

Efforts for conservation, sustainable use and protection of Wetland Biodiversity should be stepped –up!

By Dr. Joshua Zake (Ph.D), Executive Director, Environmental Alert. P.O. Box 11259 Kampala, Uganda; Tel: +256414510547; Email: ed@envalert.org or joszake@gmail.com



The **World Wetlands Day (WWD)** on **2nd February 2020**, is celebrated globally. Its 32 years since ratification of the **Ramsar Convention** on **4th July 1988** by the Government of Uganda. Uganda is also a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity Conservation (UNCBD) and as well committed the nationally determined contributions within the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In this context, the national commitment is to increase wetlands coverage to 12% of the total land coverage by 2030 (Uganda's Nationally Determined Contributions, 2015).

The global theme for the WWD 2020 is, '*Wetlands and biodiversity*,' were as the national slogan is, '*Life lives in wetlands – protect them.*' This is timely because wetland biodiversity country-wide is under threat resulting from climate change, rapid urbanization, and inadequate policy implementation and enforcement. Thus, the current national wetlands coverage reduced from 13% in 2000 to 10.9% of the total land cover in 2017 (Ministry of Water and Environment, 2017).

The wetlands degradation negatively impacts on community livelihoods, national economic growth and development. Hence, in the short and media term it compromises both community, national and global benefits from wetlands goods and ecosystem services. Some of these are: *Employment creation and income generation through making crafts and building materials; Provision of water for domestic, irrigation and industrial use; Water recharge and purification, temperature regulation and carbon storage; Habitat for various species e.g. Shoebill and Uganda cranes (Uganda's National symbol) among several other bird species.*

There are several initiatives by the Government and Partners targeting conservation, sustainable use and protection of Wetland Biodiversity country-wide. For instance, the Government of Uganda, the United Nations Development Program and the Green Climate Fund are financing the implementation of an 8 years 44.3 million dollars wetlands project titled, '*Building Resilient Communities and Ecosystems through Restoration of Wetlands and Associated Catchments.*' It's being implemented in 24 districts (i.e. 12 in Eastern Uganda i.e. Pallisa, Kibuku, Bukedea, Namutumba, Butaleja, Tororo, Kaliro, Kumi, Ngora & Mbale and 12 in Western Uganda – i.e. Kabale, Rubanda, Rukiga, Kisoro, Rukungiri, Kanungu, Bushenyi, Buhweju, Mitooma, Sheema, Rubirizi & Ntugamo) with a target of restoration of 64370 Ha of degraded wetlands and 11,630 Ha of degraded wetland catchment areas through targeted awareness & training; wetlands boundary opening and marking; promoting alternative livelihood options for wetland dependent communities based on a value chain approaches.

According to the Ministry of Water and Environment, the National celebrations will be held in Bushenyi **on 7th February 2019 at Bumbeire sub county headquarters**. The WWD celebrations are timely for reflection on the Government's commitments at International and national levels in respect to effective implementation of existing policy and regulatory frameworks for conservation, protection and wise use of wetlands country-wide. It's a day for stakeholder's (i.e. Government, Development Partners, Civil Society, Private Sector and Communities) reflection on approaches, best practices and innovations for wetlands resources management.

This requires better understanding of the root causes of wetland degradation that have resulted in the escalated annual wetland loss over the years in Uganda. It helps in fine-tuning the responsive strategies to effectively address the emerging issues for conservation, sustainable use and protection of Wetland and associated catchments biodiversity country-wide.

The ongoing national wetlands policy (1995) review coordinated by the Wetlands Management Department is a great opportunity for articulating emerging issues to identify effective strategies for saving Uganda's wetlands and healthy lives for the estimated at 45.7 million Ugandans.

Biodiversity conservation, wise use and protection should contribute to community livelihoods and overall national economic growth and development at community, local and national scales through promoting alternative livelihoods and income generation opportunities (*such as bee keeping; Eco-tourism; livestock & poultry keeping; Fruit-tree production*) in communities to reduce pressure on wetland resources.

The Presidential directive on cancellation of titles in wetlands and forests reserves and associated call in 2014 for voluntary departure of encroachers from wetlands and forest reserves is very timely. However, the approved roadmap by Cabinet in 2017, for its implementation should be allocated adequate resources.

The Ministry of Water and Environment, its departments and agencies should strengthen collaboration with the communities; local governments; other sectors ministries, departments & authorities; development partners; civil society; private sector for effective enforcement and regulation of wetlands resources conservation, wise-use and protection as stipulated in the existing policy and legal framework.

Technology development and innovation is a key ingredient for promoting sustainable wetland resources management. For instance, building of bridges over wetlands or animal cross-overs in road Infrastructure designs conserves the resources. Nambigirwa Bridge along the Entebbe-Kampala highway is a good example. Such innovations should be up-scaled in future urban planning and infrastructure designs for conservation and protection of wetland biodiversity.

Effective implementation of the responsive strategies for stepping up biodiversity resources conservation, wise-use and protection requires adequate resources allocation by Government and Development partners. The investment in the Water and Environment sector, currently at 4% of the total national budget (MWE, 2019) is inadequate for effective delivery of Government's commitments in the multi-lateral environmental management agreements (*such as the Ramsar Convention, UNCBD and UNFCCC*); sustainable development goals, inclusive green growth and the National Development Plan II & III targets.