

The price of living near Mount Elgon National Park in Uganda

By Mwayafu M. David, Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development

The communities surrounding Mt. Elgon National Park have often borne the costs and rarely received the benefits associated with neighboring the Mt. Elgon Forest hence have usually had little vested interest in the conservation and management of the forest resources. As result local peoples' attitudes often have been biased against the forest ecosystem.

This article is based on my dissertation submitted to Makerere University Geography Department for the partial fulfillment for the award of Bachelor of Environment Management Degree of Makerere University titled: *Factors that influence local community participation in the management of Mt. Elgon National Park a Case Study Wanale Sub-county Mbale District.*

Location and brief about Mountain Elgon National Park

Mt. Elgon is an extinct volcano that is fourth highest mountain in East Africa. The Bagisu and Sabiny are the two ethnic tribes around the mountain. It lies between the longitudes 30°20'49" E, 35°3'55" E and 0°43'31" N, 01°02'02" N. it has a total area of 2,504 Km² in which the protected area of Mt. Elgon covers approximately 2045 Km² with 1145 km² comprising the Uganda side and 900 km² comprises the Kenyan side. The mountain extends 80km North-South and 50Km East-West with the 20Km long Nkokonjeru arm to the west (District State of Environment Report, Mbale 1997)

The Park was designated as a Protected Area in 1992 and is host to diversity of at least 68 mammals over 400 tree species, 300 prolific bird species, among others.

Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Elgon_National_Park

The price: Is it worth living near the Park

Communities Living adjacent the park face a number of challenges among which include: destruction of crops, livestock and properties by wild animals leading to low food production and income; Abandoning homes for most of the day and night to protect crops, thereby forfeiting education and other activities; Engaging in selective farming that doesn't include major crops favored by wild animals; Insecurity and fear of attack from wild animals and criminals that seek sanctuary in the National Park; Summary execution by the park rangers; Restriction on traditional user rights livestock grazing, collecting firewood, building and construction poles, mushrooms, honey, grass for thatching and mulching, medicinal plants and bamboos shoots which is a delicacy, disappearance of fruit collection and hunting traditional medicines and traditional agriculture. The end of self subsistence brings with it undernourishment and poor nutrition; Wild fires from the park cross over to gardens and destroy crops and other properties and destruction of social structures and tradition of indigenous population with subsequent cultural impoverishment.

Benefits: Case of the Mt. Elgon Conservation and Development

The Mt. Elgon Conservation and Development project have been assisting the National Park authorities with forest and community issues since 1987 working in conjunction with Mt. Elgon National Park. (MECDP 1995, Mwayafu 2007)

Through collaborative management of resources, the people are no longer viewed as a problem but rather a solution (Barlett 1992, Gilmour 1994). The underlying principle behind this is that the benefits, responsibilities and decision making powers are shared to varying degrees and through a range of approaches among some of or all of the stakeholders in the resources.

Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) which is mandated to oversee all protected areas in Uganda is obliged to share 20% of its park entry fees with the local governments adjacent to the forest reserves. This obligation is based on the acknowledgement that communities on the frontline of protected areas endure a disproportionate burden of the costs associated with the conservation of protected areas. Through revenue sharing provides an enabling environment for establishing good relations between protected areas and adjacent communities, demonstrate the economic value of protected areas and conservation in general to adjacent communities, solicit support and acceptance of protected areas and conservation from adjacent communities and developing a framework of collaborative management for the protected areas.

Employment the protected areas provide a number of benefits to the surrounding communities by enhancing employment opportunities to the people. The community may be directly or indirectly employed in catering for visitors as guards, guides, and ticket collectors to areas having eco-tourism programmes; the standard of living of the communities is improved as a result of community involvement in the management of the protected areas. This has enabled the local people become collaborating partners in the management of the park hence reducing conflicts with the park authorities.

Wildlife or forest reserves?

Communities prefer forest reserve over wildlife reserves because their use of resources in wildlife reserves is more limited. The future viability of protected areas in Mt. Elgon appears to hinge on the cooperation and support of local people. This cooperation and support, in turn, depends on whether the areas can provide local communities with benefits that are sufficiently concrete for people to want to maintain the areas as reserves.

Many people view forest reserves as sources of land for future cultivation. There is an urgent need to develop practical options for meeting the growing demands of local communities. Such options include Family planning, agricultural technologies and facilities to increase productivity through increasing yield per unit area, rather than increasing acreage of arable land; farming of useful wild animals and plant species.

Lessons learnt and proposals to scale up the benefits

For community conservation efforts to be successful, government authorities must be convinced that the local people can use resources sustainably and the local people need to be assured that government will protect their rights and interests. Community once sensitized about the importance of a resource will appreciate and want to conserve it once the concrete evidence of tangible values is shown to them.

Popular support in the conservation and management of Mt. Elgon National Park was got through involving local people in the project design, formulation, planning and implementation of the strategies so that they don't call it "their project" but instead they embraced it by calling it "our project". This popular support helps local people eventually, voluntarily and internally motivated to participate in the forest conservation efforts.

A Collaborative resource management Agreement between communities and UWA provides a framework for what can be done in National park and what can't be done. For instance every Saturdays' women and children are allowed to access the park in collecting some resources agreed upon as per the agreement which has fostered their relations. The communities have made an agreement with the park for sustainable harvest of the traditional products.

Suggested actions

There is need for compensation of the local people for the crop destruction by vermin's from the park and when the government decide to resettle people who are believed to have encroached the park as evident with the message from the local people who argues that it is UWA that has encroached on their land since "Bamasaba" have stayed on the slopes of Mt. Elgon as their native land so they should be compensated to reduce on the conflict because no one will see the importance of a national park that serves the interest of the rich urban tourists and international tourists.

There is need to promote viable alternative income generating using ecologically viable agricultural so as to increase productivity through increasing yield per unit area, rather than increasing acreage of arable land; and farming of useful wild animals and plant species that will enhance soil productivity.

There is need for mutual understanding between conservationists and the local people and among the local people. This will help in averting unnecessary outrageous conflict that existed between UWA and the local people, with regard to encroachment to the park.

There is need to advocate for small families through family planning methods so that local people can change their attitudes and adopt small families that are manageable. In order to reduce pressure on the forest resources.

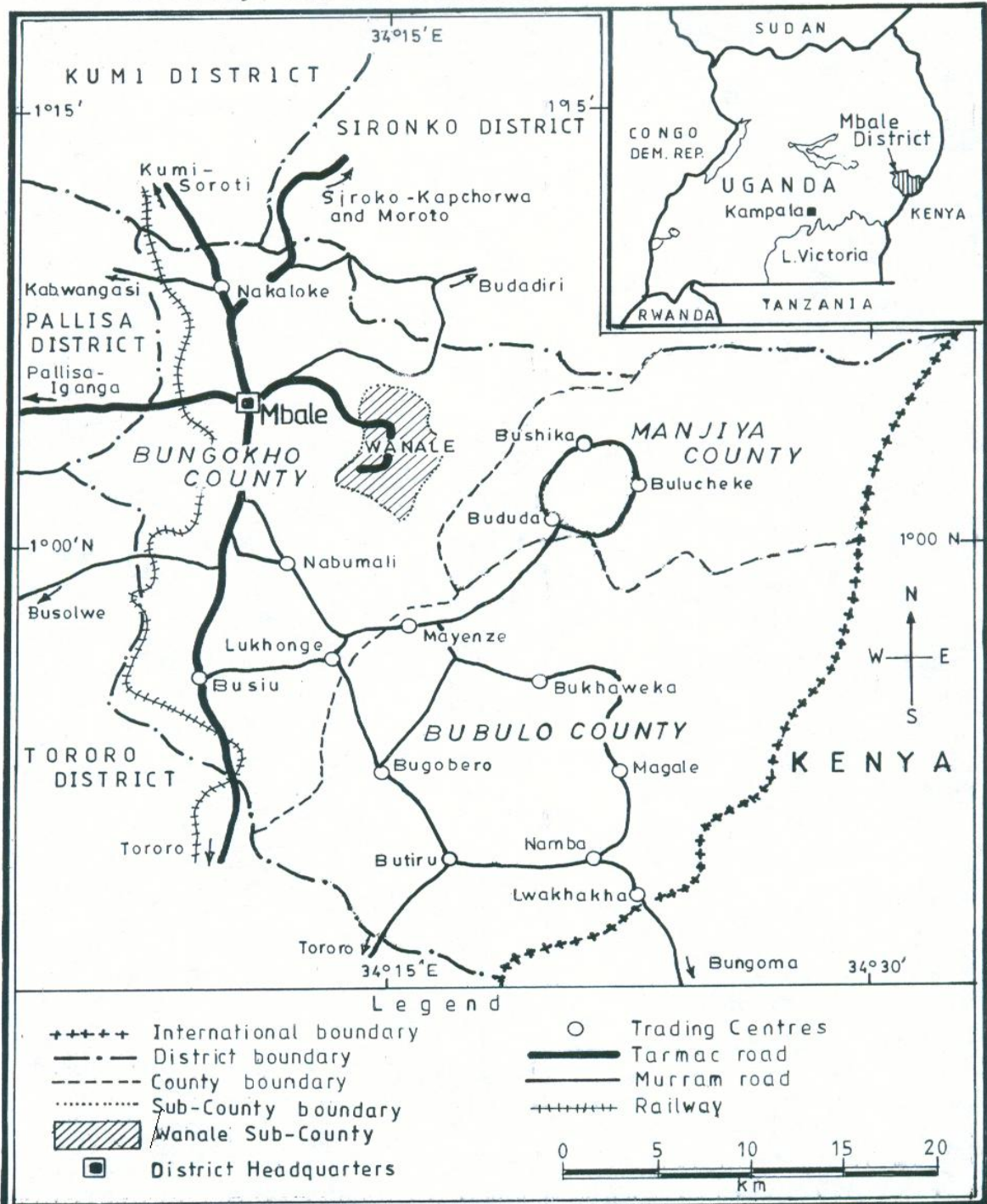
There is need to involve more local population in park conservation and management activities by organizing park education and recreation programmes with support from the local leaders and Uganda Wildlife Authority. In order to create awareness and conscientization for people to recognize the importance of conserving areas with unique ecological values which are paramount to the forest ecosystem.

Reference:

- Duli, E 2003, Case study one: the Uganda Wildlife Authority Revenue Sharing Experience. As part of “Protected Areas in Uganda: Benefits Beyond Boundaries” presented at the 2003 Durban World Parks Congress.
- Mwayafu D.M 2007, Factors that influence the local community participation in the management of Mt. Elgon National Park in Wanale Sub-County Mbale District. Dissertation Makerere University.
- UWA 2000, Community Protected areas Institution policy. Government of Uganda
- UWA 2000, Revenue Sharing Programme Around Protected Areas. Government of Uganda.
- UWA 2002 Collaborative resource management Agreement-Tangwen_MENP.
- UWA 2006 Guidelines for integration wildlife and PA issues within the Local government system.

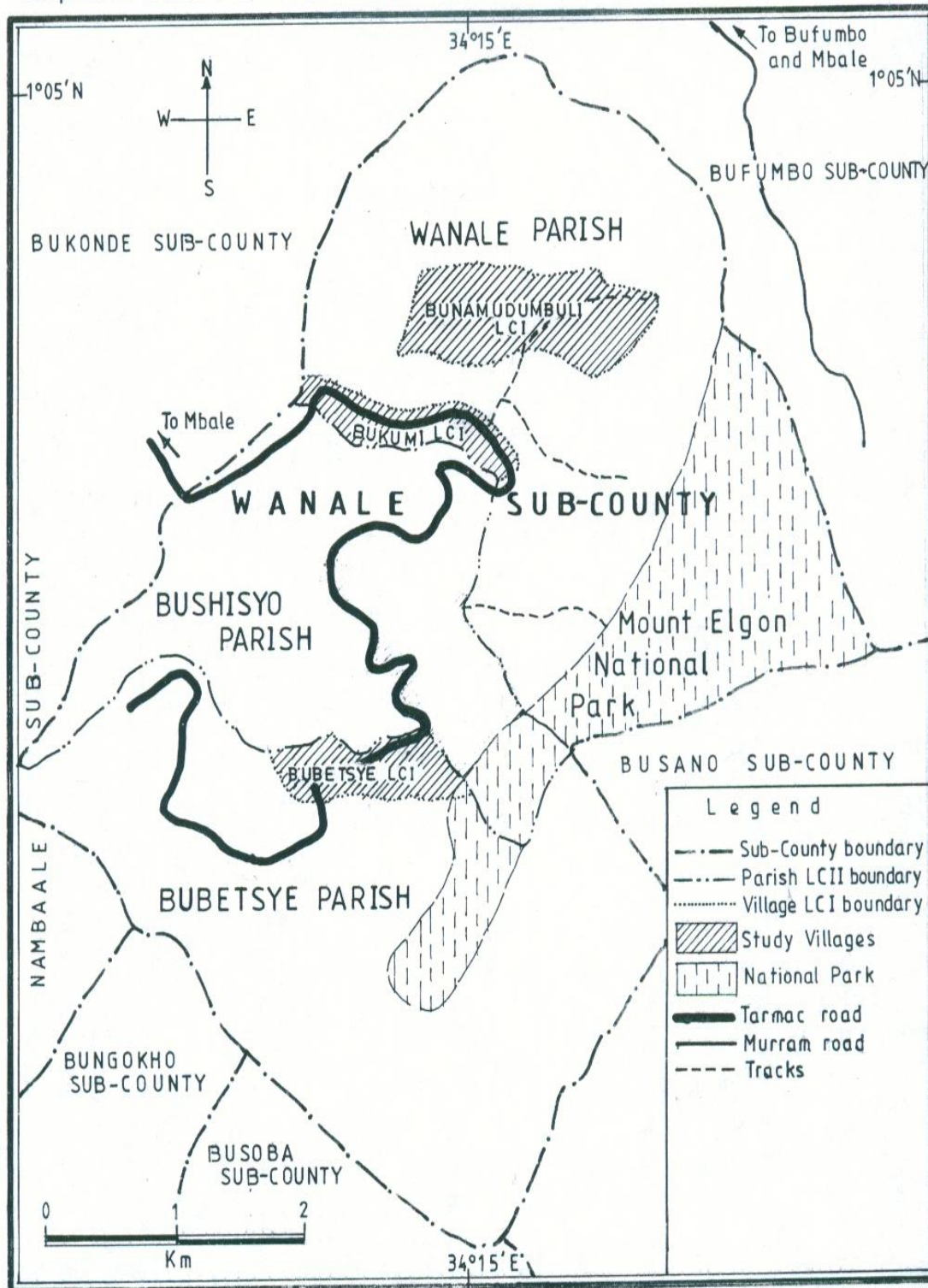
* David Mwayafu works as a Programme Officer with Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development (UCSD), P.O.Box 27551 Kampala Tel: 256 414 269461
Email: ugandacoalition@infocom.co.ug Website: www.ugandacoalition.or.ug

Map 1. LOCATION OF WANALE SUB-COUNTY IN BUNGOKHO COUNTY, MBALE DISTRICT.



Source : Mbale District Office, 2002 .

Map 2. LOCATION OF THE STUDY VILLAGES IN WANALE SUB-COUNTY.



Source : Wanale Sub-County map from Mbale District Population Office, 2002.