

# Improved life satisfaction may decrease illegal forest use in protected areas

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The Virunga Landscape in east Africa comprises three contiguous protected areas across three countries, including Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Rwanda. It is a protected, biodiverse ecological

region home to endangered species, such as the mountain gorilla, but some people still poach, hunt and illegally access resources in the park.

A new study by researchers from the Penn State College of Health and Human Development sheds light on motivations for why people participate in or refrain from illegal [forest](#) activity within protected parks.

The team, led by Assistant Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management Edwin Sabuhoro, found that improved life satisfaction significantly reduces livelihood-based illegal forest use, whereas traditional values and cultural practices significantly increase illegal forest use for livelihood needs.

The researchers published their work in the journal [Forests](#).

"We want to understand the community," Sabuhoro said. "We see poaching is increasing in some of these areas, but we don't know what's happening in the community. Why are they doing that? Is it livelihood-driven or are there other factors? These parks are protected areas, and no one is permitted to go in and remove the parks' resources."

When people illegally enter protected parks, they may start wildfires or spread diseases, which can be unsafe for wildlife. Reasons for [illegal activity](#) can include [food insecurity](#) or the need for obtaining wood to build homes, according to Sabuhoro.

"They are going into protected parks based on a lack of alternatives to solve their household livelihood insecurities," Sabuhoro said. "If their lives are secure, then they don't need to go in. This is why we found a decrease in illegal forest use when perceived life satisfaction was higher."

However, the research team also found that improved [life satisfaction](#) did not always reduce illegal forest use when activities stem from traditional [cultural practices](#).

"If someone can access a hospital or [modern medicine](#), they may still feel like the traditional medicine works better," Sabuhoro said. "Even with improved livelihoods, some people still want to go in and harvest resources used in traditional medicine because it has a traditional value attached to it. It connects people with their ancestors and cultures."

The researchers surveyed 570 household heads residing in villages adjacent to Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda and Mgahinga National Park in Uganda. Household heads were selected because they typically influenced household livelihood decisions. Those who participated in the survey were protected via anonymity.

"We share this data with park management and the country to craft strategies and policies to help reduce illegal use activity," Sabuhoro said. "When they obtain this information, they can design better policies and solutions that are informed by research and include the perceptions of the communities' needs and priorities."

Existing policies can be reactionary with short term measures, but they should have long-term community engagement and a model that can achieve solutions on a long-term basis, according to Sabuhoro.

Sabuhoro said he hopes other protected parks in east Africa can use a similar model, utilizing a research-based approach to capture the perceptions of local communities to inform their own efforts.

"For us to have sustainable national parks and protected areas that we're happy about, we must have happy communities around them," Sabuhoro said. "If communities are happy about their lives and livelihoods, then

we'll have a happier outcome for conservation. We need an integrated approach of people and parks together. To design better strategies and policies, we need to engage the community and take time to listen to them."

**More information:** Edwin Sabuhoro et al, Perceived Life Satisfaction and Illegal Forest Use in the Virunga Landscape of Rwanda and Uganda, *Forests* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/f15010053](https://doi.org/10.3390/f15010053)

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