by climate stress, deforestation, and environmental degradation resulting from the impact of the current commercial charcoal production and illegal logging. It is established that over 150,000 students will directly participate in planting and caring for these trees, including naturally-occurring varieties, and fruit trees, including mangoes, avocado, guava, and jackfruit, and grevillea, will deliver both environmental and economic value. The reforestation efforts are aimed at improving biodiversity, providing food, and creating small but meaningful income opportunities for schools and communities. According to Mr Francis Topacho, the Absa Bank's Communication and Information and Security Officer, said that the initiative is part of the bank's national priority for environmental conservation, climate resilience, and sustainable livelihood. He explained that the bank's strategy to carry out reforestation initiatives through schools aligns with the government's efforts to embed environmental stewardship and sustainability at the community level by engaging learners, the next generation. "We are committing to planting 2 million trees across 300 schools in 12 districts in northern Uganda through the next two years. Every tree will be geotagged and monitored until 2027 to ensure survival, accountability, and long-term impact," Mr Topacho told the *Daily Monitor* in an interview. This marks the beginning of an even bigger ambition, since through our partnership with the MyTree Initiative, we have already planted over 1 million tree seedlings across schools in the region in 2025 alone, and that is why we are confident that this target is achievable, he said.

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State efforts To restore depleted forest cover in the Acholi subregion, NFA has invested in the generation of tree nurseries aimed at regenerating critical indigenous and commercial species, including Shea (*Vitellaria paradoxa*), *Tectona grandis* (Teak), *Mvule* (*Milicia excelsa*), and *Warburgia ugandensis*, a rare medicinal tree. These nurseries are expected to supply seedlings for forest restoration, community planting, and enrichment of degraded forest reserves, according to Mr Aldon Walukamba, NFA's communications and public relations manager. In a recent interview, Mr Walukamba noted that despite the present efforts, the severity of encroachment on central forest reserves managed by NFA remains a worryingly serious challenge in the Acholi sub-region, where vast areas have been targeted for farming, settlement and charcoal burning. In the Acholi sub-region, over the last

decade, several thousand hectares of central reserve forests have been threatened by encroachment, with hotspots in Lira, Gulu and Amuru districts, he stated. "NFA has stepped up efforts to protect and restore central forest reserves in Acholi and Lango sub-regions, with notable progress in several central forest reserves. These interventions are part of a broader strategy to safeguard Uganda's forests against rising threats of encroachment, illegal charcoal production, and unsustainable land use practices," he said. NFA has, in collaboration with other government agencies, enforced the Presidential Directive on charcoal, targeting large-scale illegal commercial production that has devastated Shea tree populations in northern Uganda, he added. Dr Kenneth Omona, State Minister for Northern Uganda, welcomed the initiative, noting its contribution to national development priorities. "This initiative speaks directly to our national priorities of environmental restoration, climate resilience, and community development. By focusing on schools, we are not only restoring ecosystems but also shaping a generation that understands the importance of protecting our natural resources. According to Mr Moses Eguma, Gulu High School deputy head teacher, the school has received 2,000 assorted seedlings, including mangoes, guavas, jack fruits and other indigenous species. He says that the school will condition each student to plant a tree and manage it for two years to ensure survivability. "Giving them this knowledge directly turns them into change agents who will help to promote afforestation, reforestation, and fight against deforestation because our people in the communities are engaged in deforestation but pay less attention to efforts to replenish them," Mr Eguma said. Buyers struggle to load bags of charcoal bought during the public auction in Gulu City in April 2020.

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THE BAN

In May 2023, President Yoweri Museveni issued Executive Order No. 3, in which he, among other things, banned commercial charcoal trade in the northern and northeast (Karamoja, Teso, Lango, Acholi, and West Nile). Mr Museveni reasoned that the conclusions showed security forces (UPDF army and police) had masterminded the trade that had turned disastrous to the environment. Currently, the country needs an approximated 2 million hectares of plantation forests. Meanwhile, in November 2025, Uganda launched its Uganda Pearl Carbon Platform, an exclusive online registry and trading platform for the country's sovereign carbon credits, on the sidelines of COP30 in Belem, Brazil. The new carbon trading platform is expected to help it leverage measures to enhance its climate change response in pursuit of its 2030 zero-emission targets, which include a radical campaign against fossil (wood) fuel consumption, specifically charcoal. Uganda consumes its biomass at an unsustainable rate; its deforestation rate is one of the highest at 1.44 per cent, one of the highest in sub-Saharan Africa. This is said to make its most source of greenhouse gas emissions to be deforestation, unlike industries, in other countries. Between 2001 and 2024, the country is said to have lost 1.2 million hectares of tree cover, equivalent to 15 per cent of the tree cover it had in the year 2000. This mathematically translates to 540 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent in emissions. About 66 per cent of firewood is sourced directly and unsustainably from forests, and the existing ban on charcoal trade is being circumvented. editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

