

A Monthly from the East African Sustainability Watch Network founded by Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development (UCSD), Tanzania Coalition for Sustainable Development (TCSD) and SusWatch Kenya

### East Africa Needs to Spare Wetlands for Its Peoples, the Climate and Biodiversity



A Shoebill stork  
(Photo: NPF)

Wetlands in Uganda and East Africa in general play a great part in the livelihoods for millions of communities. It is for this reason that a number of steps at national and local levels have been taken in line with the global response to sustainably manage them. Practical steps like co-management arrangements for example have been known to raise the profile of wetlands amongst communities, while providing duty bearers in Government with a platform to continuously engage with other stakeholders for the longevity of these resources. However this is not yet done as human-induced impact on wetlands in different forms remains a key constraint to their continued existence.

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources with 172 Contracting Parties. According to the *Global Wetland Outlook: Special Edition* (2021) prepared on the occasion of the Convention's 50th anniversary wetlands contribute unrivalled services for climate mitigation, adaptation and biodiversity and human health worth more than US \$47.4 trillion a year.

However, wetlands have not been spared from the pressure due to population increase, need for land expansion for industry, agriculture and human settlement. For example, according to *The Guardian* (November 7, 2021), the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) that will transport oil 900 miles (1,450km) from the shores of Lake Albert on the border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo through Tanzania to the port of Tanga on the Indian Ocean, would skirt the Murchison Falls' Ramsar site that is home to a diverse species of birds, including critically endangered shoebill storks. In Kenya, a recent fire is reported to have reduced Dunga wetland by 40% from its current 500 hectares, with high-rise hotels and homes putting pressure on this pristine wetland ecosystem.

Outside designated wetlands of international importance, cumulative impacts are also noticeable on 'smaller' wetlands through earth filling to create land for 'development' of beaches, hotels and houses to meet the growing demand. At the same time wetlands in many fast growing urban areas in Uganda are acting as sinks for all sorts of waste including municipal, industrial as well as that from building and construction. The result is a potential loss of wetland products and services that we have been enjoying for generations including biodiversity loss (some of which humanity has not yet fully understood).

But undisturbed wetlands are reported to be powerful carbon sinks, but can be significant sources of greenhouse gases if degraded. Wetland actions need to increasingly be included in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), as well as in national adaptation and disaster risk reduction plans. In this regard, Parties to the Ramsar Convention including those in East Africa that are also Parties to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, with support from bilateral and multilateral should be supported to implement resounding actions to conserve wetlands as a way to further increase their ambition of their NDCs. This has both mitigation and adaptation dividends.

It is out of this concern for wetlands services to livelihoods, climate and nature that has prompted Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development, JEEP and other Ugandan CSOs to organise a twitter campaign event from February 2 to 4, 2022 to commemorate the World Wetlands Day 2022. The Campaign with hashtag: **#WetlandsNature4People** seeks to generate and widely share key messages / proposals with key duty bearers, development partners, Ramsar Convention secretariat, other CSO networks and the media in line with the Uganda national Wetlands Day theme: 'wetland action for people and nature' based on the status of Uganda's wetlands and global responsibility to protect them. [More about this upcoming event from here: https://tinyurl.com/u9chw9wp](https://tinyurl.com/u9chw9wp)

## World Wetlands Day 2022 Should be a Turning Point for Lake Wamala Case!



A disused borehole near a receding water point on Lake Wamala (Photo: KEA)

Lake Wamala found in central Uganda, is under high pressure due to the increasing human population (around one million people). Natural habitats in the basin have been converted to other land uses, primarily agriculture. The basin holds extensive forested areas but these are subject to ongoing and major deforestation, which is leading to erosion and increased siltation in the lake and inflowing rivers.

That Lake Wamala is *vanishing is no longer breaking news*. What is new is the unique and complex activities around the basin. The lake was identified to be in a very sorry in 2007 that prompted rigorous advocacy action by Kikandwa Environment Association (KEA), Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development (UCSD)

and National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) to highlight its plight to Government and development agencies. According to John Kaganga (KEA), ‘the lake situation showed signs of temporary improvement - for example cleanliness was getting better while the water level rose between 2013 and 2018’.

However, a survey carried out by KEA in 2021 revealed that the situation was becoming worse than it was in 2007 due to laxity and lack of resources to sustain the public awareness and advocacy campaign, sensitization sessions, trainings, and practical action such as periodic cleanups, tree-planting to support and law enforcement measures. The COVID19 pandemic has also contributed to the worsening situation as communities have lost jobs and are looking at the Lake as the sole source of livelihood hoping for increased fish catches (which has been dwindling due to the receding water levels over time). KEA notes that ‘Many people who depend on Lake Wamala are already contending with high poverty rates, poor provision of basic services like education and healthcare, and the devastating impact of changing weather patterns rusting in extended droughts. KEA further adds that people are visibly seen drawing water to irrigate their crops and putting all efforts to look for fish without regulation, which presents further threats to the remaining fauna and flora.

### Lake Wamala

Lake Wamala covers a total area of 250 km<sup>2</sup>. It is a relatively shallow with a depth ranging from 1.5m to 4.5m. The Lake covers an area of approximately 250 square kilometres . It is dotted by many islands, and several rivers that flow into it. The Lake is drained by the Kibimba River into the Katonga River, which in turn drains into Lake Victoria. The Kibimba River, however, is highly seasonal and for much of the time its course remains essentially dry.

Lake Wamala is of significant economic and cultural interest locally and is jointly administered by the districts of Mubende, Mityana, and Gomba, each of which share a part of this lake. Lake Wamala is of historical significance as it derives its name from King Wamala, the last king of the Bachwezi dynasty that once covered the central, western and southern parts of Uganda, northern Tanzania, western Kenya and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

KEA raises concern that increasing land fragmentation, competing land uses, poor fishing methods, unpredictable weather conditions, poor implementation and policies and laws and outright abuse of office are driving Lake Wamala to its ultimate death bed if nothing happens to address these challenges. These issues are in tandem with the IUCN Report (2018) titled ‘*Fresh Water Biodiversity in the Lake Victoria Basin*’ which noted that, ‘Despite general agreement of the local governments, no progress has been made since and the participants discussed how to restart the process as the political will seems still to be there. There are both biodiversity and cultural values for which the area should be recognized as a site of international importance’. Hence, the IUCN Report recommended a strategy for the conservation of the Lake Wamala Catchment as a Key Biodiversity Area, including designating it as a Ramsar site of International Importance (a process that has dragged on since 2015)’

Read the strategy for the conservation of the Lake Wamala Catchment KBA in the IUCN Report (2018) “Fresh Water Biodiversity in the Lake Victoria Basin” (pp 174-8): <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/RL-2018-002-En.pdf>

## JEEP and UCSD Join CAN Uganda and a Local FM Station to Push for Local Sustainable Solutions



**Left to Right:** Ruth and Gertrude on air in CBS FM 88.8 FM a household improved firewood cookstove; an Institutional Improved cook stove; the Catalogue of Local Sustainable Solutions in East Africa (photos: JEEP & UCSD)

Joint Energy and Environment Projects (JEEP) and Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development (UCSD) raised the profile of local sustainable solutions on 88.8 CBS FM's Climate change radio programme that broadcast on Monday morning.

The Programme on 3/01 was an opportunity for UCSD (Kimbowa Richard) to formally introduce the Catalogue of Local Sustainable Solutions – East Africa to the radio programme host (Mr. Henry Mpinga), the EMI coordinator (Mr. Semakula Martin), as well as to CBS 88.8 FM audience. This was in the context of the radio programme broad focus: State of Uganda's forest cover

A follow up programme by JEEP (Ruth Kiwanuka) and UCSD (Kimbowa Richard) focused on what can be done to avert further forest cover loss, where Ruth gave a detailed explanation for the need to switch to improved cook stoves based on experiences from the EASE CA Project, and quoting the Catalogue cases and experiences documented in Nakaseke, Nakasongola and Nebbi.

In the subsequent programme on Monday 24/2/2022, Mrs Ruth Kiwanuka and Mrs Iga Gertude from Guiding Star nursery and Primary School, explained the rationale for Ugandans to switch from the three-stone cooking facility to improved cook stoves and charcoal stoves in rural and urban areas by both households and institutions. Ruth explained the importance of promoting the improved cook stoves to save women from the kitchen smoke that affects them for a large part of their lives leading to respiratory related diseases. She called on Government a key planner to be exemplary and start using Improved Institutional Cook stoves in all its institutions as a starting point, but also decentralize energy systems (serving 10 - 20 households) so as to have more people access clean and safe energy sources (including energy efficiency).

Mrs Iga whose school adopted an improved institutional energy cookstove shared positive experience in using the stove. She highlighted the money and time savings realised. She disclosed that, 'firewood used per term has reduced by a quarter, while boiled water supply is not a big challenge as it used to be before'. She therefore urged all schools to move away from the three-stone stove that is inefficient, expensive in the long run, and a health hazard to the cooks. On the wider environmental conservation issues that Guiding Star nursery and Primary School undertakes in addition to the Improved Institutional Cookstoves, Mrs Iga mentioned greening of the school compound to create tranquility, planting of a variety of trees including fruit trees, and open days where environmental education is emphasized.

The Environment Media Initiative (EMI) through the Climate Change Radio programme in Luganda is an initiative of 88.8 CBS FM and Climate Action Network Uganda. It seeks to raise the profile of public discussion on climate change and other environmental issues including possible adaptation and mitigation actions especially by citizens (focus is on the vulnerable people as well as the middle income earners, citizen groups and leaders at all levels. More importantly, it seeks to promote local solutions drawing from experiences of practitioners at local, national, regional and global levels in both Government and Non-Governmental sectors.