



UGANDA

population: **26 million**
capital: **Kampala**
total land area: **19,710,000 ha**

primary forest 1990: **4,924,000 ha**
primary forest 2005: **3,627,000 ha**
primary forest lost 1990-2005: **1,297,000 ha**

UGANDA

Assisting Uganda's Batwa people

by T ea Braun, Coordinator, Africa Legal and Human Rights Programme, Forest Peoples Project.

The Batwa, more commonly known by the misnomer 'Pygmies', were originally forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers, practising a highly sustainable, traditional way of life in the high mountainous forest areas of the Great Lakes region in Central Africa. They are still to be found living in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and eastern DRC.

The Batwa of present-day Uganda total approximately 6,700 in number. They and their ancestors are the original inhabitants of the Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks, which were gazetted as forest reserves by the colonial administration in the 1930s, and later upgraded to national parks by the post-colonial government in 1991. For millennia, the Batwa had developed and maintained a close relationship with these forests: it was their home, providing them with sustenance and medicines, containing their sacred sites, and forming the fundamental basis of their unique cultural and socio-economic modes of expression. Not taken into account in the development of national conservation initiatives, the Batwa were gradually evicted and excluded from these ancestral lands and have since found themselves in a highly marginalized situation living on the fringes of the dominant society. They were not consulted about the creation of the parks on their lands, nor did they receive compensation for the loss of those lands.

The most acute impact of the Batwa's forced eviction and exclusion from their ancestral territory has been landlessness and severe poverty. After the park creation in 1991, 82 percent of Batwa were entirely landless, living either as squatters on the land of others, or on government or church land. The Batwa are still used as cheap labour by landowners, working the fields in exchange for the right to squat temporarily on the land and receiving paltry handouts of food and clothing. Batwa children suffer some of the lowest rates of education in Africa, with less than half attending primary school and a mere handful continuing onto high school, largely due to lack of food and other poverty-related ills.



Mutwa woman

In 2000, with the assistance of the UK-based charity, Forest Peoples Programme, the Batwa established their own community-based organisation - The United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda (UOBDU) - to lobby for their rights and help alleviate their suffering. UOBDU has since been engaged in education, agriculture, advocacy and income-generation initiatives on behalf of the Batwa.

Rainforest Concern recently donated \$25,000 to UOBDU to help the Batwa purchase approximately 50 acres of private, forested land abutting Bwindi National Park, in the Kanungu District of southwest Uganda. The land transaction was completed in May 2006 and UOBDU is now in the process of establishing a Batwa trust to hold this land collectively and in perpetuity for the Batwa. This initiative will not only help the Batwa, but will ensure that the purchased land remains forested, enhancing forest conservation in an area well known for its



The Batwa demarcate their newly purchased land

gorilla population. By creating a collective land trust, the land will be held in perpetuity by the area's original forest conservationists (the Batwa), and this land will be outside the reach of other private interests that may wish to clear or otherwise degrade the land.

Over the next year, UOBDU will be encouraging more donors to help increase the Batwa land base both by acquiring additional forested land and by transferring other small plots of housing and agricultural land currently held 'on behalf of the Batwa' to the Batwa land trust. Thus, with continued effort the Batwa people and the unique biodiversity of the forests in which they abide will continue to exist and to thrive.

Please help support UOBDU by donating money specifically to Batwa land and development initiatives - simply indicate 'Uganda Batwa' when submitting your next donation.



Batwa women at the 2006 UOBDU AGM