

## **A school where the pupils are learning how to protect Lake Victoria**

**Major environmental problems are threatening the world's second largest freshwater lake, Lake Victoria. It is affecting not only plant and animal life but also the living conditions of the millions of people living in the region. But a school in the Ugandan village of Kaswa is taking the lead in an effort to turn things around.**

“When land is degraded it leads to poor harvests, malnutrition and poverty. Many families cannot even cover their basic needs. When families don't have a surplus of crops to sell, they can't pay their children's school fees.”

Joyce Kawooya is head teacher at the school in the tiny village of Kaswa in Uganda. The people here are stockbreeders and farmers, and the rapidly growing population is having a negative impact on land and forest. Trees are felled to make way for farmland and the combination of unsuitable farming methods and erosion causes the nutrients in the soil to leak into the river, from where they make their way into Lake Victoria. Since time immemorial, the lake has been a vital source of income for the people living in the vicinity. Today, millions of people are dependent on fishing and nearly all the water used in the region originates from here. Around Lake Victoria also live numerous zebras, hippos, antelopes and a wealth of bird species.

But the lake's eco system is now under threat. The pressure from the fishing industry is immense, eutrophication is a major concern and the water hyacinths that are rapidly spreading across the surface hamper fishing, reduce the amount of oxygen in the water and stop the sunlight from penetrating. Since the 1970s the number of native fish species has fallen by 80 per cent and over 70 per cent of the forest cover in the drainage basin has been lost.

Environmental problems are not only threatening plant and animal life but are also affecting the standard of living for the 27 million people living in the region. Despite the rich natural resources, over 60 per cent live under the poverty line. But in Kaswa the villagers have set their sights on a more sustainable society with head teacher, Joyce Kawooya, leading the way. She is one of the initiators of an educational programme supported by WWF to spread awareness of environmental issues and to help local people to find sustainable solutions. The programme emanates from the school where Joyce and her colleagues teach their students about sustainable farming and taking greater responsibility for the environment, which they then pass on to their families.

“When the students finish school for the day they bring their knowledge home and share it with the whole community. Their parents also visit the school where they learn directly.”

Previously the school had teacher-centred, ‘talk and chalk’ traditional teaching methods based on school books. These days Joyce Kawooya uses real life situations outside the classroom. The students are also taught to think for themselves and reach their own conclusions. The commitment is 100 per cent.

“The children have even travelled to Tanzania and Kenya to demonstrate how they work. But above all they discuss the real life problems at school and learn how they can conserve their environment.”

Many other people in the village are beginning to find alternative activities that pose no threat to the environment. Local interest groups have taken up things like tree planting, chicken breeding, basket and carpet making, beekeeping and the production of coal briquettes. All of this has stemmed from WWF's contribution to education for sustainable development.

“When people have alternatives they no longer need to use the wetlands to grow their crops. A lot of sand and clay used to be taken from the wetlands to make bricks, but this has now switched to the highlands instead where there are no sensitive wetlands,” continues Joyce Kawooya, who grows her own trees that provide fuel for cooking and a bit of extra cash. But most of all she now has an influence over her own life and things that happen in her community. “Today I am an environmental change agent. I train people in other villages and know how to link their environmental problems with the community they live in. I feel highly empowered.”

The programme contributes to strengthening civil society in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania and aims at engaging people politically to promote sustainable and equitable growth. It also protects valuable natural areas through the local management of natural resources.

### **Environmental education at Lake Victoria**

The aim of the educational programme at Lake Victoria (Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania) is to improve awareness of environmental issues and boost the ability to find more sustainable solutions. A large part of the population is young, which is why environmental education in schools is vitally important. Adults in the community also receive education. The programme contributes to strengthening civil society in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania and aims at engaging people politically to promote sustainable and equitable growth. It also protects valuable natural areas through the local management of natural resources. New networks enable local communities to exchange knowledge and experience.