

The public awareness campaigns organised by the Union des Femmes pour L'Entraide de Developement to prevent fires in Burundi

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Abstract

1. Introduction

Burundi is a small country in the heart of Africa between 2° 30' and 40° 30' latitude South and 29° 00' and 31° 00' latitude east covering a surface area of 27 834 km².

Before the political crisis of 1993, the natural and artificial forests together covered 200 000ha, or about 8% of the country. The crisis brought devastation to more than 30 000ha. The Kibira Park alone covers 40 000ha, at an altitude of 1600-2600 m, it stretches across Burundi from the centre to the north west of the country. It is montane forest made up of different strata of vegetation in various forms, of which some species are endemic. The existence of an herbaceous layer with trees covering a rocky soil at 2300m altitude is particularly interesting. The magnificent large trees reach as high as 50m with a forest of bamboos in deep soil at 1900-2300m. Areas at low altitudes in Kibira, 1600-1900m, are made up of a transition zone between mesophile forest and rainforest forest; snakes; porcupines, chimpanzees, baboons and a diversity of bird species add variety to this terrestrial paradise.

2. The damage caused by the crisis to the environment

Since the political crisis of 1993, uncontrolled destruction by armed gangs, bush fires (more than 150ha burnt in September 2000), illegal cutting of wood products, farming, logging, gold panning, poaching, research for medicinal plants, grazing, charcoal production, and security measures are all in the process of disfiguring these montane forests leaving a bare landscape, and flattening the surrounding areas, creating a scene of devastation. Thus the Kibira Park which remains a centre of interest much sought after by several user groups (local population, administration, army, technical services as well as the armed rebels) has not escaped the problem of deforestation which could accentuate the risk of increasing desertification in sub-Saharan Africa. The problem is not yet felt but is perceptible because of the late rains and the merging of the seasons, which severely hampered the farmers, during 1998-2001. The measures taken, which are limited to simply raising the awareness about the situation, do not really refer to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification because few national organisations are involved in it. Training in the subject of desertification would be ideal for young Burundi environmentalists in order to fight this problem with concrete actions.

3. Raising awareness

The U.F.E.D, (UNION des FEMMES POUR L, ENTRAIDE DE DEVELOPPMENT) together with other environmental organisations and the media organised awareness campaigns in order to develop an understanding amongst the users of the economic and ecological benefits that this forest offers. This forested area covers a large part of the Congo-Nile watershed protecting it and the many rivers that rise in this area. It regulates the climate and the flow of the rivers, and it is an important habitat for biodiversity. It also protects infrastructures such as hydroelectric dams from silting up. Another useful action carried out by the Association d'Encadrement, de Production et de Vulgarisation (AEPV-DUFASHANYE) was to alleviate the suffering of this vulnerable local population by developing income-generating micro-projects using the Participatory approach which develops knowledge of management and gives responsibility to these people. The principle cause of the problem "populationsustainable management" of forest resources is poverty, "an empty stomach has no ears".

A major breakthrough has been made, after numerous requests; the government has recently brought into force a law which defines the limits of the Kibira Park and the nature reserves. An environmental code has been passed in the National Parliament at the beginning of 2001. Also, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the Burundi government have signed a convention of cooperation on the project "Parks for peace" which includes the Kibira forest in Burundi, Virunga forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Volcanoes Park in Rwanda. This project supports and reinforces the efforts of AEPV-DUFASHANYE to help the local populations affected by war by promoting income-generating activities, supporting forestry and small plantations around the parks and raising awareness amongst the people, the administrative and military authorities about the project concept "Parks for peace" in order to transform this park into a site which will be respected by everyone, even during periods of conflict.

The idea of the transfer of technology has not yet been accepted in our country and the ABO has already approached many organisations particularly the Burundi branch of the Global Biodiversity Institute to develop training and education on this subject, in cooperation with local nature conservationists.

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