



Mpanga gorge: Uganda's ecological treasure in danger!



Mpanga falls is located in western Uganda on the eastern edge of Queen Elizabeth National Park, north eastern corner of Lake George. This area contains the largest cycad forest population in the world. However an American-based company called 'South Asia Energy Management Systems' is in the process of bulldozing the cycad plants, the national treasure, for a paltry 18 Mega watt Hydro Electricity Power dam.

Mpanga River originates upstream from Kibale National Park and flows through a cleft over the 50m Mpanga falls. The river then flows gently along the boundary of QENP into Lake George Ramsar site. From 100 yards above the falls down to Lake George is part of the QENP national park. In the escarpments of the gorge before and after Mpanga falls lies one of the most ecologically important areas in the world for the precious and priceless cycads, *Encephalartos whitelockii*. The cycads are an ancient plant believed to have survived over 200-300 million years.

In his book, Uganda's Great Rift Valley, Andy Roberts describes the cycads as a "living fossil". It is probably the only Uganda's surviving "dinosaur". Environmental changes have reduced the range of the cycads around the world and they survive in small pockets wherever they exist. In some countries these cycads may be represented by a single plant. Uganda is blessed with the largest surviving cycad forest in the world. This plant is described as Critically endangered according to IUCN with a very small area of occupancy less than 5sq km.

Uganda is a signatory to the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) (the focal point for convention is NEMA) and as a party to this convention, Uganda has a responsibility and obligation to protect such a national and global ecological treasure. This plant is an equivalent of Mountain Gorilla in animals for Uganda. The combination of Mpanga falls, the cycad population and the vicinity to the eastern part of QENP as well as Kibale NP makes this area an immense tourist spinner. In fact the fast alert to the destruction of the cycads was made by tourists and now there is a big alarm all over the world about the survival of the "Ugandan dinosaur".



Encephalartos whitelockii male cone



cycads destroyed by road construction

The attraction and the interest that Mpanga area exudes to researchers, tourists and private collectors makes this spot an area to be strictly guarded by Uganda as a country. The most unfortunate part of this story is that Uganda again has chosen the path of destruction rather than the conservation of it's uniqueness. This treasure has been condemned for the development of an 18MW HEP dam. As I write this letter, the South Asia Energy management Systems has commenced the destruction of the cycads as a prerequisite for the construction of the dam. Roads and other infrastructure are criss crossing the cycad contour zone and hundreds of the trees have already been destroyed. I visited the Mpanga gorge and the construction site and it seems that the construction company gives no regard to the 'primitive plants'.

An EIA produced for the proposed development was highly lacking and in some sections it reads like a desk study report and barely talked about the significance of the cycads. One of the recommendations in this report was that communities should be encouraged to grow the cycads in order for the plants to survive. This means that according to the EIA report, the cycads were condemned already from their natural habitat. This was not the purpose of the EIA study in the first place; however this confirms my suspicion that no proper assessment was actually done or the consultant had no idea what the cycad plants were. How can communities start propagating plants that take hundreds of years to grow when you are destroying the natural habitat? Local community activities are also a big threat to the cycads. It was evident that communities are cutting down and burning large areas for cultivation or grazing. There were reports of harvesting seeds for food and sale. This problem needs to be urgently addressed.

As if this was not bad enough, National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) approved the EIA report and issued a certificate of approval No. 001269 on 31st May 2007. NEMA also gave the conditions of approval, which are always similar for all projects. Ironically the approval certificate does not even mention the word cycads or endemic plants or ecological sensitive area. This was a big oversight on NEMA's part that concealed critical information from the construction company and the destruction may be in complete ignorance of the significance of cycads as special plants and a blessing to Uganda as a nation.

Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) expressed concerns about the EIA study which was acknowledged by NEMA, to reconsider the certificate of approval and "requested NEMA to halt the on-going works at Mpanga falls" and recommended a fresh submission of the EIA statement for review. I have talked to senior officers from both institutions and there seems to be consensus on conducting a fresh EIA study. However the destruction of the cycad forest has commenced in disregard to the technical advice from the wildlife body (UWA). The roads and other infrastructure developments continue to eat up the landscape. Surprisingly, these roads were not even part of the EIA study.

Damming of the river and water diversion through the canal will cause major hydrological changes in the river valley. The canal is expected to divert over 8 cubic metres of water of the estimated 16 at high water level. Besides, the local government of Kamwenge District is constructing a water supply plant that will draw 10 cubic metres of water per day from the same river. The resultant effect may be little or no water over the falls. However no hydrological report is available

The ecology of the whole area will be changed and destroyed by this development and of course the merciless bulldozers of the construction company are on the verge of destroying one of the most priceless treasures of this land. The ecology of the site is not fully known, the EIA did not meet the minimum requirements and the technical advice was not considered. So then what information did NEMA base itself to approve the EIA study and recommend the development of the dam to go on? What a loss this country will bear for only 18MW of electricity?.

Why is Uganda very insensitive to tourism sites when tourism is the second largest foreign exchange earner bringing in over \$450 million annually? Why would we destroy the very sites that we are spending millions of dollars to advertise for tourism? Is Mpanga falls project a more urgent dam than one proposed for Karuma Falls, etc? No one is opposed to energy development and it is clear that lack of energy is a threat to environment conservation but can't we be more responsible in our quest for increased energy? I visited the site for three days together with a botanist and it is my strong opinion that the dam construction on Mpanga River is an actual and big threat to the survival of the endemic cycad population and the entire ecological system.

NEMA and UWA must reconsider this development and act quickly, otherwise it will be shameful of a country "Gifted by Nature" to destroy the largest cycad forest in the world located within our borders.

For more information;

Achilles Byaruhanga, Executive Director

NatureUganda