



CSC STORIES

Restoring the Lake Edward Fishery in Virunga National Park

Virunga National Park is one of Africa's oldest and most biodiverse parks. Located in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, it stretches along borders with Uganda and Rwanda and has more bird, mammal and reptile species than any other protected area on the continent. It is home to the critically endangered mountain gorilla, once hosted the world's largest hippopotamus population and recently witnessed the first sighting of an okapi in the wild in 50 years. Virunga's rich biodiversity is a function of its incredible variety of ecosystems: flora and fauna thrive among its lakes, grasslands, volcanoes, rainforests and glacier-peaked mountains.

Unfortunately, over the past two decades, the park and the region around it have also been the site of one of the world's most violent and intractable conflicts.

Lake Edward is a central part of the Virunga ecosystem: it was once the site of a thriving fishery and a globally significant hippo population. But in recent decades, Lake Edward has been adversely affected by the active conflicts that continue to plague the area. By the mid-2000s, chronic instability resulting from fighting between rebel groups and the national armed forces had created a lawless atmosphere in which the fishery was over-exploited, settlements around the lake increased and expanded, transboundary incursions from Uganda were on the rise, and poaching for bushmeat and ivory nearly wiped out the local hippo population. The lake, its ecosystem and the local population that relied on its fishery were collateral victims of the conflicts that played out in the region.

Local communities recognized the need to strengthen the institutions that governed the lake and its resources; without action, the fishery would collapse. Fishery institutions had been weakened by years of conflict,

often worked at cross-purposes (and at times in direct conflict with each other and the local population) and individually had few financial or political resources at their disposal.

Working with the Wildlife Conservation Society and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and with the technical support of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), in 2006 the lake's communities began a process of reversing this institutional decline and addressing the lake's environmental degradation. Through the application of the conflict-sensitive conservation (CSC) approach, stakeholders started to identify and address some of the conflicts at the heart of the management of the Lake Edward fishery.

Stakeholders undertook a key CSC initiative to restructure and support the fishery's multistakeholder monitoring committees. The fishery, by that time, was straining to support between 60,000 and 70,000 people. Half of these people lived in three legal and tolerated villages within the park; the other half were found in illegal settlements. A high demand for fish came from the region's major population centres: Goma, Butembo and Beni.

The monitoring committees were a means of improving collaboration over the fishery among the affected stakeholders. By that time, the fishery and health of the lake's ecosystem faced a number of challenges: overpopulation and the unsustainable exploitation of the fishery; a lack of control over population movements; illegal settlements on the lake's western coast; the presence of armed groups, including rebels, militias and the national army; illegal fishing practices; alliances between groups for illegal exploitation; weak resource governance institutions; illegal cross-border



fishing by both Ugandans and Congolese fishers; illegal non-fishing activities in the villages, including livestock rearing and farming; and a lack of understanding and enforcement of fishery laws.

After applying the CSC approach, a program of support was designed, which included: awareness-raising campaigns on sustainable fishing methods, fishery laws, conservation practices and threats to the fishery; political and military lobbying programs; a population census; stricter enforcement of laws through mixed parks authority-army-fisher cooperative patrols; and transboundary dialogue and increased coordination with Ugandan fishers.

Strengthening the monitoring committees further formalized cooperation between and within the villages. Coordination on fishery management and mixed patrols improved relations between stakeholders, and consolidated and thereby increased the financial and political power with which the fishery's challenges could be cooperatively addressed. It showed early signs of improving the lake's ecosystem: illegal fishing practices began declining and fish yields started to improve.

Project activities further contributed to peacebuilding in a number of ways. Stakeholders moved from conflict

over the fishery toward peace through increased environmental cooperation, building on a foundation of greater stakeholder dialogue towards information sharing, joint assessment and joint management. Regional meetings brought together stakeholders from the various governing institutions, community groups and non-government organizations to discuss shared problems and come up with joint responses. Political and military representatives were targeted for participation and support through increased lobbying. New channels of dialogue increased the sharing of information between the villages, while coordinated awareness-raising campaigns attempted to standardize knowledge across the lake on sustainable fishery practices and the laws governing the lake. The information shared, particularly that assessing the health of the fishery, was increasingly generated locally through cooperation among stakeholder groups.

Conservation actions on Lake Edward are not going to solve the broader conflicts of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. But by promoting cooperation and sustainable development among the fishery's stakeholders, they can contribute to restoring the ecosystem while also strengthening livelihoods and food security.

To learn more about conflict-sensitive conservation and associated training opportunities, please contact:

Alec Crawford
alec.crawford@iisd.ca

or

Anne Hammill
ahammill@iisd.org

Visit our website at www.iisd.org/csconservation/

iisd International Institute for Sustainable Development Institut international du développement durable

