
Rwanda: Indigenous Batwa Opening Channels of Cooperation with Conservation

In 1925 King Albert 1st of Belgium created a Protected Volcano Zone covering present Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and this later became Albert National Park. In 1960 Albert Park was split into the Virunga Park, and the Parc des Volcans in northwest Rwanda. Both are important ecotourism sites due to their populations of endangered mountain gorillas. Nyungwe National Park in the Rwandan South West was established as a Forest Reserve in 1933, and like the area around Volcans is a zone of high biodiversity, especially in relation to the much larger, adjoining areas that have been taken over for cultivation by Rwanda's dense population.

Both of these protected areas overlap the traditional lands of indigenous Batwa, yet Batwa were not consulted when the parks were established, even though these forests were central to Batwa livelihoods at the time of their creation. Over the intervening years, removal of human inhabitants from protected forests and increasing enforcement measures by conservation authorities, coupled with demands on Rwanda's scarce land and forest resources by Rwanda's growing population and large numbers of returning refugees has led to extreme pressures on forest-dwelling Batwa livelihoods. The Rwandan Batwa can no longer practice a forest-based lifestyle. Central problems for these Batwa is their persistent inability to secure land for their communities outside the forests, and their social marginalisation which is due to deep-seated prejudice against the Batwa as a 'Pygmy' people and their extreme poverty. Surveys carried out in 1993 and 1997 showed that only 1.6% and 1.5% of Batwa families respectively had agricultural land compared with a national average of 85%. Batwa access to health care and education is very low. Batwa primary school enrolment is estimated at 28% compared to a national average of 88% .

Over the past few decades Batwa communities have received little information about the management of either Volcans or Nyungwe Parks, even though in both regions many Batwa have remained reliant on the resources within them to secure their livelihoods, especially around Nyungwe Forest in the more remote South West. Hunting, honey collecting, and gathering food and material from the forest are still important elements in the cultural of current and former forest dwelling Batwa communities. Batwa in these two case study areas are aware, however, that "their" forests have come under outside protection; their accounts of their evictions from the protected areas and the repressive measures employed against Batwa who try to continue to secure their livelihood from the protected forests are illustrative:

"You speak to me of the parks, and all that I know is that the authorities and soldiers came from far away, in order to chase us away with guns and tell us never to return to the volcanoes, where we were forbidden to hunt, look for honey, water, and wood", said a Batwa man.

Despite this attitude by park managers, and the ongoing threat of repression by the forest guards near their rural communities, many Batwa living around both protected areas still rely partially upon forest resources, especially since there are few alternative livelihood options open to them, due to their socio-economic marginalisation and lack of land. Despite their dependence on forest resources, prior to 2001 Rwandan government and NGO conservation agencies had never consulted them

about park management plans, and have continued to apply traditional enforcement measures in line with national conservation legislation. These include provisions barring hunting and gathering activities in the forests, which in their present form are incompatible with the continuation of Batwa forest-based livelihoods:

"Our objective was to protect the environment. When we start our work, we are not interested in knowing who did or did not live in the forest from hunting and gathering. Our mission is to forbid all activities in the forest by the resident population, hence it is not our role to identify Batwa in the forests", said Rwandan protected area manager.

Since 2001 in Rwanda a dialogue has opened up between indigenous Batwa and government agencies, including the Office Rwandais pour Tourisme et Parcs Nationaux (ORTPN), through the efforts of CAURWA, the Rwandan Batwa NGO. CAURWA engaged with government ministries and international conservation organisations to make them aware of the impact of Volcans and Nyungwe National Parks on Batwa communities, and facilitated local workshops between Batwa and conservation authorities in the two case study areas. These consultations have led to increasing cooperation between conservation authorities, CAURWA and local Batwa communities over the development of alternative sources of income for Batwa living near the parks, and have begun a process of dialogue to enable Batwa to secure at least part of their living from the reserve areas.

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