

# Katonga on track to become 11th national park

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Laying on the northern banks of River Katonga is Katonga Game Reserve that stretches over 210 square kilometres of land in Kamwenge and Kyegegwa districts.

Until 1964 when it was gazetted as a game reserve, this wildlife sanctuary was a hunting ground for the king of Tooro, while colonialists used it for sports hunting. Now Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has embarked on a programme to upgrade it to a national park in its drive to diversify wildlife resources and boost tourism.

"[Katonga] is an additional tourism package which brings our products closer to tourists, especially those from Kibaale national park and the Rwenzori cluster," Dr Patrick Atimnedi, UWA's veterinary coordinator, said.



Rod Waddington via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

## An antelope epicentre

Atimnedi has for the past couple of weeks been in the wilderness with other veterinarians, trans-locating zebras, topis and eland to Katonga. Since most of the animals in the reserve were poached to extinction, translocation from Lake Mburo national park was the viable option to increase the animal population in the reserve before it is formally declared a national park.

Topis and eland belong to the antelope family and their arrival at Katonga brings to life UWA's dream of making Katonga an antelope epicentre.

It already has an estimated 2,000 impalas, 1,000 bushbucks, 500 waterbucks and an unspecified number of the less known but globally attractive sitatunga - a swamp-dwelling antelope locally known as *enjobe*. It also has about 13 elephants, 10 buffalo and some lions.

"The idea is to have this as a convergence area for antelopes," Samuel Amanywa, the senior warden at Katonga, said.

It is also going to be Uganda's third national park with zebras, meaning tourists with tight schedules will not have to drive to Lake Mburo or Kidepo Valley national parks to see the zebras. The first attempt to take zebras to Katonga was in 2015. Five zebras were introduced to the game reserve but to the disappointment of UWA, three of the five zebras walked 153km back to Mburo.

## The trek

UWA veterinarians learned the hard way and, when they went back to Mburo last month, they went with enough materials to blindfold the beasts before driving them to their new home.

As early as 7am, the veterinarians, supported by game rangers, were already assembled, armed with dart guns to safely capture and restrain the targeted animals. Once captured, the animals were blindfolded, and blood samples taken before an antibiotic was administered to neutralise the dart drug. The animals were then loaded onto trucks and driven to their new home. After the translocation of 46 zebras and about 30 topis, UWA took a group of journalists to see how the animals were adapting to their new home.

The main targets were animals living outside the boundaries of Lake Mburo national park. "We have been having issues with the community because of the high number of species like zebras that cross into people's ranches," Atimmedi said. Nearly half [of Lake Mburo national] park's original size was degazetted and turned into ranches for Ankole's cattle keepers after 1986. That, however, did not stop the wild animals from freely crossing into the ranches. "There are too many complaints that the wildlife takes ticks and diseases to the ranches, that they also eat a lot, drink a lot... this is like addressing the human-wildlife conflict," Atimmedi said.

Since Katonga game reserve has not been receiving visitors, there are no clear roads, which meant we had to walk through the shrubs to see its new inhabitants. UWA hired the services of Geoffrey Pakuneta, a game trail guide who works with one of the sport hunting companies in the game reserve. For more than two hours, Pakuneta took us through thickets, relying on a spot where he saw the animals grazing that morning. He later changed to following the zebra sounds and when that failed, he tracked their dung.

Pakuneta is a master of his trade given the way he raised the spirits of the visibly tired group and kept it going. Unlike the gorillas of Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest national parks, topis and zebras are fast runners and shy animals that will run away once they detect anything coming their way. Pakuneta thus ordered us to keep our voices low. We complied, barely, since everyone was now panting, until we decided to walk back to where our trucks were parked - the same place, we discovered to much chagrin, the zebras chose to rest as we stomped the bush looking for them.

## Source of the source of the River Nile

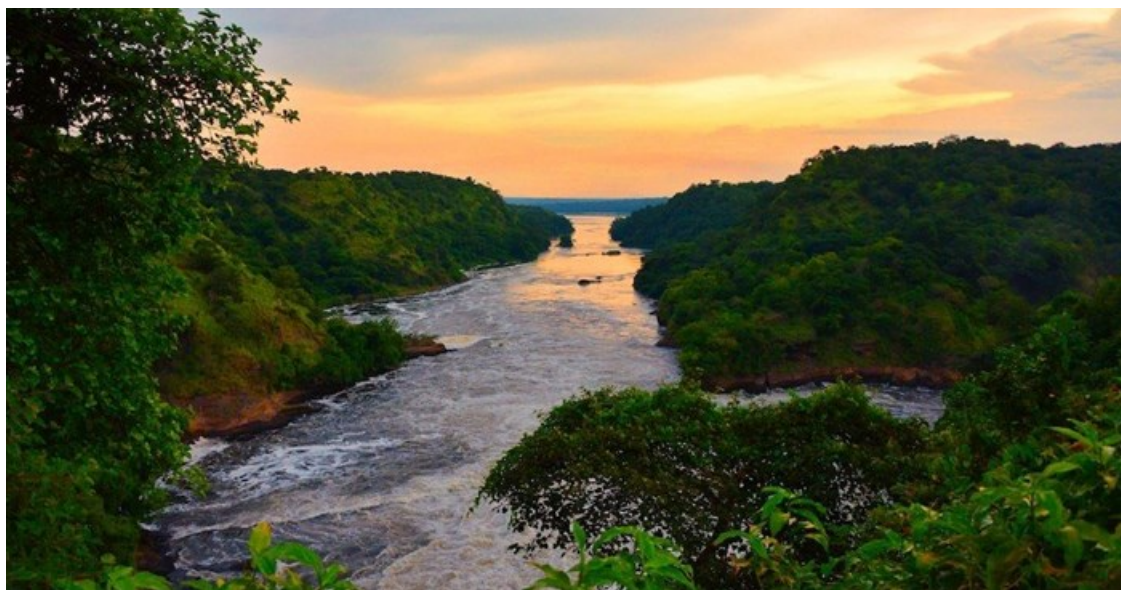
Each of the already established national parks has a tourism product it is known for - that unique feature one may not easily find in any other parks. In its more than Shs 5bn investment plan, UWA intends to promote Katonga as the 'source of the source of River Nile', the longest river in the world. Katonga and Kagera are the main rivers that pour into Lake Victoria, from which the Nile flows all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Rwanda has persistently claimed that the source of River Kagera is the true source of River Nile, but to UWA, the true source of the Nile is in Katonga.

The 220km-long river is said to originate from Bihanga in Kamwenge district where three rivers - Kitonga, Mpanga and Rushango converge. From there, Katonga flows in two directions: westwards to pour into Lake George and northwards into Lake Wamala in Mubende, and later into Lake Victoria to connect to River Nile. "We have earmarked that spot [at Bihanga] as the source of River Nile, and, we have engaged scientists and geographers who have done studies and written about it," Amanyanya said.

"This is a [tourism] product we are seriously looking at because this offers a unique experience. Guests will take a walk along the river to the source of the source of the Nile and in the process view the sitatungas," he added.

This is a 35km stretch of River Katonga and it will take a tourist about five days of activity-packed trek.

UWA has already secured the approval of the National Environment Management Authority (Nema) and is waiting for the proposal to be endorsed by cabinet and later parliament.



Rod Waddington via [Wikimedia Commons](#) - River Nile at Sunset, Uganda

## What to find in which park

According to UWA Executive Director Dr Andrew Seguya, 95% of Uganda's tourism resources are nature-based. Tourism contributes 10% of Uganda's GDP and is the country's top foreign exchange earner. Tourists increasingly favour Ugandan national parks because none of the 10 parks is completely identical in what they offer. While they all have a wide variety of wild animals, each has a special x-factor.

Here is how:

### **Kidepo Valley National Park (Karamoja)**

Kidepo is a savannah park loved for its pure, totally wild experience. It is also the Ugandan park with ostriches, cheetahs, not to mention the mountain-dwelling Ik community that makes for amazing visits.

### **Lake Mburo National Park (Kiruhura)**

This acacia-savannah park is favoured for its extensive wetland, birding, as well as trophy hunting, heavily controlled by UWA.

### **Queen Elizabeth National Park (Kasese)**

With its Ishasha tree-climbing lions, shoebill stork, Kazinga channel and Mweya peninsula, it is no wonder Queen Elizabeth

is a very popular park.

### **Mgahinga Gorilla National Park (Kisoro)**

Covering three of the eight Virunga mountain volcanoes, Mgahinga gives both the mountaineering and gorilla tracking experiences.

### **Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park (Kabale)**

Where gorilla-tracking in Mgahinga gives the volcanic mountains experience, trekking through mountainous Bwindi's dense tropical forest in search of the gorillas is a different ball game. The park was declared a UNESCO natural world heritage site in 1994.

### **Murchison Falls National Park (Masindi/Nwoya)**

Uganda's biggest national park is arguably also its best-known, in part because of the magnificent falls that tourists can trek up for a more intimate experience. The Victoria Nile separates the park into the northern and southern banks, and Murchison also has some of the best accommodation facilities.

### **Kibale National Park (Kibale)**

When one thinks of chimpanzee tracking in Uganda, the first park in mind is this forested sanctuary in Tooro.

### **Semliki National Park (Bundibugyo)**

Situated on the floor of the Albertine rift valley, Semliki is famous for birding and primates. It boasts more than 400 bird species and 300 butterfly species and has hot springs.

### **Mt Rwenzori National Park (Kasese/Kabarole)**

This is a mountain park, popular with climbers, and offers a rocky mountain experience, with a snow-capped peak.

### **Mt Elgon National Park (Mbale)**

Where Rwenzori is rocky, climbing the Elgon is a forested affair. The forest changes and fascinates the higher one goes, with unique bamboo and other tree species. The breath-taking caves and waterfalls are a bonus.

Read the [original article](#) on [The Observer](#).

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