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Rwanda's Rainforest Conservation Receives Praise from Indigenous People



Sources: IPS [Image: Rwanda's Gishwati Mukura Rainforest is one of the most biodiversity sites in the Congo Basin. Photo: Aimable Twahirwa / IPS]

NYABIHU, Rwanda – Laurent Hategekimana, a farmer from Nyabihu, a district of western Rwanda, remembers the terrible state of the Gishwati natural forest a few years ago, when it was invaded by illegal loggers and invasive farmers.

Many of the invaders of this nature reserve were the local people themselves, and Hategekimana, a farmer turned environmental activist, faced a tough task to make them change their minds.

"While many have not yet started to reap tangible benefits, some are engaged in beekeeping and others are trying to venture into tree planting, conservation agriculture and handicrafts," the father of six said in an interview with IPS.

In these remote rural areas of this landlocked East African country, tropical forest conservation is creating new jobs for several thousand indigenous people living especially near the major tropical forests of western Rwanda, thanks to the country's new laws and policies that encourage community involvement in environmental protection.

Scientists recommend strategic solutions to resolve potential conflicts between population and wildlife conservation along this part of the Congo River Basin.

Some of these specialists believe it is important to find out what kind of activities communities want, need and could engage and manage them sustainably in this country of some 13 million people. This is in order to devise lasting actions that address the conservation of biodiversity and the problems of climate change.

Thanks to several conservation mechanisms recently adopted by the Rwandan government and stakeholders, Hategekimana is among the members of the indigenous community who have been actively involved in monitoring the Gishwati Natural Forest.

They inform local administrative authorities of illegal activities such as logging without permission and burning charcoal.

"Now I understand the importance of conserving the forest. That's why I sacrifice my time to protect him," Hategekimana said.

Over the past two decades, much of these nature reserves on the Rwandan side of the Congo rainforest have nearly been depleted, largely due to resettlement and cattle ranching.

When new forest conservation efforts began in 2015, most local farmers felt they were being deprived of their main source of income. Some were initially engaged in illegal logging, timber and the charcoal business.

The Gishwati-Mukura Nature Reserve, now converted into a national park for conservation, is currently contributing to improving the livelihoods of the surrounding local communities. This, in turn, offers the forest a greater chance of regeneration.

This has prompted local residents to launch a local non-governmental organization (NGO) focused on the conservation of the newly created national park. Thanks to these initiatives, the size of the reserve increased from 886 to 1484 hectares, the number of chimpanzees grew from 13 to 30, the 600 hectares added to the central forest are regenerating naturally and chimpanzees began to use this area in the last two decades.

Beth Kaplin, director of the Centre of Excellence in Biodiversity and Natural Resources Management at the University of Rwanda, told IPS that there is a need to commit to really listening to the people who live next to this park and who interact with it on a daily basis, and to develop collaborative strategies to solve the problems that arise.

"We need to spend time figuring out what kind of activities communities want, need and can engage and manage them sustainably... to devise lasting actions that address biodiversity conservation and climate change issues," he said.

The Gishwati Forest, a protected reserve in northwestern Rwanda, has an area of about 1439 hectares and the Mukura Forest, with a total area of 1987 hectares, has critical populations of endemic and endangered species, such as golden monkeys, blue monkeys and chimpanzees, and more than 130 different types of birds.

The reserve also has about 60 species of trees, including native hardwoods and bamboo, according to the Rwanda Development Board, the government body responsible for tourism and conservation.

The Rwanda Environmental Management Authority (Rema) estimates that forest reserves initially covered 250,000 hectares, but illegal mining, animal grazing, logging and other practices drastically reduced their size.

In 2014, Rwanda received \$9.5 million from the Global Environment Facility through the World Bank to restore forest and biodiversity in the Gishwati-Mukura forest.

The main purpose of this funding was to support Community activities. These included farm stays, handicrafts, beekeeping and tourist activities such as visits to tea plantations and the possibility of learning from traditional healers, who use natural plants to support modern medicine and synthesized medicines.

The collective efforts of rural community dwellers, environmental and indigenous NGOs and local administrative entities to train and mobilize residents on the importance of conserving forest in this part of the Congo River basin, which covers 33% of Rwanda's territory, have been praised.

"These efforts managed to change people's minds and, in turn, saved this natural forest from extinction," said Jean Bosco Hakizimana, a senior local administrative leader from Arusha, a small forest village in Nyabihu, a mountainous district in the country's northwest.

Delphine Uwajeneza, deputy director of the African Initiative for the Advancement of Humanity, told IPS that the key to achieving current natural forest conservation efforts would be to include indigenous peoples in decision-making and ecosystem management.

His NGO advocates for the protection and promotion of the rights, well-being and development of Rwanda's historically marginalized peoples.

"Current conservation efforts will not allow tropical forests to persist if they are completely shut down to use or other benefits by these communities that are the first to preserve the environment," Uwajeneza said in an interview with IPS.

Although the Rwandan government and other sectors involved are satisfied with the current conservation efforts, some scientists and activists shake their heads in dismay and say it is not enough. They insist that the communities living around those nature reserves should benefit.

Charles Karangwa, head of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Regional Forest and Landscape Programme for the Eastern and Southern Africa region,

told IPS that the most important thing is to balance the needs of these communities trying to make a living and to maintain and sustain their forests.

"Development actors must engage these vulnerable communities in a win-win situation," he said.

In 2011, Rwanda joined the Bonn Challenge, a global effort to restore 150 million hectares of deforested and degraded land by 2020. According to officials, Rwanda reached its target of 30 percent forest cover.

However, despite the good policy framework and efforts made to achieve this goal, experts insist on the need to find ways for communities to benefit from forest resources in a sustainable way.

"The people who work here (in the traditional pottery activity) make a living without being totally dependent on forest resources," said Giselle Uwimanaas, 55, as she chatted with her neighbours in the village in the adjacencies of the nearby Mukura forest reserve in Rutsiro, western Rwanda.

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[You can read the English version of this article here.](#)

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