

From March 18 through to 22, Uganda is marking the annual Water and Environment week. As part of activities to mark the Week, New Vision is publishing a series of articles on water and environment as drivers to achieving sustainable development goals to raise awareness on the need to conserve environment resources. In a bid to save Zoka forest, four environmental activists recently walked 470km from Kampala to Adjumani, writes **Arnest Tumwesige**

FOUR ACTIVISTS WALK FOR 470KM TO SAVE ZOKA FOREST

**UGANDA
W&E
WEEK**

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They had been in the limelight for their activism in trying to save Zoka Central Forest Reserve in Adjumani district for long. However, they recently took it a notch higher by walking hundreds of kilometres from the environmental ministry headquarters in Kampala to Adjumani in an effort to raise awareness about encroachment on Zoka forest. Water and environment minister Sam Cheptoris flagged off the group.

The walk to Zoka, which took 15 days was undertaken by William Amanzuru Leslie (the team leader), Solomon Agwe, Geoffrey Alule and Ayiga Joseph under their pressure group known as Friends of Zoka. Amanzuru thanked Care International, a non-governmental organisation for supporting their walk.

The group has been raising awareness about the cause since 2016 when the forest came under severe encroachment by loggers, timber dealers and charcoal burning.

Amanzuru said unknown people had threatened to harm him and his family if he did not abandon his activities. Because of the threats, he relocated his family to

eastern Uganda for safety. He expressed disappointment in the security forces, saying they let illegal loggers get away with their activities. He wondered how trucks full of forest products transport them from Adjumani to Kampala without being stopped.

At the inception of the campaign in 2016, Amanzuru said almost 70% of the forest that sits on over 6,000 hectares had been depleted.

"In Adjumani, the temperatures go very high. Just imagine how the situation will be 10 years from now," he added.

When Friends of Zoka started their campaign in 2016, it was alleged that some army officers were involved in encroaching on the forest. A team of Uganda People's Defence Forces officers led by the then 4th division commander was assigned to investigate the matter.

Current status

Byron Oguzu, the sector manager Zoka and Otze central forest reserves in Adjumani, said Zoka is the only natural forest reserve in northern Uganda with two zones of tropical high forest and wooded savannah. Zoka is also the only habitat for flying squirrels in the entire world. Oguzu also dismissed reports that Afrizella Africana tree logs,



Residents of Adjumani welcoming Friends of Zoka to their area on Sunday. Photo by Arnest Tumwesige



Minister Sam Cheptoris flagged off the group

commonly known as *Beyo*, were being ferried from from Zoka in West Nile to Kampala.

"The conditions in this forest do not favour the growth of Afrizella Africana. They thrive on rocky soils which are not here," he explained.

The officer said although the forest was previously under severe encroachment, especially on the southern part, satellite images show it has regenerated over the last two years.

While Friends of Forest claim that 70% of the forest had been depleted, Oguzu said only 2% had been encroached on. This has been possible

due to due patrols by National Forest Authority and Uganda Wildlife Authority personnel.

The officer also downplayed reports that tree cutting is still going on. He said the last time a tree was cut in the forest was in February 2018 and the culprits were arrested and taken to court.

Christopher Tusiime, a youth empowerment and entrepreneurship specialist from Care International, asked the Government to inject more resources into collaborative community activities that

promote it's preservation.

Margaret Adata, the commissioner of forests, said a lot in the forest has changed as opposed to what has been reported.

She said the environment ministry was coming up with policies and enforcement of the laws to be enforced by Environment Protection Police Unit and UPDF.

She added that illegal issuance of titles for forest reserves has made it impossible to evict some encroachers.

Location of Zoka forest



Byron Oguzu, the sector manager Zoka and Otze forest reserves (left) explains to a team of environmentalists about the state of the forest