Uganda: Notes from a visit to Mount Elgon

The land near the southern boundary of the Mount Elgon national park is green and the volcanic soils are fertile. But since it was declared a national park in 1993, a sometimes violent conflict between villagers and the national park management has flared up at Mount Elgon.

In July 2006, I visited Mount Elgon national park together with Jutta Kill of Sinkswatch and Timothy Byakola of Climate Development Initiatives. The visit was part of the research for a WRM report about a carbon offset tree planting project carried out by the Dutch FACE Foundation and the Ugandan Wildlife Authority (UWA). The UWA-FACE project has so far planted about 8,500 hectares of a total of 25,000 hectares with indigenous trees around the border of the national park. The project has been certified as well managed by SGS Qualifor according to the Forest Stewardship Council system.

A village council chairperson told us that some people died as a result of the evictions from the national park in 1993. "We got the land in 1980," he said. "After Mount Elgon was declared a national park, our property was destroyed and our homes were burned. Since then, we have lived here in this Trading Centre." UWA promised compensation, he told us, but none has ever arrived.

"We planted crops last year," the village council chairperson said. "But when we went to the forest we were beaten. About six people have died. We have reported what happened to the court but we are still waiting for what the court decides." He told us that at the beginning of 2006, the President saw that people were desperate and said that villagers could go back to the land. "But we have gone back in fear. UWA is not treating us like human beings."

Several villagers told stories of violence and threats from UWA rangers. One villager told us of a villager who was forced to eat the intestines of a dead mouse. Another told a story of UWA rangers forcing a villager to have sex with a goat. Others told stories of UWA rangers forcing male villagers to have sex with each other.

I told them that the FACE Foundation acknowledges that there were some problems in 1993 but claims that things generally are better now around the national park. "No. The problems have worsened," a villager replied. "The things we are describing have happened recently," another added.

I told them that the FACE Foundation claims that its project is providing jobs. They laughed. "No", a villager replied, "the FACE Foundation is not providing any jobs in their village." I asked whether anyone from the FACE Foundation had ever visited their village. UWA-FACE last planted trees in this area in 1994 was the reply.

None of the villagers had heard of the Forest Stewardship Council.

We visited a trading centre in Buwabwala Parish, which villagers moved to in 1993 after they were evicted from the national park. Many of the villagers here had bought land from forest officers during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Forest guards had not been paid for months, and were keen to earn

money from fees for land allocation. At the same time, under the regimes of Idi Amin and then Milton Oboto, the government encouraged forest-clearing so that anti-government groups could not hide out in the forest. Villagers sold their land lower down the slopes of Mount Elgon in order to pay the forest guards for the land higher up. When the government declared these transactions illegal, they became landless.

A villager introduced himself to us as a representative of the people evicted, not just here in the village, but also in the High Court. "In the old days," he said, "people and the Park lived amicably. We want the forest to be there. We know the benefits of forest."

He told us that after the evictions in 1993, the government left villagers with too little land. "UWA and UPDF evicted us by the force of the gun. All our property was demolished and our land was added to the national park."
"In 1998, we made claims in the court of law," he said. "The court has helped us. It has given us land to use until it makes its decision. But UWA's rangers are not allowing people to use the land. We have planted the land, but we are threatened day and night. UWA sometimes destroys our crops. We have documents of title deeds and court documents, including 'Certificate of Title' documents. We have requested that the government helps us to get UWA to stay where it is until the court decision."

Villagers here also told us of being attacked by UWA rangers. One of the villagers was beaten and taken to the police. Another man showed us wounds he'd received on his chin, where UWA rangers had hit him with a rifle. Another has a broken hand, a result of being beaten by UWA rangers. Another man was laid down flat on the ground and had a heavy stone placed on his back so that he could not move. He is now in bad health. Another villager was beaten and is now bed-ridden. "These are only a few of the many cases," said the village representative. "UWA has never been prosecuted for any of them. We have reported UWA's actions to the authorities many times, but because we are poor nothing has ever happened."

"Yesterday UWA uprooted onions in our gardens," said a villager. "This morning there was a gun-shot," added another.

I asked whether the UWA-FACE project had provided jobs in this village. "None of us is ever employed in the national park. None," was the reply. No one from the FACE Foundation had visited this village, either. I asked about FSC. Again, they'd never heard of it. In any case, when people do come to the village, they have their own agenda, a villager explained. "When you ask, you hear a bullet," he said.

A villager opened up an envelope containing bullet shells. "The bullets were shot by people trying to kill us," he said. "Some people have died. Others have been injured."

Land rights are the key to villagers' well-being. "Taking a child to school is almost impossible without land," a villager told us. "We don't want the whole National Park, we just want our land back," another said.

The first step towards addressing the land rights of the people living in and around the park is to acknowledge that the boundary of the national park (as well as much of the park itself) is a highly contested zone. Any top-down solution to the park boundary will result in further conflicts between park management and local people. The FACE Foundation is contributing to the tension because the carbon stored in its trees must be protected from damage from local communities. Through the UWA-FACE project, the boundary of the park is being fixed, not in stone but in carbon. Rather than

focussing on UWA's "rights" to manage the national park and the "rights" of people in the North to continue to pollute, there is an urgent need to start from the perspective of the rights of the people living in and around Mount Elgon National Park.

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http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Uganda/book.html