

# Lake Mburo—a new national park in Africa

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**The opening of a new national park in Uganda is significant and welcome evidence of the resuscitation of the country's commitment to conservation. The author, an FFPS Council member, who has a long and active association with Uganda, attended the ceremonial opening of Lake Mburo National Park last July. He tells the story behind the achievement and makes a plea for international support to enable Uganda to sustain its efforts to reverse the trend towards environmental degradation.**

On the morning of Saturday 14 July 1984 a cloud of dust rose into the sky as lorries, landrovers and cars made their way over a hastily laid track that led to a low hill overlooking Lake Mburo. School children and students, workers and businessmen, dancers, bands, politicians and scientists converged in a noisy cheerful crowd on this spot in south-western Uganda to celebrate a very remarkable event—the birth of a new national park in one of the loveliest areas of Uganda. Few people at the ceremony and practically no one



Klipspringer in Lake Mburo National Park (*J.B. White*).  
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outside Uganda was likely to appreciate the scale of this achievement.

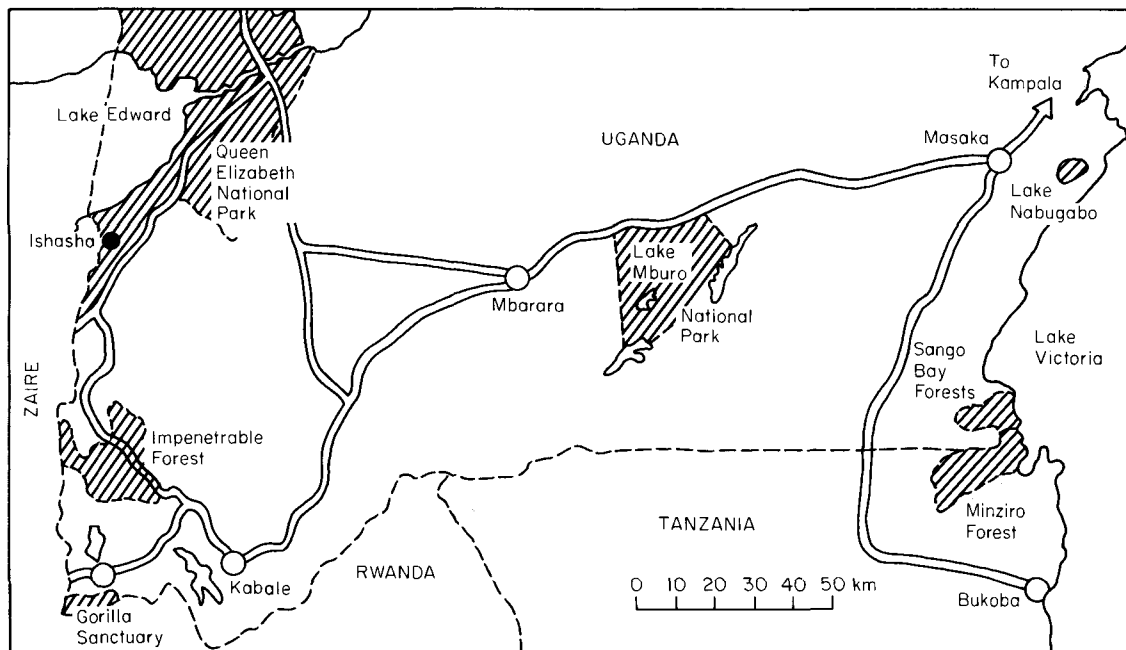
During the first half of this century Lake Mbuo was known to a handful of naturalists as one of the premier wildlife areas in East Africa, some preferred its sculptured landscape, idyllic lake shores and smaller scale to the grandeur of Serengeti. Both areas were once comparable in range of species and animal abundance. Eland, buffalo, waterbuck, topi, sitatunga, impala, zebra, roan antelope, reedbuck, oribi, klipspringer, lion, leopard, hippo, warthog, baboon were common animals and sufficient remain to recover their numbers. The varied vegetation, rolling grassy hills, rocky scree, rich acacia-wooded valleys, forest galleries and swamps by the rivers and lakes support a wealth of smaller animals and birds, which make every area of the Park alive with variety, interest and colour.

This jewelled corner of Ankole was recognised as a superb wildlife area and gazetted as a game reserve at an early date. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s wildlife flourished and no settlement was permitted in the Reserve. The opening up of large areas of Ankole to ranching and settlement

in the late 1950s and 1960s was made possible by a concerted anti-tsetse campaign which involved spraying with DDT, massive tree-felling and bush clearance and the shooting of 44,000 large mammals (including the elimination of rare species such as the giant hog).

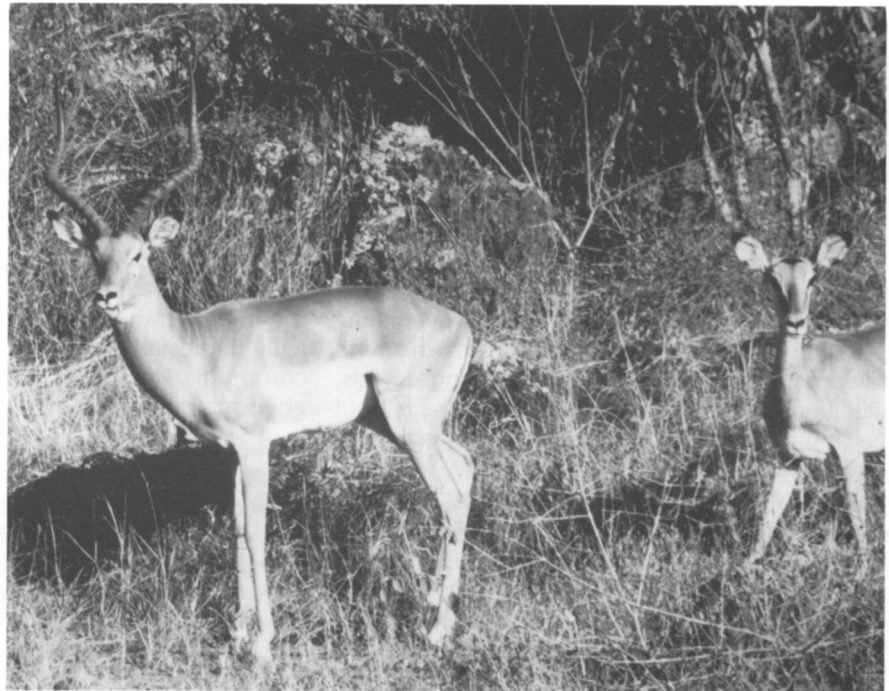
Very large areas of land that had been inaccessible were converted over a short period into highly desirable rangeland. Those best placed to benefit from this very rapid conversion were neighbouring cattle owners who already had the breeding stock to fill the biological vacuum created by the game and tsetse clearance. Population and political pressures in nearby Rwanda provided essentially agriculturally-based refugee settlers. In the ensuing land-rush the boundaries of Lake Mbuo Game Reserve were ignored and I remember the Chief Game Warden, Mr Ruweza, tearing his hair in frustration at the humiliations that his department and staff were forced to endure.

In 1966 four million dollars of US aid were earmarked for the development of ranches in Ankole. Their confidence bolstered by money and machines, functionaries of the livestock and



Map to show location of Lake Mbuo National Park.

Impala in  
Lake Mbuo  
National Park  
(J.B. White).



veterinary department bluntly described the Game Reserve as a source of competition, disease and nuisance—an untidy obstacle to their plans for a gigantic beeflot. There was one weekend when Ankole Ranching Scheme employees mobilised their bulldozers and fencing to excise a critical watering point out of the Game Reserve, thus appropriating the water for livestock. A demoralised Wildlife Department was helpless in the face of this *fait accompli* and the wild animals enclosed behind the fence provided some free sport that was well-advertised at the time.

With the advent of Idi Amin's regime the Game Reserve became a larder for the nearby barracks at Mbarara and settlement by illegal squatters became quite extensive. Furthermore one of the richer and more influential cattle-owners in Ankole ran some 6000 head of cattle over a large part of the Reserve and it was his recent demise that removed just one of the numerous obstacles faced by those who have not only re-asserted legality but gone on to inaugurate the first of the new national parks first envisioned and planned by far-seeing Ugandans in the days before Amin's reign of terror.

The leading light in this initiative has been the  
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Minister of State in the Office of the President who holds the portfolio of Tourism and Wildlife, Christopher Rwakasisi. His drive and personality have overcome substantial opposition from local vested interests, but it should be remembered that the initial impetus came from the District Council of Mbarara who, in August of 1982, recommended that Lake Mbuo be upgraded to national park. Their resolution was taken up by Parliament in December 1982. The subsequent relocation of illegal squatters was lengthy and costly as they numbered several thousand people. Local criticism of this resettlement was vociferous but the Prime Minister in opening the Park stressed that the Government had been as humane and considerate as it could be in what was inevitably a painful uprooting.

Why did the Councillors in Mbarara feel they needed a national park? In his welcoming speech Christopher Rwakasisi voiced a vision of the future that is perhaps already perceptible in the dusty lorry-dominated ruins of Mbarara and is certainly a reality in the overcrowded streets of Kampala. He said: 'We are now engaged in the great task of rehabilitating our economy, we are doing it with remarkable success. Give it a little

time, our economy will be buoyant again. Our towns and cities will expand and grow. There will be congestion. There will be noise. Places like this we are trying to set aside and preserve will be of premium recreational value. Our children's children will need and appreciate places of this nature where they will, as it were, enjoy a quiet bliss from the pressures of big towns and cities.' He went on to describe plans for the second phase of Uganda's National Environmental and Conservation Strategy, in which everything possible will be done to stop and reverse the trend towards degradation. He put saving forests, wildlife, swamps and water catchments first, but he reminded his audience that the national parks once generated foreign exchange earnings second only to cotton and coffee. The economy and infrastructure will soon be capable of sustaining a refurbished tourist trade and Lake Mburo has the advantage of being only two-and-a-half hours drive from Kampala, but it is clear that tourists will only come in significant numbers when the soldiers return to their barracks and no longer punctuate the roads with their road blocks.

Meanwhile, influential figures like Minister Rwakasisi, Professor Kayanja and many others have thrown their weight behind grass-roots conservation and supported a rapidly expanding network of wildlife clubs. It is an open secret in Uganda that proposals first put forward by Uganda National Parks in 1970 to upgrade the Impenetrable or Bwindi-Kayonza Forest to national park status have been resuscitated. This forest is habitat for the last viable population of mountain gorillas in Uganda and supports one of the greatest concentrations of rare forest animals and plants in Africa. Its survival is a top priority for the region. If the Impenetrable Forest were to become a national park it would be the most significant contribution to conservation in eastern Africa in several decades.

In a recent survey Harcourt (1981) reported on the continuous exploitation (largely benefitting foreigners) that the forest has suffered for over 10 years. My own impression is that only national park status is likely to give the authorities muscle enough to protect it. Ivory poachers from Zaïre have killed all but a few dozen of the elephants. Timber is smuggled out daily to Rwanda. Armed gold diggers make extensive workings along the

rivers, trap duikers and other animals for recreation and sell the gold across the border. Naturally these enterprises, like those at Lake Mburo, have local supporters, sometimes in influential circles, but there is a good chance that they may meet their match in the present generation of Ugandan conservationists who include several ministers and other public figures, many young educated Ugandans and a solid core of indigenous scientists and academics. Needless to say, protection of the Impenetrable has massive moral (and potentially financial) support from the international community, particularly informed scientists and environmentalists.

It has to be recognised, however, that this renascent concern for the environment in Uganda has a very fragile base both politically and financially and those who spearhead the foundation of new parks and protection of old ones fight continuous battles against formidable opposition.

All the major international conservation organisations would be bound, by the very principles on which they were founded, to support an Impenetrable Forest National Park and the resulting funds can be predicted to dwarf the pathetic revenue presently earned by timber and prospecting licences.

The funding of Lake Mburo is less predictable. Given a tourist trade it should be self-supportive in a short period but a larger political and economic scene determines that. It is my personal, and perhaps unpopular, opinion that US aid could offset some of the adverse criticism it earned from its role in the Ankole Ranching Scheme by giving generously towards this fledgling Park.

Many national parks in Africa had colonial beginnings—here instead is a park that owes its entire existence to local initiative and imagination. Here is a field in which Uganda deserves all the support it can get. I, for one, hope to camp on the shores of Lake Mburo next year.

#### Reference

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