

Women in Conservation: Let women benefit from ecotourism revenues - biodiversity will benefit, too

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Gorillas of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (Photo: ITFC)

98%: This is the percentage of members on the Project Procurement Committees that decide on revenue sharing projects to distribute to beneficiaries at the [Bwindi Impenetrable National Park](#) in Uganda that are *men*.

Annually, approximately USD 2.8 million is raised from tourists who want to see the famous mountain gorillas that live in this Eastern [Afromontane Key Biodiversity Area](#) (KBA). This amount differs from year to year but has been increasing since 2009. According to the 1996 Tourism Revenue sharing policy of the Park, 20 percent of the gate entry fees is shared with the local people who live adjacent to the Park – to ensure they will benefit from the Park’s existence. The communities decide how to spend this money – that is, the *men* within those communities do.

So what is the problem?

“The needs and aspirations of women ought to be mainstreamed and voiced out if sustainable Conservation and Development are to be realized at Bwindi”. This was the opening statement made by the only woman Local Council (LC) chairperson of Nkwenda village near the Bwindi Park, during a capacity building and awareness raising seminar organized by the Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation (ITFC) in December, 2014.

ITFC, in collaboration with the Institute of Interdisciplinary Training and Research - IITR (both units of Mbarara University of Science and Technology in Uganda) organized this seminar as part of a project that aimed to increase women's involvement in Integrated Conservation and Development (ICD) and specifically in allocating tourism revenue at Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. This is needed because preliminary research, undertaken during this Conservation International funded project as part of its [Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies](#) programme, shows that compared to men, women;



Beautiful Bwindi (Photo: ITFC)

- Do not benefit substantively from revenue sharing projects (95% of revenues go to projects benefiting men)
- Are not actively involved in revenue sharing project selection (as stated above, 98% of the members of the Project Procurement Committees are men)
- Do not have policies that protect and involve them in Park revenue sharing formulation, selection and management

So why is this a problem?

Local leaders, who are mostly men, tend to spend the gate fee revenues on community projects such as local schools and local dispensaries. Few people will argue that those are not good things - obviously they are. However, they are based on male decisions. Free and easy access to local schools is of great benefit to men, who are supposed to pay school fees for their children. But it is of less benefit to the local women and girls, who are busy protecting the crops from animal raids, and gathering water and firewood for their families – so these girls won't be able to go to school anyway.

How would involving women be better for conservation and development?

Women interact with the environment more often than men, but their priorities in conservation and development related interventions have not been met because they are excluded from the decision-making processes. Revenue sharing projects have not addressed practical survival needs, but rather focused on more general societal needs that mostly benefit men. It is hard for women to meet the daily needs of their families and themselves in the highly patriarchal, densely populated and unproductive landscape they live in. This failure to meet women's needs, forces some women to look for alternatives that include reverting to the illegal collection of firewood, herbal plants, wild yams, bean stakes and basketry materials from the

National Park. This poses a threat to the conservation of the Park's biodiversity. Therefore, funding revenue sharing projects that meet the priorities of women as well as of men would help Park management to effectively achieve conservation objectives.

What did the project do?

Based on the research results of the project, ITFC and ITR organized capacity building meetings in 10 villages to equip both male and female 'activists' around Bwindi with advocacy skills that would facilitate more equitable revenue sharing policy implementation. *"We lack capacity to challenge men who have been taking us for granted and take the lion's share in revenue sharing projects,"* stated a woman from

Byamihanda, one of the 10 target villages. The meetings involved 4 people nominated from each of the 10 communities: 2 women, 1 man and the Local Council chairperson (which, in 9 of the 10 villages, were men). Thus, in total 40 community representatives (21 women, 19 men) were trained. The training included sections on the importance of gender in conservation, local capacity and empowerment in influencing policy, understanding of the existing revenue sharing policy and its guidelines, how to become a good policy advocate for gender equality, and gender advocacy group formation.



One of the women activists from Byamihanda, Kaara Kabale district showing commitment (Photo: ITFC)

What has changed?

As a result of the project, community leaders have initiated monthly 'gender sensitisation' meetings in their villages. Community members have agreed to develop 'gender based' proposals under the revenue-sharing programme. These proposals will entail an in-depth gender analysis on how many women and men are to benefit from ICD projects, the impact of the project on both women and men, and the constraints that would prevent women to benefit. They also agreed to produce gender-based budgets and plans during the local Government planning processes for the three districts of Kabale, Kanungu and Kisoro.

The project also led to conservation agencies such as the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) to integrate gender equality in the ICD implementation guidelines at Bwindi. The management of Bwindi has already pronounced commitments of applying a gender approach during revenue sharing project funding. Also, discussions on the ongoing review of the Uganda wildlife policy entail proposals to increase the number of women on Project Procurement Committees in revenue sharing guidelines. This has been possible as a result of the project's engagement of the Community Conservation department of UWA.

What was learned?

Two main things were learned from this project:

(1) Comprehensive problem and stakeholder analyses should always include women; it will provide critical information that will inform more effective ICD interventions.

(2) It is a good idea to involve women in the community decision-making process about how to spend the money derived from a National Park. It will ensure that the needs of men, women and children in the community will be met more fairly; it can reduce illegal activities; and it will result into a greater appreciation of the Protected Area by all beneficiaries.

Truly a win-win-win situation.

Please follow the series of articles about 'women and environment' on www.birdlife.org/africa/project/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies. The BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat is managing a small grants portfolio of five innovative projects at selected Eastern Afrotropical Important Bird Areas / Key Biodiversity Areas in Uganda and Kenya, on behalf of Conservation International. The grant described in this article was made to the Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation in Uganda.