

Quarrying concession marks new onslaught

The approval of a controversial mining concession allowing Hima Cement, a Ugandan subsidiary of the French multinational Lafarge, to quarry limestone in the northern sector of the **Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP)** has become the latest in a series of land-use conflicts pitting the Uganda Government – in its headlong rush to court big business in the name of 'development' – against the country's long-term environment and conservation interests.

The controversial mining deal follows hard on the heels of recent efforts to dole out almost 25 % of the country's Mabira Central Forest Reserve to a sugar conglomerate seeking to expand its cane plantations. That proposal, together with an earlier attempt to turn the Pian Upe Game Reserve in eastern Uganda into an agricultural business, stand defeated at present, following a massive public outcry in Uganda, backed by pressure from major development partners and global conservation bodies.

Now, the onslaught on Uganda's increasingly beleaguered network of protected areas has shifted to the northern QENP, and to the mining deal with the Hima Cement Company. The deal already has the signed approval of the Executive Director of the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA)'s Board of Trustees.

Uganda's conservation community is understandably aghast at how such a massive open-cast mining operation, involving the blasting and crushing of stone on a scale that is likely to scar and pollute the landscape for decades to come, causing untold damage to the local fauna and flora, can possibly be countenanced on the doorstep of a globally recognised Ramsar Site.

Uganda is of course a signatory to the Ramsar Convention, and to other global treaties protecting biodiversity. Indeed, it was not very long ago that the same Uganda Government, as the host of a recent Ramsar conference, issued a series of pronouncements underlining its "commitment" to conservation. How hollow all those lofty pronouncements now sound.



Home from home: The Rothschild's Giraffes now thriving (above) in northern Uganda's Kidepo Valley National Park came originally from the Lake Nakuru National Park in Kenya. The re-population exercise has not only been a success in terms of building up herd numbers in a core part of the subspecies' historic range; it is also a fine example of East African regional co-operation.

End of the road for the Northern White

Reports from neighbouring DR Congo's **Garamba National Park** appear to confirm what many of us have feared all along: that the last remaining population of the **Northern Square-lipped (White) Rhinoceros**, *Ceratotherium simum cottoni*, has indeed been wiped out.

Some still cling doggedly to the hope that a few isolated individual animals might yet turn up somewhere in the Southern Sudan, but – unless (or until) that happens – it seems safe to declare the subspecies officially extinct.

Extermination of the Northern White Rhino coincides with a period over which Joseph Kony, the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leader who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, and gang were holed up in the Garamba Park. Now that Kony – who had been due, in early April this year, to sign a truce with the Ugandan Government ending the LRA insurgency – has reportedly left the Park and is said to be heading for the Central African Republic, it appears that the Congolese park authorities may belatedly regain control of Garamba and of what little

remains of its wildlife after the slaughter meted out by Kony and his henchmen.

The Congolese authorities have not only condoned the rebel group's protracted, destructive presence in one of their protected areas; they are guilty too of having frustrated international conservation efforts to transfer the last few Northern White Rhinos to a safe location in Kenya. By withholding the necessary permits some years ago, they effectively condemned the then rare subspecies to extinction, a tragic fate that – alas (it seems) – has now come to pass.

Envy lobby targets Nkuringo project

A model community-based tourism venture in western Uganda has – as its launch date approaches – become the focus of scurrilous 'hate campaigns' unleashed by a disgruntled minority.

The misguided 'stakeholders' are bent on undermining a landmark agreement under which the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has granted tourism concessions to the **Nkuringo Community** living on the remote western fringes of the **Bwindi National Park** in Uganda's western Kisoro region.