

Col. Tom R Butime, Minister of Tourism, Wildlife & Antiquities of the Republic of Uganda visiting GVTC Pavilion on the sidelines of Africa Protected Areas Congress (APAC), the first-ever continent-wide gathering of African leaders, citizens, and interest groups in Kigali, Rwanda

By Aimable Twahirwa

During a session focusing on interstate collaboration toward sustainable conservation in the Greater Virunga Landscape that connects different national parks from Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), experts reiterate call to address major challenges facing the region including mainly illegal activities, insufficient funding and the level of poverty in the region.

Activities oriented towards conserving the Greater Virunga Landscape include landscape management, tourism development, community conservation and law enforcement among others.

The Greater Virunga Landscape covers areas and communities around the Protected Areas of Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda; Virunga National Park in Democratic Republic of Congo and five national parks (NP) in Uganda: Mgahinga Gorilla NP, Bwindi Impenetrable NP, Queen Elizabeth NP, Rwenzori Mountains NP, and Semuliki NP.

According to Dr Andrew Seguya, Executive Secretary of Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration (GCVTC), current conservation efforts in the landscape is particularly challenging as the human population which is highly dependent on natural resources.

“We need to keep engaging all the relevant stakeholders across member countries to address those challenges,” he said.

The most famous denizen of the Virunga is the mountain gorilla, which inhabits all six of the extinct or dormant volcanoes, but not for obvious reasons the more active ones.

The 13 800 km² landscape straddles eastern DRC, north-western Rwanda and south-western Uganda. Although many of these areas are protected, poaching and the illicit trade in wildlife pose a serious and ongoing threat, according to conservation experts.

Incidents involving poaching or animal destroying crops have accounted for the bulk

of cases of human-wildlife conflict reported in the landscape in recent years

Speaking at the occasion, Fidele Ruzigandekwe, the Deputy Executive Secretary for Programs at the Rwandan-based Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration (GVTC), explained that beyond these illegal activities, insufficient funding is another conservation challenge that member countries need to tackle.

“There is a need to keep engaging all the relevant stakeholders to address these funding-related challenges,” Ruzigandekwe said.

Conservationists say the greatest threat to the gorillas stems from the fact that the mountains are situated in a region that has fertile soil and a rainy climate, conditions that attract agricultural communities.

The rural population density in this volcanic region is amongst the highest in the world, and the demands of humans weigh heavily on the future of the forests and mountain gorillas, the scientists add. (END)