Testimonial Report:

Unveiling the Ripple Effects of Bugoma Forest Destruction on Local Communities

August 2023

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ABSTRACT

Forest cover, according to National Forests Authority (NFA) stands at about 1.9 million hectares (ha), which is 10 percent of Uganda's land cover area.

The forests comprise both natural and plantations. "Natural forests" include both the tropical high forests (THF) and naturally wooded land that falls within the definition of "forest".

Bugoma Central Forest Reserve, with an official size of 41.144 hectares equal to 411 sq km of protected area, is situated southwest of Hoima and northeast of Kyenjojo towns, and east of Lake Albert, in Hoima District. It was gazetted in 1932 and came under the mandate of the National Forestry Authority in 2003.

Forest-based tourism contribute about 61%to national revenue and as a result, forests play a crucial role.

The forest holds a vital significance for both the planet and its inhabitants. A part from mitigating the impacts of climate change and natural calamities, the forest encompass some of the planet's most diverse biodiversity's. Moreover, Bugoma forest serves as a source of sustenance, fuelwood and charcoal for livelihoods of countless individuals.

The above and other benefits are supposed to be attained with the protection of forest resources by the government through enforcing laws to protect and conserve forests, as well as fighting the encroachers.

The communities should, on the other hand, be sensitized on how to live alongside forests as well as benefit from forests without destruction.

Despite all the benefits, many forests in Uganda, including Bugoma Forest Reserve are under threat and destruction.

For instance, after the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) issued an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) certificate of approval to Hoima Sugar Ltd in 2020, for its Kyangwali Mixed Use Land project covering Bugoma forest, the company started clearing part of the forest for sugarcane growing. The company's out-growers encroached on the forest, neighboring wetlands, river banks, and others. Furthermore, illegal logging, charcoal burning, and other activities are ongoing in the forest.

The origin of the legal wrangles of Bugoma forest startedway back in 2016, when Hoima Sugar, a private subsidiary company to the agro-forestry giant Sarrai Group operating in Uganda, Kenya, and Malawi – obtained a 99-year land lease from Uganda's ancient kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara.

Members of the Save Bugoma Forest campaign have claimed corruption has played a role in the lease. However, in August 2020, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), a governmental entity tasked with supervising and coordinating environmental activities, approved the environmental assessment, giving the project the final go-ahead.

The company's out-growers encroached on the forest, neighboring wetlands, river banks, and other structive economic activities in the forest because they are seeking to earn a living. Yet it is possible to conserve the forest and earn income from it through the promotion of green economic alternatives.

To promote the efforts of saving Bugoma forest through Host Communities' engagements, **Strategic Response on Environmental Conservation (STREC)** conducted testimonial report aimed at unveiling the Ripple Effects of Bugoma Forest Destruction on Local Communities

The testimonial report was conducted between June and August, 2023. Data for the research was collected through document key informant interviews with communities, tour operators, and community leaders.

The report established that the local community and other stakeholders feel that Bugoma Forest's location and biodiversity can be restored if they are supported by the government.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Bugoma Central Forest Reserve, spanning over 41,144 hectares, is situated in the Albertine region of Kikuube and Hoima districts. Positioned between the Budongo Forest and Semliki, this forest plays a crucial role in climate regulation within the region and serves as a vital sanctuary for wildlife migratory corridors.

The forest's diverse ecosystem is home to approximately 500 chimpanzees, which represents about 10% of the total Ugandan chimpanzee population. This significant chimpanzee population makes Bugoma Forest a sanctuary for these incredible primates. Additionally, the forest provides a habitat for other species such as mangabeys, elephants, and numerous other wildlife.

Bugoma Forest holds another distinction as an exceptional tourist destination, boasting over 221 recorded bird species. This abundance of avian life makes it a significant attraction for birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts. Notably, Bugoma Forest stands out as a prime destination for eco-tourism, attracting visitors who seek unique experiences outside the traditional national parks and wildlife reserves.

However, the future of Bugoma Forest has been marred by controversy and environmental concerns. In 2016, Uganda's Ministry of Lands granted Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom a freehold land title for a portion of the forest that the kingdom claims. Following this acquisition, the kingdom leased over 21.54 square miles (5779 hectares) of land to Hoima Sugar Limited, a company that began clearing the forest in 2020.

Alarming satellite images from Maxar Worldview confirm the extent of the destruction caused by Hoima Sugar Ltd. By March 3, 2022, an estimated 2,800 hectares of the forest had been decimated by the company's activities. This rapid deforestation poses severe threats to the delicate balance of Bugoma Forest's ecosystem and the survival of its inhabitants.

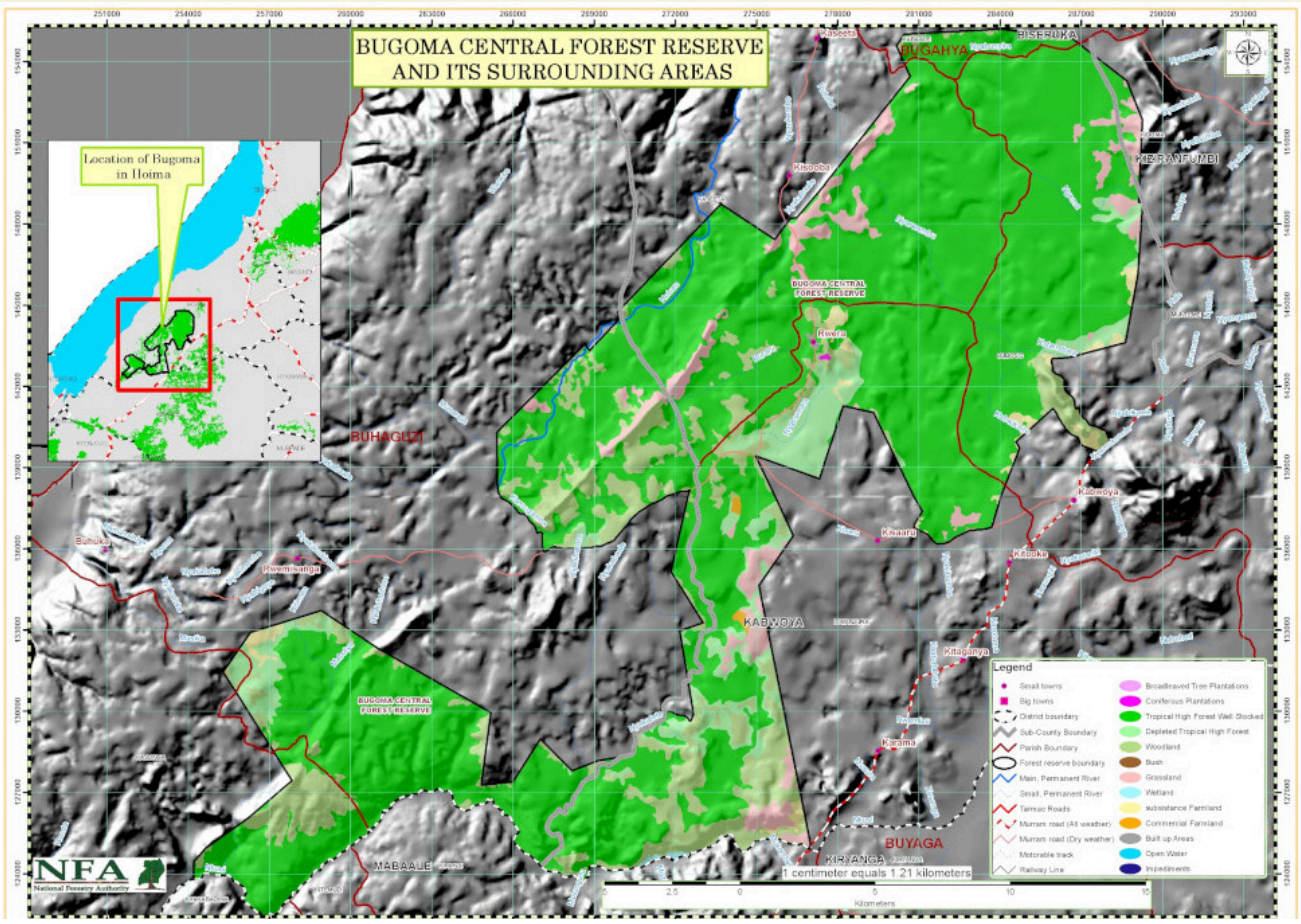
The destruction of Bugoma Forest has raised significant concerns among environmentalists, conservationists, and local communities. The loss of such a vast expanse of forest negatively impacts the region's climate patterns, including rainfall distribution and temperature regulation. Moreover, the destruction of wildlife habitats disrupts the delicate balance of the ecosystem, potentially leading to the decline or extinction of numerous plant and animal species.

Efforts have been made to challenge the land title and protect the forest from further degradation. Advocacy groups and concerned individuals have been working towards raising awareness about the importance of Bugoma Forest and the need for its preservation.

Preserving Bugoma Forest is not only crucial for the conservation of wildlife and the protection of migratory corridors but also for maintaining the climate patterns in the Albertine region. The forest acts as a natural carbon sink and helps mitigate the impacts of climate change in the area.

Efforts are ongoing to address the crisis and find a sustainable solution that balances economic development with the need for environmental conservation. These efforts involve engaging various stakeholders, including European Union Delegates in Uganda, government agencies, conservation organizations, local communities, and the private sector, to ensure the long-term preservation of Bugoma Forest and its invaluable ecosystem.

Map of Bugoma Forest



Source of the map: National Forestry Authority

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The government is focusing on rapid industrialization at the expense of the environmental conservation. Many natural resources such as forests, wetlands, national parks and among others have been degraded for purposes of industrial development yet such natural resources like Bugoma central forest reserve play a very vital role and its destruction and change in the of the habitat will affect the climate, water sources and the entire Bunyoro region. The Human-animal conflicts have increased as a result of Hoima Sugar activities, impoverishing the dependent local communities.

The destruction of Bugoma forest which interconnects with Lake Albert is expected to affect not only the communities that depend on the forest but also the neighboring countries because of its importance in the rain formation in the region. The rain flows in lake Albert which is a shared resource with Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Such destructive activities in and around the forest will affect the communities that also depend on fishing because of change in climate patterns.

Although the Civil Society Organizations have taken legal action to revoke the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) certificate of approval to the Hoima Sugar Company, Bugoma forest remains in imminent danger of destruction. The local communities, who depend on Bugoma's

biodiversity, require extensive support to protect the forest, which is integral to their lives and future generations.

Therefore, this testimonial report aims at **Unveiling the Ripple Effects of Bugoma Forest Destruction on Local Communities.**

The forest has been serving and benefiting local communities for decades, substituting such a critical biodiversity which is already under threat by other negative activities will affect the provisions of International Public Goods (IPGs) of food security, water provision, climate resilience and others in Bunyoro region.

Main objective

The main objective of this testimonial report is tounveiling the ripple effects of Bugoma Forest destruction on local communities

Specific objectives

- To integrate local communities adjacent to the forest in participatory management of the forest reserve.
- To discuss the ecosystem services provided and socio-economic roles played by the Bugoma Forest.
- To make recommendations to upgrade Bugoma forest into national park.

Methodology

This testimonial report utilized a cross-sectional framework along with a mixed methodsapproach.Informationwasgathered through interviews with key informants including district leaders, tour operators, conservationists, civil society groups, officials from Bunyoro kitara kingdom, and local communities residing near Bugoma forest. Additionally, documentary sources were examined to gather data. Subsequently, the collected data underwent analysis. Qualitative data underwent scrutiny through thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis methods.

Local community voices

Mr. Desire Murenzi, the chairperson of Nyairongo village: He noted that they aspire to preserve Bugoma forest, but their hopes were dashed due to the inaction of both the government and certain officials from the Bunyoro Kingdom. "Our campaign to save Bugoma forest began three to four years ago, attracting the interest and support of numerous NGOs eager to join our cause. Sadly, despite our collective efforts, they have yielded no positive outcomes. The majority of the forest has been decimated to make way for sugarcane cultivation."

Community members have expressed their desire to engage with the government, potentially entering into an agreement to restore the forest. Regrettably, up until now, no response has been received from the government representatives. "We had initially sought assistance from the government in the form of tree seedlings, yet our pleas went unanswered." It's disheartening that the same government responsible for the forest's destruction is not taking substantial steps towards its restoration.

In Kikuube, the forest held significant importance for the local residents, especially to pregnant mothers who lack access to healthcare facilities. The forest provided them with essential herbs for medicinal purposes. However, due to the extensive tree felling, this invaluable resource has become scarce, leaving these individuals without a reliable source of herbs.

Mpagi Jackson, Chairperson of Kaseeta Local Environment Conservation Group, Nyerongo resident

"I'm deeply saddened by the destruction of Bugoma forest in the name of an investor. Previously, we enjoyed the benefits of clean and pure water due to the water-filtering capabilities of the trees. Unfortunately, that's no longer the situation. The forest also provided us with protection against storms, which is now lost. Additionally, we used to gather firewood and medicinal herbs from the forest, but those resources are no longer available to us. This destruction has rendered us in a state of vulnerability, both socially and economically".

Namatovu Rovinsa, Kaseeta Parish, Kikuube District

The challenge we encountered while advocating for the preservation of Bugoma forest involved individuals encroaching on the land, with Hoima Sugar being one of the parties responsible for this encroachment. Our efforts to safeguard the forest resulted in a distressing series of events. We were subjected to brutal assaults by combined security forces, leading to the arrest and subsequent imprisonment of some of our members. Tragically, certain individuals lost their lives as security agencies used lethal force during protests against the forest's destruction and allocation.

The consequences of this situation are profound. The traditional herbal remedies we once accessed from the forest are no longer available to us. Additionally, as women, acquiring firewood has become a formidable challenge due to restricted access to the forest. Any attempt to enter the forest is met with violence and expulsion by the soldiers deployed by Hoima Sugar. Our ordeal has been deeply dehumanizing, causing immense suffering.

Asiimwe Jackline, resident of Rwenkoba village;

"our ancestral lineage possessed a sacred shrine within Bugoma forest, which regrettably vanished in the wake of the forest's clearance for sugarcane cultivation. Our obligation to conduct customary rituals has been thwarted by this loss. Consequently, one of our kin has experienced unsettling interactions with the divine multiple times, prompting our family to seek solace through prayer. Nevertheless, as a united family, we are convinced that it is incumbent upon us to either return to Bugoma forest to perform the essential

rituals or contemplate relocating the shrine in order to restore peace in our family."

Ndaimaana Bosco, resident of Nyambogo village;

Before the giveaway of Bugoma forest to Hoima Sugar, we coexisted harmoniously with the untamed creatures. Our sustenance was meager, but now a cohort of desperate and audacious chimpanzees has begun pillaging our crops, imperilling both our subsistence and our security. The constant fear lingers within me as clashes between human and chimps ensue in our communities.

For the past year or two, the chimpanzees have been drawing nearer, infiltrating every corner of Nyambogo village in search of sustenance. They brazenly pluck bananas from trees, seize mangoes and papayas, yielding to whatever tantalizes their taste buds.

It appears that the primary catalyst for these conflicts is the erosion of Bugoma forest habitants for the Chimps. The forest land has been transformed into sugarcane plantation. We appeal to the government to elevate the status of Bugoma forest to that of a national park. This transformative step would bolster forest conservation while concurrently mitigating clashes between humans and wildlife in our localities

Byamugisha John, resident of Kisoroza village:

He noted that the communities are facing a lot of intimidation from private companies that operate concealed activities in the Bugoma forest reserve. A number of security operatives have been deployed in the forest denying access to the local residents except those who are willing to pay a ransom. This means that many families now have difficulty in collecting firewood, accessing the innermost water sources, and picking fruits, tubers and herbs.

Alex Kabagambe, a resident of Rwekobe villagestood helplessly in his Irish potato garden razed down by the army worm and wondered how he will manage to take care of his 10 member-family.

"My Irish Potatato garden survived drought. Now, it is being destroyed by the army worm. The Irish I planted in the other garden failed to germinate. This is a disaster and we have never experienced it in our lives, those who are threatening our forest [Bugoma] should leave us alone," Kabagambe reckons.

Robert Rukahemura, the social affairs and cultural officer for the kingdom, said the destruction of Bugoma forest has not only hurt nature but has made Bunyoro lose rare and important trees for herbal medicine. He argued that since the biggest part of the forest is an ancestral area, the former kings including Omukama Kabalega planted most of these herbal medicinal trees intending to offer treatment to their subjects.

He noted that Bugoma forest has been the home of Prunus Africana (Entaseesa), a medicinal tree for Prostate cancer and other diseases, Warburgia ugandensis (Omusikambuzi) used to produce Covidex and Tamarind (Omukooge) tree among others.

Tamarind tree fruits are used to make medicine which is rich in maintaining healthy blood pressure and antioxidants among others benefits.

We have lost a very big resource like Bunyoro interms of those rare medicine, in terms of volume and quality.

Alex Obonyo, the National Forest Authority manager for the Kisindi sector, conveyed that Bugoma played a significant role in housing Warburgia Ugandenisis trees. Regrettably, these valuable trees have been depleted.

He highlighted that in 2020, they ventured into Bugoma forest in collaboration with Prof. Patrick Engue Ogwang, the inventor of Covidex and a pharmacist, along with his team. Their aim was to gather Warburgia Ugandensis for the production of a Covid-19 remedy. However, it was observed that the population of these trees had been severely diminished.

He emphasized that encroachers have caused extensive damage to the forest reserve. This has led to a substantial reduction in the forest's overall areas. While Bugoma Forest spans 41,144 hectaresin total, a worrisome 8,000 hectares have been subjected to depletion due to human activities.

Conclusion:

Bugoma Central Forest Reserve is a critical ecosystem that provides essential services to both the local communities and the broader environment. Its destruction through activities such as sugarcane cultivation poses a significant threat to the delicate balance of the ecosystem, the survival of numerous plant and animal species, and the climate patterns of the Albertine region. The testimonies of local residents, conservationists, and community leaders reflect the profound impact of the forest's destruction on their lives, livelihoods, and cultural practices.

Urgently Cease to Destructive Activities: It is imperative for the Parliament to issue a decisive directive aimed at promptly halting all detrimental activities within the Bugoma Forest. This encompasses an immediate cessation of the expansion of the Sugarcane plantation and resolute stand against any additional encroachments. The revival and rejuvenation of the forest's ecological balance must take precedence and be pursed without delay.

Community Engagement and Participation: local communities adjacent to the forest should be actively engaged in participatory management of the forest reserve. Their traditional knowledge and perspectives are crucial for sustainable conservation efforts.

Ecosystem Valuation and Services: A comprehensive assessment of the ecosystem services provided by Bugoma Forest should be conducted. This valuation should include quantifying the benefits of clean water, climate regulation, medicinal herbs, and biodiversity, among others. This information can serve as a basis for advocacy and decision-making.

Upgrade to National Park: Considering Bugoma Forest's ecological significance and the threats it faces, serious consideration should be given to upgrading it to a national park. This enhanced protection status would provide stronger legal mechanisms for its preservation.

Public the Boundary Opening Report: it is imperative that the Ministry of Lands, House, and Urban Development releases the boundary opening report pertaining to Bugoma Forest for public access.

Restoration and Reforestation:NEMA should champion efforts to restore the areas that have been cleared, including reforestation with indigenous tree species. Such restoration projects can also provide employment opportunities for local communities

Alternative Livelihoods: Recognising the dependence of local communities on the forest's resources, alternative livelihood options such as bee keeping should be explored and supported to alleviate the impact of forest degradation on their well-being.

Enhance Global Cooperation: The Ugandan government has a crucial opportunity to fortify its forest conservation efforts by deepening its collaborative partnership with the European Union. This strategic alignment aims to ensure the comprehensive restoration of Bugoma Forest, an endeavor that embodies the shared commitment towards ecological preservation and sustainable development.

About Strategic Response on Environmental Conservation (STREC)

Strategic Response on Environmental Conservation (STREC) is a youth led community-based not-for-profit organisation dedicated to promoting the sustainable management of the environment and natural resources in Uganda.

We started in 2018 as University environment group to protect Bugoma Central Forest Reserve from destruction for sugarcane plantation. In 2020, we registered with the National NGO Bureau as not for profit organization.

STREC monitors government actions, conducts research, provides educational materials, develops science-based strategies, organizes affected communities, rallies other civil society organizations and international organizations to common causes, and engages government officials at all levels to ensure that natural resources are utilised in a way that leads to equitable development, environmental conservation and respect for human rights.

Our Mission

To promote the sustainable development of the natural resources in Uganda.

Our Vision

A society that promotes equitable utilisation and sustainable governance of natural resources for Socio-economic development.

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