





PHOTO: UCF

The Recovery of Murchison Falls National Park and its Impact on Megaherbivore Numbers

Derek Lubangakene

Uganda Conservation Foundation, Uganda

Before the 1970s, Murchison Falls National Park was home to Africa's highest biomass of elephants and other megaherbivores. Subsequent decades of political insecurity, and a twenty-year insurgency under the Lord's Resistance Army, led to an unprecedented decline in elephant populations and wildlife numbers across board. Elephants were widely poached and their ivory was traded for arms, and as such, elephant populations dropped from 16,000 in the 1960s to less than 1,000 in early 2000s.

Even after security was reinstated, the park still faced the problem of having less-than-adequate investment in Uganda Wildlife Authority's (UWA) ability to effectively manage its estate. This was further compounded by the return of human settlement in the region. Exploitation of park resources drastically increased, and so did instances of crop-raiding and human-wildlife conflict, problems that the park still faces to this day.

Despite this, the return of human settlement also resulted in increased investment in regional development; as a result, tourism slowly stabilized. Since the late 2000s the park and communities surrounding the protected area have been benefitting from tourism revenue and the expansion of the tourism value-chain. Poaching, however, remained high across the park, especially in the Delta area, the park's main tourism hotspot. Poachers exploited UWA's inability to secure the waterways and the lack of the basic foundations of park management. The poachers often disguised themselves as fishermen and crossed the Albert Nile to lay snares and wheel traps. Many elephants, giraffes, and other wildlife suffered agonizing injuries and deaths at the hands of these indiscriminate poaching implements.

At the time, park management had neither the resources nor the infrastructure to provide a strong anti-poaching presence across the park, especially in key strategic habitats. Many ranger posts were still situated in the wrong areas. These ranger posts, constructed in the 1960s to deter encroachment along the park boundaries, couldn't effectively respond to poaching. Without the basic foundations of park management in place, wildlife numbers would continue to plummet.

In response, the Uganda Conservation Foundation (UCF) with UWA established the Recovery of Murchison Falls National Park program in 2012. The program was established to mitigate the rising threats of poaching and to install the basic founding of long-term park management.

Since then, the program has steadily invested in strengthening four basic pillars:

1. Install key infrastructure (ranger posts and marine ranger stations) and capability in strategic locations



Ranger discussing snares and traps recovered from Murchison Falls National Park. Photo: UCF.

2. Provide training to UWA, and adequate equipment to ensure rangers are able to carry out their tasks,
3. Install park-wide communications network, and
4. Ensure improved accessibility and essential means of transport.

Without these four pillars and additional capabilities such as the veterinary response unit (also built and sponsored by UCF), UWA would continue to react instead of being proactive in managing the threats facing the park.

The Recovery of Murchison Falls program has since then constructed and equipped twelve ranger posts in strategically important landscapes, three marine ranger stations (each equipped with patrol boats), installed the digital radio communications network across the park, and constructed the Law Enforcement Center at the park headquarters in Mubaku. The Center includes a police station, armory, Joint Operations Command Center, a central stores facility, and a guard room). From here, all park operations are planned and managed, whether it's responding to injured animals, anti-poaching, crop-raiding, or even tourists getting stuck in the mud!

UWA's anti-poaching presence has since increased from 5% of the park to over 70% of the park. Additionally, more than 200 rangers have benefitted from various



◀ Semanya Marine Ranger Station, partially spearheaded by UCF. Photo: UCF.

training, including marine ranger training, and most recently junior leadership training conducted by the British and US military, covering subjects such as first aid, team work and leadership, human rights, navigation and operations planning and reporting skills, communications, and patrol techniques.

To compliment these gains, the recovery program also set out to establish UWA's marine capability. Since 2013, the program has constructed three marine ranger stations—Semanya, Paraa, and Kabim—and provided four patrol boats. UCF has over the years maintained these patrol boats and others not provided by the program. This has ensured the marine unit has round-the-clock control of the waterways. Frequent patrols have provided an effective deterrent against poachers. The unit is also able to respond to search-and-rescue operations, as well as remove snare and illegal fishing nets from the protected areas, and are able to respond to local community and tourism boat accidents. Over 42 tons of snares have been collected from the Delta region alone.

Before the establishment of the Program and the marine unit, snares were killing huge numbers of wildlife; one in three elephants had a fresh snare wound, many with trunks missing. Nubian (Rothschild's) giraffe were in incredible trouble, and thanks to the UWA anti-poaching efforts and investment into the veterinary response unit, their numbers have increased from 400 to over 2,000. All it took was protection.

Across the park, wildlife numbers continue to rise in a big way, despite poaching pushing hard. Elephant numbers are pushing towards 3,000 and growing as fast as elephant biology allows! However, snares continue to injure wildlife badly. UCF remains committed to supporting the park's veterinary unit. UCF has donated a new response land cruiser, veterinary drugs, dart guns, and lab equipment in the UCF-sponsored veterinary and research and

monitoring lab located in the park headquarters.

With the basic foundations of park management in place, Murchison Falls was recovering beyond all expectations and records. Wildlife numbers were increasing at incredible rates and Murchison Falls was the most visited park. In 2019 the park broke its own visitor records. Revenue-sharing with communities (20% of all park gate fees) had increased from a meager \$50,000 pa to over \$400,000 pa. Among the park-adjacent communities, attitudes towards wildlife conservation continue to change for the better.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has greatly impacted the progress of the recovery program. The pandemic crippled tourism, not only in Uganda, but across Africa. The collapse of tourism puts the program in a precarious position, as tourism revenue accounts for much of UWA's operational budget. With that revenue gone, UWA has had to scale back on some of its operations. As such, UCF and a few other organizations have had to step up to help. In addition to supporting park operations, UCF continues to invest in the recovery program and in strengthening the foundations of park management already in place.

Communities have had all links to tourism dwindle, supply chains to direct employment decline, and of course the revenue-sharing has gone almost completely. To make matters worse, there have been other impacts of the lockdown, COVID-19 itself, and the River Nile flooding to record levels, destroying crops and severely hampering operations. What a year...as it has been for everyone. But, UWA's ability to cope has been hugely improved due to the long-term investments made through the Recovery of Murchison Falls program, just as UCF is also continuing to do in Queen Elizabeth National Park.

For once, the park is now in a position to proactively prevent and manage many threats. UWA is winning, despite it all.