

# Wetlands key for survival in Uganda's changing climate

By Gerald Tenywa

**S**ometimes things have to get worse before they can get better. This seems to be the case with the degraded wetlands around lakes Victoria, Kyoga and those in parts of western Uganda.

After losing about 30% of the wetland cover in just 20 years, the Government started working with the local communities not only to ensure the protection of the remaining wetlands, but also to restore the wetlands that have been degraded. Fortunately, this has started paying off in different parts of the country.

"We have lost much of the wetland cover in the last one year," Paul Mafabi, the director of Environmental Planning, recently told *New Vision* in an interview. "Even in Kampala, we have not seen rampant reclamation of swamps within the last year," he added.

Mafabi was speaking ahead of the national commemoration of the UN World Wetlands Day which is observed globally on February 2. The theme of this year's World Wetlands Day is "Wetlands for our Future: Sustainable Livelihoods."

The national activities to commemorate the day are being held at Okwang Secondary School, in Otuke district in north-eastern Uganda.

## 64% wetlands lost globally

According to a report referred to as the Living Planet released by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), 64% of wetlands worldwide have been lost since 1900. The report also says 76% of the population of freshwater plants and animals have disappeared in the last 40 years.

In Uganda, while the wetland surface area of the country was approximately 16% in 1994, by 2008 it showed a decline to 11%, indicating a loss of 5%.

In terms of Uganda's wetland coverage as an ecosystem, what has been lost is about 30%. In parts of western Uganda, the communities have started taking matters in their own hands by slashing down some of the crops into the encroached parts of the swamps. The wetlands are providers of water, fish, medicine, raw materials for making handicraft and protect water bodies. Other uses of wetlands include cultural properties where some communities pay homage to their ancestors.

"The wetlands sustain livelihoods," Mafabi said, adding that this contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He said wetlands also contribute to climate resilience and the sinking of carbon, which are part of the SDGs.

Though they are referred to as precious ecological systems, the big patches of wetlands sitting around Lake Victoria and Lake Kyoga have been degraded over the years.

This is leading to the siltation of Uganda's biggest fresh water lake and the River Nile, which has water coming from Lake Victoria and crosses Kyoga on its way to Egypt, according to Mafabi.

He blamed the destruction of the



A group of fishermen in Katakwi during gang fishing on Lake Bisina. Inset is part of the day's catch of catfish.

Photo by Gerald Tenywa

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wetlands around Victoria and Kyoga on the increasing population which is accompanied by high urbanisation, particularly between Masaka, Kampala and Jinja, along the northern shores of Lake Victoria.

He also pointed out that the weak laws have let down the environment.

"We are relying on framework laws such as the National Environment Management Act. Such laws rely on civil or criminal processes which take a long time.

"We want to establish environmental

courts and charge offenders under a specific law in order to make wetland encroachment very unattractive," Mafabi said.

## Demarcation of boundaries

Mafabi also said wetland restoration has started with demarcation in different parts of the country. The demarcation of the wetlands in parts of Wakiso, Kampala and Mukono also encountered over 17,000 land titles that had been issued illegally in the wetlands.

He also pointed out that the institution of an environment Police has also helped to reduce encroachment, which was getting out of hand before they were put in place.

He, however, the lands ministry has acted slow against offenders in relation to illegal allocation of land titles in the wetlands.

"They know that the Cabinet has pronounced itself over allocation of land titles in the wetlands," he said, adding that the Ministry of Water and Environment was going to spread its tentacles upcountry.

"We want to work with the district authorities, the district land boards and the banks to discourage encroachment on swamps.

There is light at the end of the tunnel as the Government becomes firm on the sustainable use of wetlands. The SDGs have also helped to highlight to the people the importance of protecting the entire ecological system including wetlands in order to secure their future.

## Fight against climate change through wetland

Prof. Ephraim Kamuntu, the Minister of Water and Environment, has said wetlands will help to secure the future of the people by providing different goods and services, including protection from floods.

He also attributed the achievements towards wetland restoration and boundary demarcation to the support provided by CARE Uganda and International Union for the Conservation Nature.

Kamuntu said the Government has directed against issuance of leases and titles in wetlands. He also said the cancellation process is already in progress. He said a programme to restore degraded wetlands is being developed and is expected to commence this year.

"We no longer have the luxury of sitting down and doing nothing as wetlands diminish before our own eyes," he said.

He also pointed out that the wetlands provide services worth an estimated \$15 trillion worldwide.

"They are the source of our daily water, food, and filter and purify waste and control floods," he stated.

More importantly for our future, wetlands help to fight climate change. Wetlands alone store twice as much carbon as all the world's forests combined, according to Kamuntu.

"We are mindful that there are new emerging issues and challenges that require our attention if wetland benefits are to be sustained," he said, adding that people and institutions have to work together to secure wetlands for the future.