KIGALI: As the volumes of bushmeat in circulation across Central and East Africa continue to grow, experts call for strong action at regional and national levels to ban bushmeat trade and consumption across the region.

Speaking at a webinar titled “The Story Behind Bushmeat: The Relationship Between Rising Viral Diseases and Diminishing Animals” earlier this month, conservation experts agreed unanimously that eating bushmeat is believed to be a cause of various diseases such as Ebola outbreaks in humans in the region.

Kenneth Kimitei, a Landscape Ecologist for the transborder Tsavo-Mkomazi Landscape at the African Wildlife Foundation told the webinar organised by the Earth Journalism Network (EJN) that bushmeat hunting in the East African region is mainly attributed to a set of drivers mainly the climatic conditions which affect all components that influence food security for the communities living near some protected and conserved areas across the region.



Food security concern

The Tsavo-Mkomazi landscape which covers Southeastern parts of Kenya and Northeastern part of Tanzania is known to have six diverse communities who live in the landscape including the Maasai and Orma who are pastoralists and livestock

keepers.

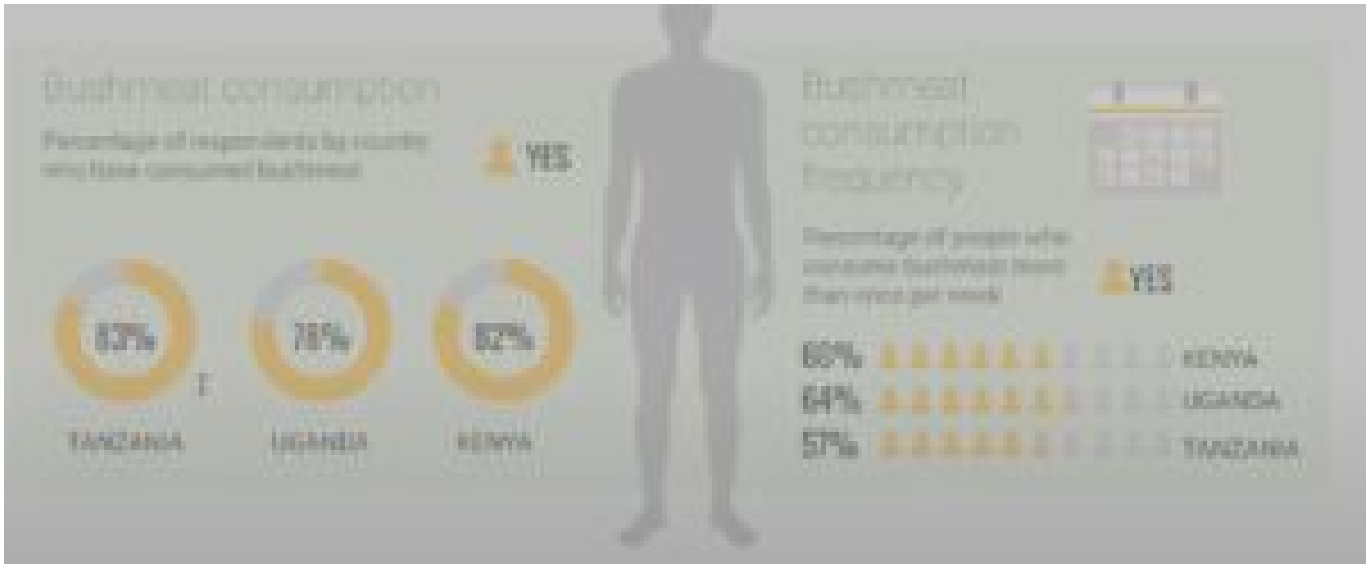
According to Kimitei, increased cases of bushmeat hunting were recorded in this area because wildlife is intimately linked to the food security and livelihood of numerous communities living in these remote transborder region.

Apart from limited awareness or ignorance of the Law, the expert also pointed out that cultural beliefs as regards to bushmeat consumption and being considered as cash-earning commodity for poor inhabitants are among other contributing drivers of hunting.

Bushmeat consumption

Bushmeat hunting, according to experts is still a complex issue that is closely linked to development and is influenced by a diverse range of factors in East and Central African region.

One worrying official indicator shows that the volume of bushmeat in circulation across Central Africa is vast, with consumption of bushmeat in the Congo Basin estimated at 1 million metric tons while in East African region, an estimated 579 million animals off-take as bushmeat.



As regards the mitigation options, Daniel Ndizihiwe, the manager of Wildlife and Protected Areas at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Uganda said that countries in the region should concentrate on how to ban the sale and consumption of

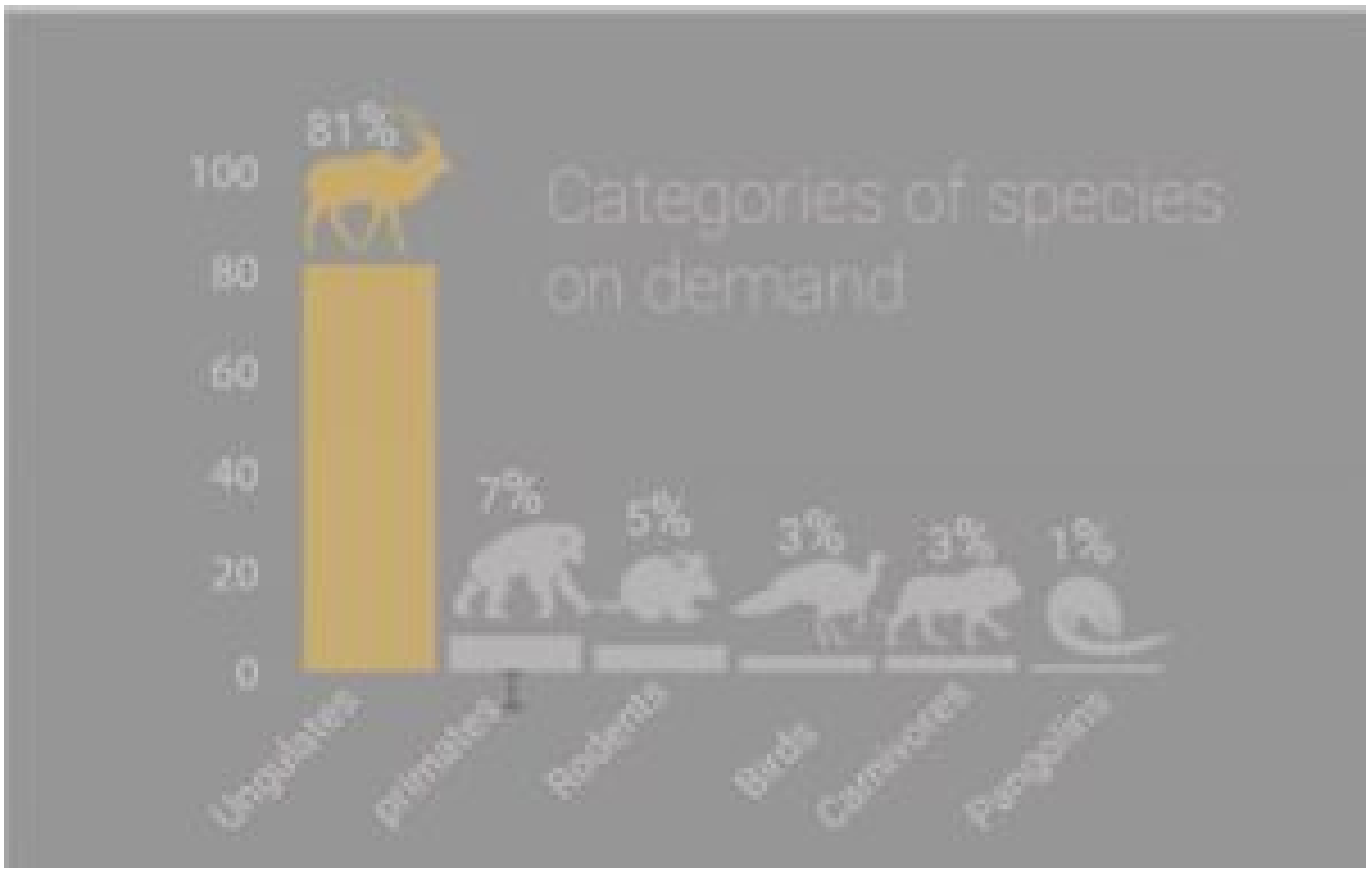
bushmeat.

“Emphasis should be on putting much efforts in the rescue, recovery, rebuilding and expansion of the network of protected and conserved areas across the region,” Ndizihiwe said.

According to him, there is also a need to recognize the interconnection between people, animal, plants, and their shared environment.

Although bushmeat consumption has increased locally for many countries across the region, estimates show there is another large portion which is mainly exported abroad such as Asian countries.

“Meat continue to be illegally harvested from wild animals and sold for human consumption in different continents such as Africa, South Asia”, Ndizihiwe said.



Zoonotic diseases

With the outbreak of Ebola in Uganda, conservation experts are urging for strong measures to combat the consumption of bushmeat which according to the latest survey conducted by WWF overlaps with the illegal trade networks, spreading the transmission of most common zoonotic viral diseases such as Ebola, swine fever, COVID-19 and monkeypox.

Both Ndizihiwe and Kimitei are convinced that bushmeat consumption as wild animals are the possible intermediate hosts of the deadly virus, which the World Health Organization has just declared it as a pandemic due to its large-scale global infectivity.

Queen Elizabeth and Rwenzori National Parks both located in Western Region of Uganda, are described to be among the hotspots for bushmeat poaching in the East African region, experts believe that the increasing demand of bushmeat by local communities surrounding protected areas is exposing more people to pathogens and facilitating the spread of diseases.

Dr Daniel Mdetele, TRAFFIC, one of the global Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network in Tanzania's observed that in most cases Wildlife harbor zoonotic disease pathogens with no clinical illness.

"The majority of communities living near these protected areas are pastoralists and livestock in close contact with wildlife can become infected with zoonotic disease and pass onto humans," Dr Mdetele told the webinar.

For instance, the origin of HIV and severe Ebola outbreaks are linked to the consumption of nonhuman primates, it said.

In the view of experts, the consumption of bushmeat is still high in these remote areas but countries need to prepare for response.

"Countries should eliminate the consumption of wild animals to safeguard people's lives and health," Dr Mdetele said adding that human interactions with wild animals must change in the region. (END)


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