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**SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES & ECOTOURISM IN UGANDA:
THE KATONGA WETLANDS CONSERVATION PROJECT**

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Perhaps more than any other region of the world, Africa's dependence on natural resources makes it especially vulnerable to environmental change. To confront the growing social and natural problems, many sub-Saharan countries are now turning to ecotourism. Governments and residents alike are attracted by suggestions that ecotourism can simultaneously sustain communities and the natural environments that surround them. Indeed, the success of nature-based tourism in Uganda alone—now the fastest growing sector in the country's travel market, earning US\$ 110 million (US \$107.8 m) in revenue in 1997—makes clear its potential for economic development.

Such windfalls do not come without social costs, however, and the manner in which ecotourism develops directly affects the sustainability of local areas. Yet, tourism proponents continue to stress upscale facilities and the desires of affluent international visitors over the quality of choice afforded indigenous people in conserving their natural heritage and traditional practices.

The presence of a number of distinct habitats—including wetlands, tropical moist forests, savannah, and snow-capped mountains—affords Uganda an incredible biological diversity. Within its protected areas are found nearly 20,000 species of plants, as well as one thousand bird species and more than 200 other wildlife animals. As a result, the Uganda Tourist Board (1997) boasts that the country contains "one of the richest ecosystems in Africa and certainly the most outstanding attraction" for nature-based tourism on the continent.

Though government authorities and the tourist industry promote the value of "charismatic" wildlife in marketing them as visitor attractions—the mountain gorillas in Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable National Parks, and more recently, birdwatching and sports fishing—a growing number of ecotourists prefer a more inclusive and interactive experience with both the natural and the cultural landscapes. For such visitors, it is not a brief view of "big game" they seek but the viability of the entire ecosystem, including its human communities, that is cherished. Consequently, the challenge facing Ugandans—indeed, all Africa—is how to balance development with community and environmental conservation.

It is this more holistic perspective that Katonga Wildlife Reserve satisfies with its diversity of flora and fauna, and innovative management practices. Located equidistant between Kampala and the country's western border with the DRC, Katonga provides a convenient halfway point for those visiting the country's major nature attractions (including Queen Elizabeth, Murchison Falls, Rwenzori, Bwindi, and Mgahinga). This central location, as well as the relative security from the insurgencies currently plaguing Uganda's borders, make Katonga an enticing destination.

A unique protected area characterized by tropical forests, savannah grasslands, and one of Uganda's most extensive papyrus wetland systems, the reserve provides ample opportunity to view numerous species of birds, hippopotamus, elephants, primates, and ungulates, including the endangered Sitatunga. In addition, there are interpretative canoe rides through the wetlands (an attraction found nowhere else in Uganda), camping, hiking and—most importantly—the chance to interact with local communities and to directly benefit conservation efforts.

Assisted by a grant from the UN Development Programme, wardens of the Uganda Wildlife Authority and residents collaborate in ecotourism planning and natural resource management. Acknowledging their common goals and concerns, both groups emphasize activities that simultaneously 1) conserve the biodiversity of the Katonga wetlands; 2) strengthen local institutions; 3) empower women; 4) support small businesses; and 4) address social and environmental needs equally. Together, they view development as an integrative *process* for sustainable community development, rather than an economic strategy alone for the national parks which surround them.

By so doing, the symbiotic relationship between ecotourism, nature, and community development is made clear. Through tourism, residents achieve self-sufficiency while visitors, managers, and developers are able to better appreciate the diverse natural and cultural environments on which all depend. In this manner, the people of Katonga provide a constructive alternative to the ecotourism activities proposed for much of the country, and a reminder that only through similar partnerships will Uganda successfully sustain itself economically, socially, and environmentally over the long-term.