

TWA Communities in Rwanda

Advocating Against the Impact of the Volcanoes National Park

Wednesday 22 July 2020, by [NTAKIRUTIMANA Richard](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2020).

This article focuses on the long way of engagement and struggle of the former forest-dwelling Batwa communities in respect of the policy of Rwandan national unity, that attempts to build a nation of one people as Rwandans on the basis that there is no ethnic identity. However, the Batwa are the third smallest ethnic group, the so-called first peoples in Rwanda, who have survived by hunting and gathering in the forests, thus reclaiming their ethnic identity. This article focuses on the impact of the establishment of national park policies and the intervention of the national government in improving the living conditions of the former forest-dependent Batwa communities in light of the national vision of national unity.

The socio-economic situation of the Batwa today as described in this paper is based on recent research findings on the relationship between the Volcanoes National Park and former forest-dwelling Batwa communities. [1] In order to highlight the current living situation, extracts from focus group discussions, as well as personal interviews conducted in the context of this study with members of the affected Batwa communities, are presented in this paper. Since the notion of national parks started in the nineteenth century, the dominant model of conservation has been one that has resulted in “an approach that seeks to preserve wildlife and their habitat through the forceful exclusion of local people who have traditionally relied on the environment in question for their livelihoods”. [2] In East Africa, historically, the Batwa were forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers, living and practising their cultural and economic way of life in the high mountainous forest areas around Lake Kivu in Rwanda and Lake Edward in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa; today, the Batwa are found living in Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo with an estimated total population of 86,000 to 112,000. [3] In order to combat climate change, and forest and biodiversity loss, conservation policies have been adopted across the continent— although in reality, between the years 2000 and 2010, the African continent saw a net annual forest loss of 3.4 million hectares [4]— and such policies have come at a human cost, including, but not limited to, forced land evictions, failed compensation schemes, and the loss of cultural sites and socio-economic opportunities.

“Fortress conservation” or “the fines and fences” methods to conservation have created tensions and accusations of the local communities destroying ecosystems. [5] In contrast, local communities portray their lifestyle as protective of the environment, rather than exploitative. [6] Furthermore, local residents have been excluded from conservation activities or, when they have been included, have found that they have been given ‘privileges’ rather than rights, and more responsibilities than benefits. [7]

Similarly, Rwanda has upheld this conservation approach since its introduction. [8] The Volcanoes National Park, created in 1924, is embedded in narratives of displacement resulting in ever-increasing marginalization. One report from the International Labour Organization noted that, as a result of a loss of habitat, communities like the Twa in Rwanda increasingly have had to offer their labour for extremely low wages, further exacerbating their tenuous economic situation. [9]

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Footnotes

[1] Richard Ntakirutimana and Bennett Collins (2019): Qualifying the Relationship between Volcanoes National Park and Former-Forest Dwelling Twa Communities, Aegis Trust Research and Policy Conference, 24 May 2019.

[2] James Igoe (2002): National Parks and Human Ecosystems: The Challenge to Community Conservation, in: D. Chatty and M. Colchester (eds.), Conservation and Mobile Indigenous Peoples. Displacement, Forced Settlement and Sustainable Development, New York: Berghahn Books, 2002, pp. 77-96.

[3] Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization (UNPO) (2016): Batwa: The History and Culture of a Marginalized People in Central Africa, 23 March 2016, available at <https://unpo.org/article/19031>. Last accessed: 17 June 2019.

[4] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2010): Global Forest Resource Assessment 2010: Main Report, FAO Forestry Paper 163, available at <http://www.fao.org/3/i1757e/i1757e00.htm>. Last accessed: 30 March 2020.

[5] K.E. Brandon and M. Wells (1992): Planning for People and Parks: Design Dilemmas, in: World Development, Vol. 20, no. 4, 1992, pp. 557-570.

[6] J.E. Hough and H.E. Prozesky (2010): 'But We Don't Spoil it, We Protect it': Coleske Residents' Conceptualisations of the Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve and its Protection, in: South African Geographical Journal, Vol. 92, no. 2, 2010, pp. 160-172.

[7] Agrippinah Namara (2006): From Paternalism to Real Partnership with Local Communities? Experiences from Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (Uganda), in: Africa Development, Vol. 31, no. 2, 2006, pp. 39-68.

[8] See Decree-law of 26 April 1974 confirming and modifying the decree of 18 June 1973 establishing the Tourism and National Parks Authority (ORTPN). ORTPN replaced the National Park Institute established by the decree of 26 November 1934 and the Tourism Authority

established by the decree of 4 August 1959 and took over all its rights and obligations falling to Rwanda.

[9] International Labour Organization (ILO) (2007): Equality at work: Tackling the challenges, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2007.