

Conservation Complexities in Rural Uganda

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Abstract

For summer 2022, I requested funding to conduct qualitative research surrounding conservation policies, deforestation, coffee cultivation, and the impact of conservation policies on local communities in rural Uganda. While Uganda has conservation policies in place for the Mt. Elgon volcano region, coffee production and other economic interests often lead to the circumventing or abandonment of conservation efforts in the country. Through conducting interviews with farmers, community members, and those employed by the government to protect the Mt. Elgon reserve, I learned more about opinions, attitudes and practices related to conservation and how these are negotiated versus the needs of the economy in an area with high levels of poverty

Background & Objectives

My area of focus was the region of Bududa, Uganda, residing on the southwest side of Mt. Elgon, an extinct volcano classified as a national park in Uganda in 1993, and UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve in 2005 (Omoding et al., 2020). While the status is beneficial for conservation, the change has led to restrictions for local people. Protected reserves, or protected areas (PAs), are designated for wildlife management. These are beneficial, yet conservation management has been problematic in Uganda when looking at the procedures for land acquisition. For example, Indigenous populations, such as the farmers living on Mt. Elgon, have been displaced through eminent domain by the government.

My main objectives were to learn more about the topic of protected land, how that impacts local populations specifically centered around resource allocation. With over 50% of Ugandans living in poverty, many people living in or around the PAs require its resources to survive, not only to expand plots like coffee, but also to acquire things like fuel wood, timber, or game, all of which are not easy to find elsewhere (Losh, 2021). This information led to the production of my interview guide in order to talk to community members on their views on this topic.



Methods & Results

For the entirety of the program, I spent time interviewing both community members and conservation/environmental officials. These interviews were arranged either through random or snowball sampling, and were in a mix of English and the local language, Lugisu. I interviewed approximately 25 people initially focusing on coffee production and how it has been impacted by conservation policies, such as the placement of the National Park boundary and the subsequent restrictions on land access. I learned of the loss of many livelihoods because of the boundary, but also the need for land protection because of the increasing population putting a stress on the land, leading to soil erosion and landslides.



The second half of my interviews discussed general attitudes concerning conservation and environmental policies meant to preserve and lead to sustainable land use. Overwhelmingly, there was concern and positive responses for increased environmental policies and the recognition that they are desperately needed. As the population grows, plots of land are reused in families over and over again. Without sustainable land practices, we are seeing lacking yields and overburdened soil.

Impacts and Future Work

Thesis

Throughout my research, I spoke to officials, and members of global organizations that had an interest in the work I was doing. This fellowship research will be used toward my Master's Thesis in Environmental Policy, and I am planning an aspect of my thesis to include a policy proposal as well as a summary of research that may be provided to both organizations currently working in the region such as "Trees for the Future" as well as a main environmental agency in Uganda, Uganda Wildlife Authority. I will continue to interpret and draw together themes through this next semester and Spring in order to produce a comprehensive Master's Thesis which analyzes this research through an environmental policy lens. I hope to be able to produce substantial conclusions, and I know there's much more work to come, but this summer has provided me the wonderful opportunity to pursue my research to be ultimately used in my graduation. I additionally, hope to return next summer for two months to follow up with many of the officials I had met with to discuss my findings.

Conservation Education

PDI, the community-based organization whose founders hosted us in Uganda, additionally worked with me on my research and interviews. Through my work with my translator, we discussed the inclusion of conservation education and tree planting initiatives into their education and youth programs. This coming November, a sports tournament they are hosting is planned to include conservation education with some of the people I interviewed this summer. Additionally, I hope to continue my relationship with PDI and support their goals in anyway I can for the inclusion of conservation education.

