

Bush burning: Hidden cause for deterioration of livelihoods in West Nile

The World Environment day will be celebrated on 5th June 2008 under the theme “Low Carbon Economy”. As we celebrate the day, one of the environmental problems that need to be addressed is bush burning. Bush fires have caused a lot of environmental degradation and affected livelihoods of communities in West Nile. In West Nile, the major dry season runs from December through January. Field visits and observations have indicated that communities in West Nile are hard working and enterprising. However, their efforts are being frustrated by bush burning. Investments of many years such as trees are destroyed in just few hours of bush fire.

Bush burning has far reaching effects including: disruption of ecosystem balance; loss of pasture for animals; pollution of the atmosphere and loss of scenic beauty. It destroys soil biological, physical and chemical properties hence contributing to environmental degradation, food insecurity and poverty in the region. Although some fires are recklessly started by communities, majority of the fires are deliberately lit. The question that has remained un answered is: If this practise is obviously bad, then what drives people to burn bushes and how do they feel when the bush is burning? My discussion with communities in West Nile revealed that they derive enormous fun/excitement setting bushes ablaze especially among the youth. Other reasons given include; clearing vegetation for quarrying and poles for building, hostilities among communities, removal of old grass to induce the growth of new pasture and as a way of hunting edible rats due to lack of alternative sources of meat/protein . Some officials in the district of Adjumani contend that bush burning is due to poverty of the mind and is embedded in the cultural values and traditional farming systems of the people with little incentive not to burn. This is in agreement with the United Nations Environment Program Report (1999), which argues that poverty has been and remains a major cause and consequence of environmental degradation and resource depletion.

Bush burning issues are currently being handled by National Forest Authority (NFA) and the district departments of Natural Resources and Environment among others. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the impact of these. agencies/institutions has been minimal.

Compliance with the law is still very weak .It has been difficult to reduce or completely eliminate bushfires although there are district ordinances and by-laws on bush burning. This could partly be because of lack of incentives and alternatives to motivate people to comply with the law. Sanctions alone seem not to have worked. Surprisingly, most of the people I interacted with reported being aware of the bush burning regulations. However, they were quick to add that they did not participate in the formulation of these regulations.

Yet in their report titled,” Who knows Who cares? The determinants of enactment ,awareness ,and compliance with Community Natural Resource Management Regulations in Uganda (Nkonya,Pender and Kata(2006), found out that the probability to comply with regulations enacted by village councils was greater than the case with such regulation passed by high legislative bodies such as district councils.

Against this background, there is need for a comprehensive package of interventions to address bush burning. These should comprise of: involvement of the community in formulation and implementation of bylaws, proper enforcement of laws combined with incentives to motivate communities not to start fires. There is also need to conduct anti-bush burning campaigns and formation of anti-bush fire task forces at village levels for self monitoring

Ambrose Bugaari

Environmental Alert