

# **Local communities and ecotourism development in Budongo forest reserve, Uganda**

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## **Introduction**

This paper outlines the development of an ecotourism and conservation project in Budongo Forest Reserve, Uganda, as an example of an attempt to involve local people in the management of Forest Reserves and to create opportunities for local communities to benefit from the forests.

## **Ecotourism as a tool for conservation and development**

Ecotourism has become increasingly popular over the last decade, both with conservation and development organisations looking for means of generating an income from protected areas, and with tourists from the richer countries looking for new experiences. Most significantly, ecotourism is seen as an opportunity for local people living in tourism destinations to gain positive benefits from tourism development and the conservation of forests and protected areas.

The market for ecotourism, however, is finite, and very susceptible to outside factors. Political instability, changes in fashions in the tourist sending countries, and weather and natural disasters play a major role in the success or failure of a tourism development. For that reason, we see ecotourism as just one aspect of overall forest management, to be integrated with other forest uses, but one which can play an important role. The Nyungwe Forest Reserve in Rwanda, for example, was raising \$15,000 per year in the early 1990s, which was more than enough to pay staff and pay for the upkeep of the reserve (Offutt, 1992).

In order for an ecotourism programme to be a success, the implementers need to ensure that the benefits gained have an impact in the host area. All too often, tourism revenue leaks away from the local economy back to the tourist-sending countries, and local communities end up seeing little benefit (Brandon 1993, Koch 1994). However, when carefully planned and managed, an ecotourism development in a tropical forest can provide a sustainable return, much of which can remain in the local community (Horwich, 1988). In the case

of Uganda, where most remaining forests are under the control of government institutions, ecotourism development offers local people opportunities to become more involved in the management of their neighbouring forests and, at the same time, to see material benefits from those forests.

### **Budongo Forest - a background to the Ecotourism Project**

Budongo Forest Reserve, in North Western Uganda, was gazetted as a Central Forest Reserve (CFR) in 1932. The Reserve, which is a mixture of tropical high forest with a large population of mahoganies and savanna grasslands and woodland, covers 825 km<sup>2</sup>, making it Uganda's biggest Forest Reserve. It has one of the longest continuous research records of any tropical high forest, with permanent plots dating back to the beginning of this century. It is of exceptional biodiversity importance, ranking 3rd in overall importance in the country (Nature Conservation Master Plan, 1997). So far, 465 tree species, 366 bird species, 289 butterfly species and 130 species of large moth have been recorded. The forest also contains what is likely to be the largest population of wild chimpanzees in Uganda, estimated at between 600 and 800 individuals.

*Fig. 1 Map of Budongo Forest Reserve, showing the location of the two tourism sites.*

According to old people in the surrounding villages, in pre-colonial days, the deep forest tended to be shunned by local people. At the forest edges, some would use it for gathering food, fire wood, building materials, craft materials and medicine. Very few local people would dare to go deep into the forest, and in local traditions it was treated with great fear and respect.

Between 1905 and 1910 Budongo Forest was surveyed by TM Dawe, who highlighted its potential for timber. Timber management and extraction, mainly of mahogany species, started in 1920 and has continued up to today. Between the 1930s and the 1980s, (foreign owned) saw-milling firms were given exclusive felling rights under 10 year licences. Local people were allowed to extract their traditional non-timber forest products, but were not given felling licenses, and some areas within the Forest Reserve were declared off-limits, being set aside as nature reserves. Hunting was severely restricted, and the license fee for hunting was beyond the pockets of the majority of local people.

The local population has also changed in composition during this century. The traditional inhabitants, the Banyoro, were joined by peoples from other parts of Uganda and from Sudan and Congo, who settled in the nine parishes surrounding the forest. The local community today is very mixed in terms of language and nationality. In one village neighbouring the forest, there are 45 households, speaking 18 different languages.

With the influx of other tribes to the area, some of whom had a tradition of using forests and forest products more extensively than the Banyoro, and with the changes in management, local attitudes to the forest began to change. Local people could see that there was a potential source of income in the forest but, at the same time, their access to the forest and its products was restricted. Mistrust between the locals and the Forest Department grew. The forest was being managed for timber, which provided a large income, but the benefits of the timber business were not seen by the people living closest to the forest. This mistrust was exacerbated in the 1970s and 80s by corruption on the part of some Forest Department officials, who were perceived as lining their own pockets with the benefits whilst denying them to the locals.

The major threat to the forest today is the unrestricted felling of timber trees. The financing of pitsawing tends to come from business people in Masindi town and from further afield, but the labour is provided largely by local people. Apart from sawing and carrying timber out of the forest, there is very little cash employment in the area. In some parts of the forest, there are no large mahoganies left at all, and other species are also in danger (Plumptre et al, 1995). In addition, in the future there will be pressure from local communities for more land for agriculture. Masindi District has a relatively low population at present, but there has been migration to the area from more densely populated parts of Uganda, and a local sugar estate is encouraging local landowners to plant sugar on their land, which, until now, has been farmed by tenant farmers and squatters. The latter will, therefore, have to find alternative sources of income, which may have a serious impact on the forest reserve. Already in one area where illegal felling of timber had almost stopped, the numbers of pitsawyers inside the reserve has increased once again as local people try to collect enough money to relocate.

In 1988, the Forest Department started to reassess its management of Uganda's forest estate, with the initiation of the Forest Rehabilitation Programme. Previous management had tended to emphasise timber extraction. With the new programme, a decision was made to dedicate half of the forest estates to protective management for conservation, and the other half to timber production. This policy change had the objective of achieving a more balanced approach to the management of Uganda's tropical high forests. The conservation value of Uganda's forests was recognised, as was the potential of other income generating uses of forests, especially non-consumptive uses such as ecotourism. The importance of involving local people in managing forests was officially recognised for the first time.

This change in policy led to the development of a variety of new projects within the Forest Department. The Budongo Forest Ecotourism Project (BFEP) is one of these, and falls under the European Union Natural Forest Management and Conservation Project (EU NFMCP) whose major goal is to A. . . see to it

that a forest estate (whenever applicable) serves a variety of needs . . .@ (Nature Conservation Master Plan, 1997).

The development of the BFEP was based on the growing awareness that Aprotected areas alienated from the local people were doomed to failure . . .@ (Nature Conservation Master Plan, 1997). The idea behind the project is to promote forest conservation by integrating conservation with community development, and to achieve active involvement of the communities in the project and management of the forest. The development of sustainable tourism in the forest aims to provide a small but regular income for both local people and government, and to create opportunities for communities and the Forest Department to work together in managing the forest resource.

### **Development of ecotourism in Budongo Forest**

The BFEP was initiated in 1993 after a preliminary biological inventory of the forest, carried out by Forest Department staff and researchers from the independent research project, the Budongo Forest Project (funded by UK-DFID and NORAD). The survey indicated that Kaniyo Pabidi, an unlogged and isolated block of the Forest Reserve, with an all year round resident chimpanzee population, and Busingiro, a forest block that has been logged and is very suitable for sighting monkeys and birds, would be ideal places for ecotourism development as far as providing an attraction to visitors was concerned. The two sites have the added advantage of being easily accessible from the two main roads going through the forest - Busingiro on the Lake Albert road, Kaniyo Pabidi on the direct Park road.

The first step in developing the project was to meet and discuss with local people whether the development of ecotourism would be appropriate, and if so, how they would like to be involved in its development and management. Five parishes, those closest to the proposed tourism zones, were visited. (A parish, in Uganda, is made up of about 15 villages, and tends to have about 3-4000 people). Consultation was carried out through a series of participatory village meetings and interviews with key individuals. The local people had mixed feelings about tourism development, ranging from worry about social and behavioural changes in their communities, to value judgements made by tourists about them, but every group and individual spoken to want to see ecotourism development go ahead. Everyone was excited about the prospect of developing a new project from which they might see the benefits.

Once the local communities had expressed enthusiasm for the idea, other people were contacted: tourists, tour operators, local business people, government and non governmental organisations involved in tourism and tourism related fields.

This consultation process, which took four months, led to the writing of the Budongo Forest Ecotourism Development Plan, which acts as an outline for the development of the project. As the project has developed, the plan has been modified in places, as discussion and consultation are an ongoing process. However, the original objectives and guiding principles are always used as a guideline for any alterations (Box 1).

The emphasis in tourism development has been conservation and local community involvement. The other parties with an interest, such as tour operators and local government, have been involved through regular briefings and consultations. The project also co-operates closely with the Uganda Wildlife Authority, who manage Murchison Falls Conservation Area, which overlaps the northern part of Budongo Forest. The Forest Department and the Park have regular meetings in which issues of mutual interest are tackled, and the two institutions have co-operated on training and extension activities in some parishes.

#### Box 1 Objectives of the Budongo Forest Ecotourism Project

1. To encourage conservation of the Forest Reserve at a local level by:
  - \* improving the socio-economic status of the local people by maximising their financial return from ecotourism;
  - \* increasing the local communities' involvement in the management of the forest reserve;
  - \* deterring illegal use of the forest by increasing presence of people involved in legal use;
  - \* increasing the knowledge and awareness of the local communities about forest conservation, through an education and extension service.
2. To encourage conservation of the forest reserve at a national level by:
  - \* increasing the returns to the Government from the Forest Reserve by establishing sustainable tourism;
  - \* raising the national profile of the forests by increasing the number of tourism circuits in Uganda;
  - \* Encouraging national tourists to visit the Forest Reserves.

#### Guiding principles

- \* Any development must support conservation
- \* Within a period of five years the project must show signs of sustainability (This means both economic sustainability and sustainability in terms of the conservation of the forest and having local people managing the tourism sites with the Forest Department in an advisory role only. The success of the latter two will be decided by monitoring on the part of the guides and independent researchers for environmental impact, and by keeping records of visitor

numbers and comments and regular community consultations to evaluate the success of the tourism sites).

- \* The project must be economically viable (i.e. costs of running the project - wages, maintenance etc. should be able to be met by the income generated through tourism).

- \* There must be active involvement of the local people in development and management

- \* Involvement of the private sectors will be encouraged. Any monopolistic interests will be discouraged.

For the first fourteen months from the initiation of the project, the role of the local people was advisory, with the exception of a few individuals recruited into the project. In the initial consultation, people had expressed doubts about their experience and expertise in managing tourism developments, and so had preferred to become more involved once the development had been started. The recruited members, who are now the guides and caretakers at the two sites, were trained by the tourism development officer and advisor posted by the Forest Department. The whole team then carried out detailed surveys of the attractions, and designed and established trail systems and some basic facilities.

Today, the two sites in the forest are open to visitors, who come for camping and walk in the forest. The main attraction at Kaniyo Pabidi is chimpanzee tracking. Busingiro is very popular with bird watchers and visitors who just want to experience a tropical rainforest. Both sites have basic campsites, supplied with borehole water, showers, pit latrines, picnic benches and a visitor centre. Currently, we are in the process of building some rooms in which visitors can stay. All construction work was done by local people, using local materials and expertise. Both areas were officially opened to the public in 1995, and visitor numbers have steadily increased since that time. (In July 1995 we received 89 visitors; in July 1997 we received 253).

Currently, the project is run by 28 local people, 3 Forest Department staff and one VSO volunteer. The local people consist of 8 women and 20 men. The women work as guides, facilitators and caretakers. The men do similar tasks and additionally work as trail cutters. Most of the staffs are young people in their 20s. They and the Forest Department staff manage the project in conjunction with the Ecotourism Advisory Committees (EACs). The EACs are elected from the parishes bordering the project areas. The elections are organised and supervised by the Local Councils, (LCs), and the recognised system of local administration in Uganda. (A council is elected in every village, and members have to stand for re-election every 2 years. In our experience councillors at a village and parish level are very serious about their responsibilities to their communities). Busingiro is represented by 9 committee members (2 per parish plus 1 guide representative) and Kaniyo Pabidi is represented by 5 committee members (1 per two villages plus 1 guide

representative). The structure of the EACs was agreed upon by parish residents and LC representatives.

The EACs meet once a month, with joint meetings of the 2 committees every quarter, and their responsibilities include:

- \* overseeing the project accounts;
- \* administering the Community Development Fund (CDF);
- \* participation in the selection of new staff;
- \* conflict resolution and staff management issues;
- \* suggesting possible developments for the project, particularly with reference to local peoples' interests;
- \* bringing up any other issues that members of the communities are concerned about, both concerning ecotourism in particular and the forest in general.

Managing the Community Development Fund is seen as one of the most important roles of the EACs. The CDF is the proportion of the revenue taken at the tourism sites which is set aside for community use. This proportion, currently set at 40% of the entry and camping fees, was decided by project staff based on the running costs of a site in an average month. It was estimated that by keeping 60% of the revenue, the project could cover wages and maintenance. The money is released when there is an adequate sum to achieve something practical in the community. Meetings are held in each parish, with project staff and EAC members attending but not voting, to discuss peoples' problems and their priorities for dealing with them. Community members nominate a project or projects that they feel will be most beneficial to the community as a whole, and can make constructive use of the funds available.

The committees have agreed that all projects should:

- \* support conservation
- \* benefit the community as a whole
- \* be a joint venture between the community and the project (i.e. there should be cost sharing, either in materials, labour or cash).

Communities have so far selected six primary schools to receive assistance from the CDF on the grounds that they act as a positive force for conservation, in part because of the environmental education activities being developed by the BFEP and local teachers, and because they act as a forum for bringing communities together to tackle issues themselves.

As well as the community development fund, local people are finding other ways of benefiting from the project. Local women produce handicrafts for sale, and two women's groups have expressed an interest in running the catering at the tourist sites when visitor numbers are high enough. Farmers' groups in the area are diversifying into vegetable growing and beekeeping, with training provided by the project. The vegetables are being eaten in farmers' homes, and sold to the hotels, lodges and tourism developments connected to the forest

and the nearby Murchison Falls National Park. Farmers living close to the forest can site their beehives inside the Forest Reserve and supplement their income by selling honey in local markets and to national buyers.

The project also runs an environmental education programme, aimed at local children in particular. This is designed to reinforce the positive message about the forest that people are getting by seeing some material benefits from it by sharing information about Budongo's significance. Children from local primary schools visit the forest and learn with the guides through games and exploration. Project staff make follow-up visits to schools and family homes to help students put what they have learned into context, and to develop practical conservation activities in their own communities.

### **Summary of the benefits of ecotourism development to local people**

After four years of ecotourism development, the following has been achieved:

- \* Six local primary schools have received material benefits purchased from the CDF
- \* 28 local people are employed by the project.
- \* The tourist sites provide a means for women to sell their handicrafts as a supplement to their income.
- \* The perceptions of international visitors about Ugandans' ability to manage their resources are challenged. Many visitors have expressed surprise at meeting articulate and well informed guides who pass on a strong conservation message. It appears that visitors do not expect to find local people to be knowledgeable about the local and global issues concerning conservation.
- \* Through the advisory committee, the local communities have found an accessible forum in which they can resolve conflicts with the Forest Department. The success of the EACs in working with the communities has led the Forest Department to expand a process of collaborative forest management to other sectors of forest management. Project staffs are currently developing training programmes on how to work with communities for other Forest Department staff. In the future, we expect to see the role of local people in managing and benefiting from forest resources become ever greater.
- \* At the request of the communities, through the EACs, the project has provided training in income generating activities especially beekeeping and vegetable growing.
- \* Local schools are making use of the trained guides, with their expertise in environmental interpretation, and the ecotourism facilities as an environmental education resource.
- \* Local people are starting to take responsibility for protecting the forest. There have been a number of occasions in the past year when community members reported the presence of illegal pitsawyers to the Forest Department, or even mobilised to prevent their entry themselves. Before the development of ecotourism, this was unheard of.



\* In the initial consultation, people had been worried about the impact of visiting tourists on their communities as far as culture and behaviour were concerned. No negative impact has been identified as yet. The EACs regularly talk with other community members about any impact they might be seeing, and the response of most people is that they have seen no changes in their villages.

### **Problems faced during ecotourism development**

\* One of the biggest hurdles has been the bureaucracy within the Forest Department, which has been apprehensive about relinquishing some of its control to local communities. This has led to delays in decision-making which can, in turn, seriously delay initiatives agreed upon by project staff and local communities. Revenue spending has been a particularly difficult issue to get agreement on.

\* The EACs have been very active in planning and administering the revenue sharing and other training initiatives. However, there is a serious lack of self-confidence in their abilities to take planning and management decisions for the project as a whole. More training and confidence building is going to be needed to enable members to take a more active role.

\* The income generated by tourism is small at present, and only a few individuals are getting employment from the project. Realistically, the income from tourism will never compare to that which can be made from timber harvesting - but it will be a sustainable one, and its benefits directed to the forest edge communities.

\* The local people working for the project tend to be those who have had access to education. Involving members of the community who have not had these advantages in working directly for the project has proved a more difficult task. The only employment available for non English speakers has been as cooks and trail cutters. It is hoped that the women's groups interested in doing the catering will start the process of encouraging other members of the community to participate. In the initial consultation process and in the discussions about revenue sharing, project staffs have made efforts to involve all community members - at times, meeting some groups separately in order to allow them to express their views without pressure from other more assertive community members.

\* Insecurity in the North of Uganda has disrupted the development of tourism in Masindi District. Visitors to the area have been in no danger, but the bad press has influenced tour companies and tourists. Visitor numbers have shown a clear drop whenever there have been reports of fighting in the North.

\* Uganda as a whole has a problem with its international image, a result of the two decades of serious insecurity in the 70s and 80s. The numbers of visitors to Uganda in the 1990s is far lower than it was in the 1960s.

## **Future developments of the BFEP**

The biggest challenge now facing the project is that of ensuring its sustainability. Currently, the project is only making a profit in the peak months, July-September and December-February. The income in these months is large enough to cover the wages of all 28 local staff, plus all maintenance costs, and leaves a surplus to be channelled into the CDF. At present, project staffs are concentrating on promoting the ecotourism facilities, and making sure that what is on offer is of the highest standard possible. We are confident that this aim can be achieved - providing that Masindi District remains secure and that visitors continue to come to Uganda.

In the future, ideally by the year 2000, the project will be managed as a concession by the local people, with the Forest Department in an advisory role only. The only obstacle to this aim is unwillingness on the part of some members of the Forest Department to be A. leaving valuable resources in a forest like Budongo in the hands of local people who do not have background skills@ (member of Forest Department Budongo management plan team, 1997). With time and training for both Forest Department staff and community members, that lack of confidence can be challenged. Already almost all of the day-to-day management of the sites is being done by the guides, and the EACs are taking more and more responsibility in planning and management.

The BFEP has only been running for four years, and collecting revenue for three. A major evaluation is scheduled for the end of this year, but project staffs have been collecting feedback through meetings and informal interviews. Already, local people are reporting seeing benefits from the project and the forest. The BFEP has gone some way towards improving understanding between local people and the Forest Department and towards enabling local people to feel that they have an interest in conserving the forest. The project has contributed to the development of the local community, both in material terms, and in terms of peoples' confidence to manage their own forest resources.

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### **Notes to readers**

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