

Fears in Uganda for Mabira as sugar company renews its demands

Uganda's Mabira Central Forest Reserve, an Important Bird Area holding around 300 bird species including the Endangered Nahan's Francolin *Francoelinus nahani*, is once again threatened by proposals to degazette almost a quarter of its area for conversion to a sugar cane plantation. "Our campaign now targets Uganda's Members of Parliament, as parliament will have the final decision over the forest", said Achilles Byaruhanga, Executive Director of NatureUganda (BirdLife in Uganda). To that end, we organised a field trip for MPs, including the members of the Natural Resources Committee, as a fact finding mission to explain the community issues and environmental problems surrounding the proposed de-gazettement. The Women MP for Kaberamaido district Hon. Florence Ibi Ekwau commented during the field visit "anyone who is targeting destruction of this forest is an enemy of Uganda and parliament will never accept such a proposal". A delegation including members of NatureUganda and other civil society organisations, Members of Parliament, academics and representatives of professional bodies held a meeting with Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni, to express their concerns at the renewal of these proposals, which were thought to have been defeated following a campaign led by local organisations including NatureUganda in 2006-2007. Also present at the meeting was Mahendra Metha, managing director of the company behind the proposal, Sugar Corporation of Uganda Ltd (SCOUL), who reaffirmed his interest in the forest land and any other land within a radius of 25km to expand sugarcane production. The "Save Mabira Campaign" delegation presented the results of a study by NatureUganda which comprehensively refuted SCOUL's arguments that 7,186 hectares of the Mabira reserve was degraded and should be degazetted and allocated to the company. The Mabira Economic Valuation report was formally launched in Kampala - together with a short documentary film about the forest - on 6th October. Dr Chris Magin, Partner Development Officer of the RSPB said "It is easy to propose destroying natural habitats if you do not realise their true value. This report redresses that information lack and presents arguments in the economic terms that politicians can easily understand." Apart from the high biodiversity value of the forest, and the fact that its ecological integrity has been restored after years of unsustainable exploitation and encroachment, the "Save Mabira Campaign" team pointed out that the forest is an important water catchment; that the large population living around the forest relies on sustainable harvesting of forest products to sustain their livelihoods; and that the combined annual value of ecosystem services, forest products, and other revenues such as tourism provided by the intact forest, is considerably larger than the projected annual revenue from sugar cane. Nature Uganda consistently monitors the forest through the Important Bird Areas monitoring programme and has facts and figures on the improvements in its condition over the

years.(see footnote) The campaign team that suitable land has been offered to SCOUTS outside protected areas; that productivity from existing land could be increased if sugar companies were to invest in more efficient production and processing technologies; and that employment and household incomes would both be increased if the government were to promote sugarcane 'outgrower' schemes in place of large plantations. The giving away of any part of a gazetted forest reserve is not permitted under Uganda's Constitution; and the High Court has recently declared one such 'give-away' for sugar-cane growing, at the Butamira Forest Reserve, to be null and void. Uganda is signatory to a number of key international and regional Conventions that protect forests, and in 2001 signed an agreement with the World Bank which committed the Government of Uganda to protect the wider Mabira ecosystem, including the Mabira Central Forest Reserve. President Museveni expressed willingness to consider alternatives for sugarcane production without changing the land use of Mabira Central Forest Reserve. He also expressed the Government's wish to increase the acreage of Mabira Central Forest Reserve from the current 30,600 hectares through buying additional land around the reserve. The President pledged that any decision to change the land use or degazette the forest reserve will be made by Parliament, and that government will follow all the policy requirements and legal procedures if a decision is made. *****Footnote The Important Bird Areas (IBA) monitoring programme in Uganda is a collaborative effort coordinated by Nature Uganda that involves NFA and other relevant organisations in the country. The programme is partly supported by an European Commission-funded project to institute Protected Areas in Africa.