
The Impact of Protected Areas on Twa Women

The Twa are the indigenous people of the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, inhabiting Burundi, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Uganda. Their population is estimated at less than 100,000 in the region. Originally the Twa were forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers living in the mountainous areas around Lakes Tanganyika, Kivu and Albert, but over time the forests were encroached by incoming farming and herding peoples and taken over for commercial development projects and protected areas. Nowadays, few Twa are still able to lead a forest-based way of life. During the 20th century Twa communities were expelled from national parks and conservation areas throughout the region, including the Volcanos National Park and Nyungwe Forest in Rwanda, the Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and the Echuya Forest in Uganda, the Kibira forest in Burundi and the Virunga National Park and Kahuzi-Biega National Park in DRC.

"The ancestors told us we were the first. The people who know how to write have invaded our lands [the Kahuzi-Biega National Park]. According to our ancestors, all those lands belonged to us, but we do not have any rights there now. The park was our area since the time of our ancestors. When a man left with his spear from his home to go into the forest, the family knew they would eat. If the man did not get out his spear, the woman knew she had to get her basket and axe to collect wood. She took the wood to non-Pygmies, and bartered it for bananas, so the family had food. Now, we, the women of the forest, don't have access to the forest. [...] We cry because we have a miserable life. Then, we could live, we had enough to eat, all our needs were satisfied. Now there is nothing." (Twa woman from Buyungula/Kabare, DRC at Women's Rights Conference organized by the Congolese Twa organization PIDP in 2000)

The removal of the Twa from these forests has caused enormous hardship. No lands were provided as compensation at the time of eviction, with the result that the former inhabitants of these forests are now largely landless and suffering extreme poverty. A few communities have since obtained small amounts of land through government distribution or NGO land purchase schemes. In these cases the distribution has either been to individual families or to Twa communities, who have then divided it up between the families. In these circumstances, the Twa have adopted the customary laws of neighbouring farming communities as concerns land rights – the family plot is considered to be owned by the husband, land is inherited by sons from their fathers and women only have use rights. According to these customs, a wife can be denied access to the family land if her husband takes another wife, or if he dies, his family can remove the widow from the land. Although these customs seem to be applied more flexibly in Twa communities than in neighbouring ethnic groups and Twa women not infrequently can inherit and retain control of family land if their marriage ends, the rights of Twa women are weaker than those of men. They are also probably weaker than when Twa lived as hunter-gatherers, when it is likely that collective rights to large areas of forest enabled women to exercise autonomy in how they used the land, and their rights to gather or hunt were not dependent on their husbands.

The loss of access to forest resources has also had a severe impact on Twa women, who are mainly responsible for providing daily food for the family. Forest yams that are a favourite food of Twa are no longer accessible, along with many other forest products including leaves, fruit, mushrooms and

small animals, as well as medicinal herbs. When they had access to the forest, women could also sell forest products such as charcoal and vines, and make handicrafts such as mats.

"We go to look for yams and milunda bitter leaves in the marshes on the edge of the lake and in the eucalyptus plantations of the Zaïrois [DRC Twa term for non-Twa people], as that's where the yams like to grow. We can't go to the park since they closed it off, and even if we bend the rules a bit, if we are caught we are threatened with death. Yet, it's in the forest that there's a large amount of food, but how to get access to it? Now we don't even know if we can go to the eucalyptus plantations, as the Zaïrois have started to threaten us and drive us away, saying that we are damaging their trees by cutting their roots when we dig up the yams." (Twa woman, Chombo/Kabare, DRC)

Without land and without access to wild food resources, Twa women's main source of livelihood is now from labouring on other peoples' fields, carrying loads or opportunistic searching for food, including begging. Some communities, particularly in Rwanda and Burundi are specialists in pottery, but this is no longer profitable due to the advent of metal and plastic goods. A Twa woman's typical earnings from a day's agricultural labour is 15-50 US cents, or the equivalent in food i.e. 1-2 kilos of beans or cassava flour. With these earnings she is scarcely able to meet the daily food needs of her family, let alone have spare resources for essentials such as clothes, soap, medical care or paying for her children's schooling. The extra food that would have been supplied by her husband, in the form of game from the forest, is also no longer available, unless her husband hunts clandestinely.

As the Twa have lost their forests, so has their culture been undermined.

"Before, when we had access to the forest, the boy had to present his future mother-in-law with a bride price of 5 fuko [small rodents] caught in the forest. In our grandparents' time, we gave an antelope and buffalo as bride price. Now we are all in the same situation, without means to pay a bride price, so we just live together without ceremony." (Twa woman, Chombo/Kabare, DRC)

Very few of the national parks employ Twa, and then only as game guides and park guards. No Twa women are employed even though they also have valuable forest knowledge like their men folk. The ongoing violent civil conflicts in the area have severely reduced the number of visitors to the national parks. However, women in one or two Twa communities on the edge of the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda have been able to benefit from tourism by selling handicrafts to them, and also being members of dance troupes that put on performances for tourists.

By: Dorothy Jackson, Forest Peoples Programme, e-mail: djackson@gn.apc.org . For more information about the situation of Twa women see Jackson, D (2003) "Twa women, Twa Rights in the Great Lakes Region of Africa." Minority Rights Group international.