

Bwindi Ape Conservation Partnership (BACEP)

Annual Report 2023

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The Bwindi Ape Conservation Education Partnership (BACEP) aims to conserve endangered great ape species in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park through community conservation awareness programs. BACEP is currently working with four primary schools, all within a radius of five kilometers from the park boundary. These schools are: Ruhija Primary School, Bitanwa Primary School, Mburameizi Primary School and Kanyashogi Primary School. These conservation education activities have been ongoing since 2008. The program employs student-centered teaching, a method of teaching that emphasizes critical thinking and the exchange of ideas between students.

After a long pause since 2020 due to the pandemic by COVID-19 (Ugandan schools were closed for approximately two years), the activities of BACEP resumed in 2023. Local community members living on the edge of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park typically know very little about the environment, conservation issues, or the endangered mountain gorillas living nearby. Furthermore, there is a great need to improve the educational standards, as well as the infrastructure of the schools; they have no electricity or running water, and basic supplies such as papers, pens, chalk and portable chalkboards are always in short supply. One way to address the concern of lack of awareness is to provide lessons and other activities in conservation education to primary school children.

After two years suspension of activities, it was necessary to renew the partnership with the four different schools. This was due to changes in the school staff who did not know the program and how the activities were made. The restart of the activities was well received by the schools and the community members, making it easy to implement the program with the four schools. Participation by the headmasters, teachers and students during the year was high, making the logistics for the lessons and competition easier. The schools actively participated in proposing themes for the competitions as well as decided on the rules and judging systems.

All the activities of BACEP involve collaboration and input from various community members. The presence of the local government from the different villages where the and competitions were held was highly appreciated. Local churches provided us with use of their buildings for the school competitions. Lastly, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) staff participated in the competitions by serving as neutral judges as well as provided their support during competitions and forest walks.

Main Achievements for 2023:

- Renewed partnerships with participating primary schools: Ruhija, Mburameizi, Kanyashogi, and Bitanwa primary schools.
- Provided conservation education lessons on a monthly basis to grades P65 and P6.
- Conducted forest walks with 243 students, to provide the students and teachers with more 'hands-on' experience for learning and conservation education.
- Conducting three competitions among the four schools: debate, sports, and music, dance & drama.
- Promoted gender equity, by ensuring that girls had equal opportunities for participating in all activities.

Table 1. BACEP Activities for 2023.

| Year | Term | MONTH | ACTIVITY |
|----------|-------|------------------------------------|---|
| 2023 | 1 | FEBRUARY | Lesson: What is an ape? |
| | | MARCH | Lesson: Gorilla And Chimp behavior |
| | | | Interschool Competition 1 (Football) |
| | APRIL | Lesson: Gorilla Social Structure | |
| | 2 | JUNE | Lesson: Chimp Social Structure |
| | | | Forest walk Activity |
| | | JULY | Interschool Competition 2 (Drama & Dance) |
| | | AUGUST | Lesson:Gorilla and Chimp Diet |
| | 3 | SEPTEMBER | Lesson: National Park, Bwindi History |
| | | OCTOBER | Lesson: Wildlife in Bwindi |
| NOVEMBER | | Interschool Competition 3 (Debate) | |

Conservation Lessons

A total of 7 lessons on conservation lessons were provided for the students of primary 5 and 6 (Table 1; Figure 1). Each lesson started with a theoretical introduction in which different concepts were explained as well as a discussion among the students to assess their knowledge and misconceptions on the topic. Following the background discussion of the topic, an interactive activity was conducted to engage the students in thinking and learning more about the lesson topic. It is worthwhile to note that concepts taught during the lessons were integrated into the students' thinking about other topics. For example, different terms and issues covered during the lessons were then used in the debate competition.

In 2023, we modified the teaching experience by having the activities led by Enos Nahabwe, BACEP coordinator, as well as one research assistant of the Bwindi Gorilla Project. Having each research assistant participate in a lesson each month enables them to provide their perspective on the topic as well as contribute to the programs' engagement with the community.



Figure 1. Activity during the Gorilla Social Structure lesson.

School Competitions

A total of three competitions were held, one per school term. The first one was the sports competition, which despite not being related to a conservation issue, helps to create bonds among the students of the four different schools. The students played football, with each school having a girl's team and a boy's team. The competition was held at Bitanwa Primary School playground. Community members were selected to act as referees. The winner was Bitanwa Primary School (Figure 2). Each school received a box of exercise books and one box of pens. A total of 120 students participated.



Figure 2. Football Competition Winners: Bitanwa Primary School.

The second competition was the Dance, Drama and Poem. The schools suggested the topic of ‘Population increase and its effects on Bwindi’. Each school prepared a play, a dance and a poem illustrating and explaining the theme. The dance (Figure 3) and the play were conducted in the local language (Rukiga), making it easier for the students to deliver the message and to reach more people from the community. The judges were UWA rangers in order to avoid possible bias in choosing the winner. The competition was held at the Ruhija Church of Uganda. The winner was Mburameizi Primary School and four students of each school were chosen as the best performers. A total of 140 students participated.

Finally, the last competition was the debate. The schools proposed the topic of ‘Wildlife has done more harm than good’. The participation by the students was very high, using what they learned during the conservation lessons to defend their arguments. The main subjects mentioned during the discussions were: the construction of roads, tourism, diseases transmission, development and human-wildlife conflict. Kanyashogi Primary Schools won the competition. The debate competition served as perfect end to the school year, since it was possible to see how much of the knowledge delivered during the year’s activities was actually absorbed by the students. A total of 80 students participated.



Figure 3. Traditional dance during the Dance, Drama and Poem competition.

Forest Walk

BACEP also aims to get the children even closer to the national park. Most Ugandans don't know the national parks in the country, including those who live in the villages adjacent to the parks. This situation is common for people that live near Bwindi. The forest walk activity provides the opportunity to show the children the forest through guided visit where they are taught about the different flora and fauna of Bwindi. Staff of UWA participate, which adds to the experience of learning about the national park. A total of 243 students participated, with about 30-50 children per walk (figure 4).



Figure 4. Forest walk, June 2023.

Future

In 2024 we plan to continue the classroom lessons on a monthly basis. We will also conduct three school competitions and the forest walk, as done previous. The students, teachers, community members, and other institutions showed great interest and are willing to collaborate with BACEP activities. Therefore we plan to create more participation for community members so that more people can be reached and we can spread the conservation message widely. We plan to focus on establishing wildlife clubs at all the school, as they can focus on children who are very motivated about the topics we discuss. The clubs will enable them to be involved in different tasks related to conservation and small projects they can develop in the school. We believe having the clubs can awaken the curiosity and interest, not only for the club members, but also other students in the school. Continuing with the school competitions is also important, because it helps in building the sense of community between the schools and create a wider social network between teachers, students and community members.

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