

Why Encroachers should vacate the Lakes' Territories!

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Over the years, Nature has been calling for protection but many people have been ignoring it and some have been defending the activities that are being carried out to destroy nature. However, recent disasters have showed that nature is likely to be retaliating and reclaiming its territories.

For the last few months, the country has witnessed rising water levels in lakes such as Victoria, Kyoga, and Wamala which have disrupted businesses, destroyed property and displaced thousands of people living and working by its shores both in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The advancing waters washed clear the lake shores and the victims were the fishermen and other communities who depend on the lakes and associated activities for survival of over 10,000 people have been displaced since February 2020 when water inundated the dry lake shores according to the Office of the Prime Minister. Around Lake Victoria, settlements have been affected with many hotels, beaches and individual houses already flooded. Some of the establishments submerged include Serena-Kigo Hotel, Speke Resort Hotel Munyonyo, Hotel Protea Entebbe, Gaba Beach, K.K Beach, Miami Beach, and several other beaches, markets, Gaba water works, jetties, among others.

At the same time, some roads such as Entebbe road were recently cut off by the surging Lake Victoria waters. Essential facilities such as drinking water and sanitation systems, health facilities, among others have been affected. This has increased the risk of infestation of water borne and water related disease incidences such as cholera, dysentery, malaria, and bilharzia in the affected communities. The bulging water level also caused dislodgement of papyrus mats from encroached shorelines resulting into huge mass of floating Islands which are dangerous to hydropower infrastructure. A case in point was observed on 14th April, 2020 when the mass docked at Owen Falls Dam choking turbines and resulting into a temporary National power blackout.

Currently, water levels around Lake Victoria has surpassed the 13.46 meters highest on record in 1964. At the same time, Lake Kyoga is projected to exceed the highest historical water level of 13.2 meters and as such shorelines, swamps and flood plains will experience high water levels. Several settlements and essential facilities in the districts surrounding the lake including health, schools, roads, water supply and sanitation facilities are vulnerable to flooding. Scientists argue that this is due people who have built in the buffer zones of the lake and now water is reclaiming its place in the environment. This implies that people built all around the lake because the level had gone down previously, thus encroached on the buffer zone.

Human activities that have resulted into environmental degradation, Loss of forest cover, encroachment on wetlands, lakeshores and river banks, have led to soil erosion leading to siltation of the water bodies resulting into speedy movement of water into the lakes and rivers with a lot of silt which has further reduced water storage capacities of our water bodies. In addition, urbanization has created highly impermeable surfaces like roads, roofs, pavements that have reduced water infiltration into the soil, interception and evapo-transpiration capacity of forests and wetlands.

According to the National Environment (Wetlands, River Banks and Lake Shores Management) Regulations, No. 3/2000, all shores of lakes shall have a protected zone of two hundred meters measured from the low water mark and there are offenses for a person who fails, neglects or refuses to protect a lake shore or accordance with these Regulations, but unfortunately this is rarely the case. This calls for responsive immediate action by the duty bearers and the right holders who equally have a role and responsibility of adhering to the provisions in the policies and laws on the Environment and Natural Resource management.

Unfortunately, the raising water levels and associated flooding has come at a time of the COVID-19 Lockdown which limits movement for evacuation of the affected personnel both at individual and Institutional levels. While advancing responsive actions to support the vulnerable poor due to the lockdown, more emphasis should be put on these people affected by disasters.

On 5th June 2020, Uganda will celebrate the World Environment Day, 2020 under the International theme of, 'Time for Nature,' were as the national theme is, 'Nature is speaking, Listen.' Both themes focus on the role of nature in providing the essential infrastructure that supports life on Earth and human development. Both of these are comprehensive themes calling upon all Ugandans to listen to nature. As The World Environment day 2020 which is a principal vehicle for encouraging worldwide awareness and action for the environment draws closer, we should appreciate the fact that it's our actions that have grossly affected our mother nature.

The climate crisis is making the fight against Covid-19 harder than it already is. More than ever we need climate action to be able to tackle other crisis. In this case, the Office of the Prime Minister and the COVID-19 Task Force should review their responsive action and emphasize the affected communities but also the Ministry of Water and Environment should implement the penalties as stipulated the National Environment Act, 2019 as well as implement the Presidential Directives on cancellation of illegal titles in wetlands and forests.