

The water levels of Lake Victoria have been dropping but reached alarming proportions around 2004/2005. Around 2005, water dropped by about 2.4 metres, which is a lot of water lost considering the expanse and huge surface area of the Lake Victoria.

To illustrate this point, in Mwanza water supplies dwindled and the Water Supply Department had to extend the pipes a long distance to reach the new water levels.

Ships, which used to haul 200 tons cargo, could only handle up to 80 tons, otherwise they would risk running a ground.

In Kisumu the old ships, which were docking in waters, were now stuck in mud as water levels had rescinded tremendously.

In Jinja there was little water flowing through, that some turbines had to be shut down and electricity supply became a big problem.

The 3 Partner States, which share this God given resource, were alarmed.

An extensive tour by the East African Community Secretariat and the 3 Partner States represented by; Permanent Secretaries and technical people made a fact-finding tour around the lake. The levels of the lake were shocking and the consequences alarming. Water supply for the towns around the lake, especially those that were designed after the heavy rains of 1961 were badly affected. Docks for ships were operating at very low levels and at a loss.

Breeding grounds for fish were badly affected. The fish catch for processing plants was low. Electricity generation and consequent supply from Jinja power stations, was to say the least, at near dangerous levels.

Before I come to the relevance of this article, let me refer to two small natural resources, which are related to the subject. Lake Jipe is a small lake near Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and near the border with Kenya. It was a lake full of life, supporting a fishing and farming community as well as wildlife. There is a stream that flows into this lake.

Some important people, in order to “create wealth” upstream, diverted the water for irrigation schemes. The whole stream was diverted. The lake dried up and became muddy. Elephants got physically stuck in the mud. Fishing and farming collapsed. The lives of the people became miserable.

Fortunately the Community Secretariat, the East African Legislative Assembly and the legal fraternity, through the East African Law Society took interest. The law society threatened to expose the leaders and sue them. Stakeholders made a concerted effort. About 90% of the stream water was allowed to flow normally again.

The lake came back to life and so did the community around.

The second example is Lake Nakuru, famous for flamingos.

River Elburgon flows from Mau natural Equatorial forest. The forest and land around it was allocated to “developers”. They chopped the forest and cleared the land for farming. The river dwindled; by 2003, the lake had dropped by 1.5 meters. A good number of flamingos fled into exile in search of greener pastures. (read water.) Lake Nakuru is very shallow. Recently I was told that one can literally walk through, this shallow and endangered lake.

When the tour of lake Victoria was completed, the relevant experts had to review the situation, the causes of the low levels and what should be done.

One of the main causes is;

- Shortage of rainfall

- Reduction in water that flows into the lake naturally by rivers; and
- Silting.

All the above are interrelated. The cutting down of natural forests, draining of wetlands, loss of rain, loss of water inflow by rivers and what makes matters worse, the little water that flows in is muddy, thus silting the lake. This affects the natural breeding grounds for fish and hence fish stocks.

One of the recommendations was that Partner States should halt and reverse the destruction of natural forests within the lake basin and protect the sources of water and riverbanks. This covers Tanzania Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.

Further more, on environmental issues, the East African Community Treaty to which the 3 Partner States have acceded, states;

ARTICLE 111.

“The Partner States recognise that development activities may have negative impacts on the environment leading to the degradation of the environment and depletion of natural resources and that a clean and healthy environment is a prerequisite for sustainable development.”

ARTICLE 112.

“For the purpose of Article 111 of this Treaty, the Partner States undertake to co-operate in the management of the environment and agree to:

- a) *Develop a common environment management policy that would sustain the eco-system of the Partner States, prevent, arrest and reverse the effect of environmental degradation;*
- e) *Adopt environmentally sound management techniques for the control of land degradation, such as soil erosion, desertification and forest encroachment;”*

Lake Victoria is a very shallow lake. The deepest part in this basin is only 84 metres. One leading environmentalist, Professor Okedi predicted that at the rate at which we are mis-managing this major natural resource, Lake Victoria could disappear in 150 years. This may sound too far but considering that the Queen Mother of England lived to be 101 years, this could happen during the lifetime of the grand children of the current youth.

One third of Lake Chad is already gone due to mismanagement and the consequences are bad.

Many contributors have addressed the importance of Mabira Forest to the survival of Lake Victoria, River Nile and its tributaries and Lake Kyoga, and I don't have to dwell on it.

Some people have argued that it is easier to plant forests than to build an industry. I would like to know which country has ever planted and sustained a natural forest? To say that sugar cane is a forest is to abuse the intelligence of our people. When sugar cane gardens are ploughed for planting, some soil will run off thus silting the lakes already starved of rain due to interference with the rain forests.

Investors come and can shift. Industries can relocate and shift business. Sugar can even find another land or country. But once a natural forest is gone, it is irreplaceable and the consequences will affect present and worse still future generations.

The best example is the Dominican Republic and Haiti. They are on the same island. Haiti destroyed its forest cover and the Dominican Republic preserved its forest cover and the environment. The recent floods left many dead and homeless in Haiti and the Dominican Republic its neighbours, never suffered the same. Unless there are other cogent reasons not yet given to the public, those given so far are not good enough to warrant the destruction of this critical natural resource. I appeal to the Government to reconsider its decision. It is not too late. I appeal to the Metha Group to look elsewhere.

It is easier to look else where for an alternative land for sugar planting. You can never reallocate a natural forest. It is possible to irrigate a huge sugar plantation. It is not possible to plant a natural forest even through irrigation.

We owe it to the present and future generation to preserve and protect Mabira forest.