Uganda designates famous “Mountains of the Moon”

In a brief ceremony during the opening session of the 40th meeting of the Standing Committee, Paul Mafabi, commissioner of the Wetlands Management Department in Uganda’s Ministry of Water and Environment, accepted the Ramsar site certificate for Uganda’s newest Wetland of International Importance – “Rwenzori Mountains Ramsar site” (99,500 hectares, 00°25’N 030°00’E). The new site, within a National Park and World Heritage Site, is located in the west of the country, ranging from 1,600 to 5,100 meters above sea level in mountains that are home to one of only three glaciated areas in Africa (with Mounts Kenya and Kilimanjaro) and contiguous with the Ramsar site “Parc national des Virunga” in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Uganda’s new designation, effective 13 May 2009, has been supported significantly by WWF – Uganda and WWF International’s Freshwater Programme.

According to Cynthia Kibata, Ramsar Assistant Advisor for Africa, based on the Ramsar Information Sheet submitted with the designation, Rwenzori Mountains Ramsar site was noted by the geographer Ptolemy in AD 300 as the Lunis Montae (“Mountains of the Moon”) and has continued to fascinate ever since. The entire Afro-alpine ecosystem (between 1,600 and 5,100 meters asl.) is unique; with the contribution of high rainfall and the melting of snow from the peaks, various wetland types are present such as peatlands, freshwater lakes, and tundra, amongst others. The mountains are known to support 21 species of small mammals, including the endemic and vulnerable Ruwenzori Shrew. Other species of global conservation concern include L’Hoest’s monkey, Horseshoe bat, and Rockefeller’s Sunbird. With the distribution of fish varying with altitude, several indigenous fish species are found within the site, with the most common Cyprinid species including Varicorhinus rwenzorii.

The Rwenzori Mountains continue to face challenges from increasing population pressure resulting in increased demand for agricultural land, growing tourism, and climate change, despite the stringent protection measures in place within the Park. Through its designation as a state-owned National Park, it is covered by a management plan that allows activities such as tourism, firewood collection, research, etc., to be carried out in zoned areas only.

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