July 31st 2015

Final report

Title of grant: Increasing local awareness about the ecological importance of the Gishwati Forest Reserve, Rwanda

Thierry Aimable INZIRAYINEZA, Forest of Hope Association (FHA)

In June 2014, Forest of Hope Association (FHA) started implementing two one-year grants from received from British Ecological Society and John Ball Zoo Wildlife Conservation Fund to complement the same activities.

The two grants was used to support 13 eco-clubs in schools around Gishwati forest to reach local people and educate them about the ecological importance of Gishwati Forest Reserve (GFR) focusing on: feeding and nesting behaviour of primates; the role of primates, birds and insects in forest maintenance; and the role of the forest in water purification, maintenance and provisioning. This project was expected to generate positive behavioural changes in local people which would help to reduce their pressure on the Gishwati Forest Reserve.

This forest serves as a home for a number of threatened primate species including: eastern chimpanzees (*Pan Troglodytes schweinfurthii*, listed as threatened on the IUCN Red List); golden monkeys (*Cercopithecus mitis kandti*, listed as endangered); mountain monkeys (*Cercopithecus l'hoesti*, listed as vulnerable); a large number of plant species and more than 130 bird species.

Methods used

In June 2014, Thierry Aimable Inzirayineza, the Coordinator of FHA, visited the 13 eco-clubs and explained to them the components of the project. From July 2014 to August 2014, we developed education materials in Kinyarwanda including 30 posters describing feeding of the main forest primates, 30 posters describing nesting behavior of Gishwati primates; 30 posters about the role of primates, birds and insects in seeds dispersal, 30 posters about the role of chimpanzees in certain seeds germination, 30 posters about the role of the forest in water purification, retaining and storing, and provisioning; 40 education guides to be used by eco-club members during community awareness and 200 booklets about the ecological importance of the GFR and the best practices to reduce local pressure on this forest. These booklets were distributed to communities during the awareness campaigns.

In September and October 2014, we trained members of the 13 eco-clubs, (teachers who are in charge of eco-clubs and two representative students from each eco-club in schools that surround Gishwati Forest Reserve) on how to use education materials and the best techniques to communicate the message to the local community efficiently. At the end of the training we have distributed education materials to school representatives and launched the start of the community awareness campaign.

Eco-club representatives after distributing some of the materials during the training

In November 2014 students in eco-clubs started educating their colleagues at school as they were about to start their annual holidays (about two months). They reached several households around their schools from early February 2015 to 20th May 2015. During the awareness campaigns in the communities, Students in eco-clubs were using different methods. This included: visiting all households and educate on a house to house basis in order to reach as many people as possible in the community; forest conservation sketch, original songs and dances to attract people in the village before the process of utilizing education guides and distributing the booklets.

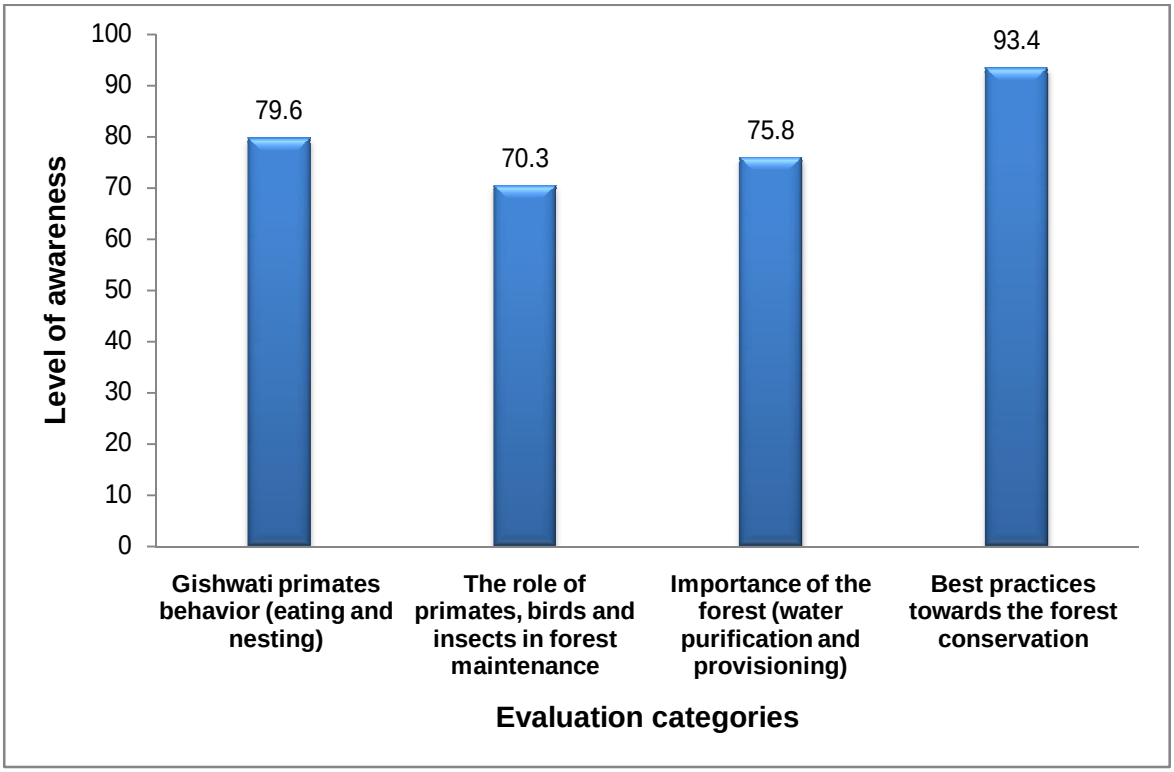
Students during the community awareness events

Another strategy used was attending meetings and reaching other places that bring people together such as markets and commercial centers, to spread the awareness messages

Evaluation and Achievements

In May 2015, we evaluated eco-clubs activities to assess the impact of the project. 130 members of the communities (10 households in the village around each school) were randomly selected for an interview. Each of them has answered ten questions grouped into three categories considering four evaluation categories for this project: (1) Gishwati primates behaviour (eating and nesting) (2) the role of primates, birds and insects in forest maintenance; (3) the role of the forest in water purification, maintenance and provisioning (4) the best practices to reduce local pressure on GFR resources.

The total number of households in 13 villages around schools is 1,966. Based on responses we recorded during the evaluation, about 94.1 % of the interviewees have been reached by this conservation message. This evaluation also has shown 79.7 % (n=130) were aware of the ecological importance of the GFR and the best practices. We are confident that this project has increased the awareness about the Gishwati Forest Reserve conservation which was on 73.5 % (n=130) in April 2013, (IPS2013 Thierry report).



Average score considering the evaluation categories

Considering the evaluation categories about 93.4 % were giving enthusiastic response to questions about the best practices to adopt to reduce the forest destruction. This level of awareness demonstrates local communities' commitment to participate in this forest management which will influence the positive change in attitude towards the future conservation of Gishwati Forest Reserve.

Conclusion

Even if it is a beat early to say the contribution of this grant in reducing illegal activities within Gishwati forest, we have started to see some signs of positive changes as results of this project considering what Community Forest Protection Initiative Agent who patrol the forest have been reporting so far. We are confident that the more local people will be educated, the more they will become concerned and therefore reduce their pressure on the Gishwati forest protection.

Local people were interested in learning more about forest ecology and its importance

We have a plan to continue introducing young people in Gishwati region about the natural habitat and educating them through local school eco-clubs to ensure the future conservation of Gishwati Forest. Students in eco-clubs have shown capacity to learn and educate the community especially when they have education materials, and they are motivated by annual eco-club competitions that FHA organizes to evaluate their performance.

Kinihira School eco-club with a certificate to acknowledge their participation

FHA will continue funding these activities through writing grant proposals to build on this project achievement and support students' activities to further spread knowledge to the future leaders of the community.

As it was planned this initiative was combined with the annual eco-clubs competition organized by FHA, where the high ranking community in proving best answers to the questions has to give a chance to its eco-club to get the best annual price. Each eco-clubs received a certificate and an envelope (reward) to acknowledge their participation. Among the prizes that FHA provided include: uniform for traditional dance group of eco-clubs, Radio receivers, soccer balls and uniform for the soccer team, etc

Eco-clubs received a certificate to acknowledge Their participation

eco-clubs received Radio receivers as awards

Uniform for traditional dance group of eco-clubs was also among the award provided

We thank very much the British Ecological Society and the John Ball Zoo Wildlife Conservation Fund for supporting this activity of increasing local awareness about the ecological importance of the Gishwati Forest Reserve. The project increased the knowledge of local community on forest ecology and its importance. We are confident that this project will continue influencing local attitude towards the forest and its biodiversity conservation. FHA wishes to continue working with British Ecological Society, John Ball Zoo Wildlife Conservation Fund and other donors to strengthen local community participation in forest protection and in other projects.