Uganda adds nine new Ramsar sites

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Uganda

Nine new Wetlands of International Importance in Uganda

The Ramsar Secretariat is pleased to announce that Uganda has added nine new sites to the List of Wetlands of International Importance. Spread around the country, the sites contribute a variety of wetland types to the total area of Ramsar sites, going from Uganda's largest tract of swamp forest to extensive papyrus tracts and an impressive waterfall system. Thanks to the new designations, the country can now afford extra protection to the habitats of endangered species such as the globally vulnerable Shoebill, the Papyrus Gonolek, and the Sitatunga, which constitute important tourist attractions. The cultural and socio-economic value of these wetlands should also be emphasized, as local communities depend on them for their survival in terms of fish, construction material, medicines, flood protection, water filtration, grazing and much more.

The Secretariat would like to congratulate Uganda, and particularly the Wetlands Inspection Division, for this new achievement and for its continual efforts in the implementation of the Convention at both national and international levels. We also recognize the contributions of WWF’s Global Freshwater Programme, BirdLife International, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Royal Danish Embassy in Kampala, and NatureUganda to the designation of these new sites.

Uganda, which joined the Convention in 1988, now has 11 Ramsar sites covering a surface area of 354,803 hectares. Globally, the Convention's 153 Contracting Parties have designated 1626 Ramsar sites, covering 145,594,013 hectares.

-- Lucia Scodanibbio, Assistant Advisor for Africa

Brief site descriptions for the Annotated Ramsar List
Lake Bisina Wetland System. 15/09/06; Kumi, Katakwi, Soroti; 54,229 ha; 01°43'N 033°54'E. Important Bird Area. A shallow freshwater lake with a thin strip of fringing papyrus swamp, part of the Lake Kyoga Basin lakes. Water lilies, a declining habitat in much of Uganda, dominate the shallow areas, which is important for its diversity of macrophytes. It is used as a feeding ground by wading birds, including the globally vulnerable Shoebill (*Balaeniceps rex*). The system is also important as a refuge for fish species that have gone extinct in the main Ugandan lakes such as Lakes Victoria and Kyoga. The lake is very important for the surrounding communities in terms of fishing, transport, and supply of water for domestic use and livestock. It is especially critical during times of famine, e.g., a rhizome of the Nymphaea genus is used as food during droughts. The site falls outside the Karamoja Protected Area system and there are no legal protections proposed. A community-based management plan has been prepared, and a local fisheries association promotes sustainable fisheries development. Ramsar site no. 1633. Most recent RIS information: 2006.
Lake Mburo-Nakivili Wetland System. 15/09/06; Mbarara; 26,834 ha; 00°40’S 030°57’E. National Park (partly). A system of open and wooded savanna, seasonal and permanent wetlands, and five lakes, of which Lake Mburo is by far the largest. The system is a unique habitat, lying at the convergence of two biological zones, giving it very high biodiversity. It supports globally threatened species of birds such as the Papyrus Yellow Warbler and Shoebill, and provides refuge to 22 species of Palaeartic and Afro-tropical migrant birds during adverse conditions. It supports two of the endangered cichlid fish species which have gone extinct in the main lakes, and it is the only area in Uganda in which the Impala is found. The site is also of immense socio-economic value as a source of water for domestic use, livestock and wildlife; pasture for the local herds during droughts; fish; and materials for crafts and thatching. The park is also used for tourism and scientific research. Hunting, habitat destruction and over-fishing are the main threats to the area. The Wetland Inspection Division in collaboration with Uganda Wildlife Authority is to develop a management plan for the site. Ramsar site no. 1634. Most recent RIS information: 2006.
Lake Nakuwa Wetland System. 15/09/06; Kamuli, Pallisa, Soroti; 91,150 ha; 01°15'N 033°31'E. Important Bird Area. A permanent wetland associated with a number of satellite lakes and a swamp system dominated by dense papyrus, broken in parts by pools of water-forming sudds (clumps of floating papyrus). In addition to supporting the Sitatunga and the Nile Crocodile, the system and its satellite lakes contain the most diverse cichlid species assemblage and are a haven for a number of non-cichlid species no longer found in the large lakes of Kyoga and Victoria. The system provides refuge to fish taxa that have been reported extinct in the main lakes, thanks to the protection accorded by the aquatic vegetation around the lakes, which prevented the Nile perch from spreading there. The wetland also plays an important role in flood prevention, water purification and groundwater recharge. It is probably one of the remaining pristine wetland areas in Uganda due to its remoteness and sparse population in the immediate catchment, and it offers employment to a number of fishermen. The papyrus is used for making mats, thatching, and crafts. The potential threats to fish species diversity include human exploitation, collection of ornamental fish for export, degradation of the fish habitat, spread of the Nile Perch, and water hyacinth. Papyrus over-harvesting and land reclamation for agriculture also constitute a threat. Ramsar site no. 1635. Most recent RIS information: 2006.

Lake Opeta Wetland System. 15/09/06; Nakapiripirit, Sironko, Katakwi, Kumi; 68,912 ha; 01°42'N 034°14'E. Important Bird Area. One of the remaining intact and probably most important wetland marshes in Uganda. It is predominantly an extensive swamp of Vossia cuspidata to the east and south graduating into dry Hyparrhenia grassland savannas. The wetland is of great importance for the conservation of birds, and Fox's weaver, Uganda's only endemic bird, has been recorded in the swamp breeding. The site is also important as a refuge for fish species that have gone extinct in the main lakes, including Lakes Victoria and Kyoga. During the dry season the site provides the only refuge for animals from the Pian-Upe wildlife reserve. The area is mainly used by the Karimojong and the Pokot people for grazing their
animals in the dry season. It serves as a source of fish protein at both subsistence and commercial level, and cultivation (maize, millet and plantain) is carried out in the catchment. Pian-Upe Wildlife Reserve has potential for big game viewing and birdwatching, but because of the insecurity, tourism development has been minimal and the reserve does not generate any revenue. A community-based wetland management plan will be ready by January 2007. Ramsar site no. 1636. Most recent RIS information: 2006.

Lutembe Bay Wetland System. 15/09/06; Wakiso; 98 ha; 00°10'N 032°34'E. Important Bird Area. Situated at the mouth of Lake Victoria’s Murchison Bay, this shallow area is almost completely cut-off from the main body of Lake Victoria by a C. papyrus island. The site supports globally threatened species of birds, endangered Cichlid fish, and over 100 butterfly species, including three rare ones. It is a breeding ground for Clarias and lungfish, and regularly supports more than 52% of the White-winged Black Terns (Chlidonias leucopterus) population. The system plays an important hydrological role, with the swamps surrounding the Murchison Bay acting as natural filters for silt, sediments and excess nutrients in surface run-off, wastewaters from industries, and sewage from Kampala City. Lutembe Bay is being reclaimed and decimated for horticultural activities and the surrounding highly populated areas have been strongly affected by commercial and industrial development, urban wastewater, and conversion to agricultural land. A number of NGOs have been conducting conservation education activities in and around Lutembe, with the Uganda Wildlife Education Center (UWEC) only about 5 km from the bay. Ramsar site no. 1637. Most recent RIS information: 2006.
Mabamba Bay Wetland System. 15/09/06; Wakiso, Mpigi; 2,424 ha; 00°07'N 032°21'E. Important Bird Area. An extensive marsh stretching through a narrow and long bay fringed with papyrus towards the main body of Lake Victoria - the only swamp close to Kampala where one can easily find the globally-threatened Shoebill (Balaeniceps rex). The site supports an average of close to 190,000 birds and is part of the wetland system which hosts approximately 38% of the global population of the Blue Swallow (Hirundo atrocaerulea), as well as the globally-threatened Papyrus Yellow Warbler and other birds of global conservation concern. The site supports a lucrative fisheries activity and is a source of fish for home consumption and commercial use, as well as of raw material for local crafts, building materials, water for domestic and livestock use, and non-wood products. Factors needing attention are the dry season incursion into the swamp by fishermen; hunting of the Sitatunga by local people; the proliferation of the Water Hyacinth; and the poaching of Shoebill. The proliferation of flower farms along the shores of Lake Victoria and the use of agrochemicals is likely to have an impact. NatureUganda spearheaded the development of a National Important Bird Areas Conservation Strategy (NIBACS) that highlights measures and strategies for the conservation of the Bay. Ramsar site no. 1638. Most recent RIS information: 2006.
Murchison Falls-Albert Delta Wetland System. 15/09/06; Masindi, Gulu; 17,293 ha; 01°57’N 031°42’E. National Park (partly), Important Bird Area. The site stretches from the top of Murchison Falls, where the River Nile flows through a rock cleft some 6m wide, to the delta at its confluence with Lake Albert. The convergence between Lake Albert and the delta forms a shallow area that is important for waterbirds, especially the Shoebill, Pelicans, Darters and various heron
species. The delta is an important spawning and breeding ground for Lake Albert fisheries, containing indigenous fish species; the rest of the site is dominated by rolling savannas and tall grass with increasingly thick bush, woodlands and forest patches in the higher and wetter areas to the south and east. It forms a feeding and watering refuge for wildlife in the National Park during dry seasons. Murchison Falls are one of the main tourist attractions and recreation areas in Uganda, and the site is of social and cultural importance to the people of the area: livestock grazing; fishing, with fish exported to DR Congo and also used to feed the refugees in camps in northern Uganda; illegal hunting for game, etc. Conflicts between fishermen and crocodiles are common. The site has been proposed for UNESCO World Heritage status. Ramsar site no. 1640. Most recent RIS information: 2006.

Nabajjuzi Wetland System. 15/09/06; Masaka, Sembabule, Mpigi; 1,753 ha; 00°46'S 031°41'E. Important Bird Area. A long narrow stretch of swamp from the periphery of Masaka to the major Katonga River system. It provides a spawning ground for mudfish and lungfish, and supports globally threatened bird species and the endangered Sitatunga. The site lies in traditional Buddu county of Buganda Kingdom, and some of the flora and fauna are closely associated with cultural norms and traditions, especially the totems. There is thus considerable cultural attachment of the surrounding areas to the wetland, which also plays an important role in stabilizing the banks of River Nabajjuzi, groundwater recharge, flood control and as a natural filter for silt and sediments in the runoff. The wetland is the source of water supply for nearby townships and provides fish, clay, papyrus, medicine and game meat (Sitatunga). Over the past 20 years there has been increased commercialisation of the resource products and some of the surrounding areas have been built up into trading centres and small towns, causing increased demand for resources. Water pollution from a tannery adjacent to the wetland is a big threat. The Wetlands Inspection Division and NGOs such as NatureUganda are implementing conservation and ecotourism activities. Ramsar site no. 1639. Most recent RIS information: 2006.
Sango Bay-Musambwa Island-Kagera Wetland System (SAMUKA). 15/09/06; Masaka, Rakai; 55,110 ha; 00°55'S 031°46'E. Important Bird Area. A mosaic of wetland types including the biggest tract of swamp forest in Uganda, papyrus swamps, herbaceous swamps interspersed with palms and seasonally flooded grasslands, sandy, rocky and forest shores, and three rocky islets about 3 km offshore in the Sango Bay. The area lies in the transition between the East and West African vegetation zones and this biogeographical ecotone makes it biodiversity rich. The system supports huge congregations of waterbirds, hosting an average of 16.5% of the population of Grey-headed Gulls (*Larus cirrocephalus*), and hosts globally endangered mammals such as Elephant, Black and White Colobus Monkey and a subspecies of the Blue Monkey. It is a source of fish to the people of the area, of medicinal plants, of grazing and of raw materials for building and making crafts including luxurious sofa chairs and mattresses. Tourism has been developed on Musambwa Island. Relatively inaccessible, Sango Bay forests have had no immediate threats; however, as overexploitation of resources and grazing depletes the rest of the landscape, forest reserves become the immediate retreat for the surrounding communities. The site contains Stone Age artifacts, internationally known as the Sangoan industry, which dates to about 200,000 years ago. Ramsar site no. 1641. Most recent RIS information: 2006.

All other photos courtesy Wetlands Inspection Division, Uganda.
Wetlands Inspection Division: Ramsar staff visiting Assistant Commissioner Paul Mafabe (left), presently Chair of the Ramsar Standing Committee, and a colleague in November 2004.

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