

Improving community attitudes towards conservation

Learning from efforts to address
wildlife crime in Uganda

Case study

September 2021



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More on this case study

This case study explores learnings from the 'Implementing park action plans for community engagement to tackle IWT' project, funded by the UK government's Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund. It draws on findings from the project evaluation to provide insights for future efforts to combat wildlife crime, in Uganda and beyond. More information about the project can be found on the IIED website (www.iied.org/park-action-plans-increasing-community-engagement-tackling-wildlife-crime).

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01

Tackling wildlife crime: why attitudes matter

In Uganda, many people illegally hunt, traffic or trade wildlife because other opportunities to earn money are limited. But poaching is also driven by anger and resentment towards increasing conflict between humans and wildlife. When it comes to tackling wildlife crime, approaches that focus on greater law enforcement may only further alienate communities. This case study looks at how park-led, community-based activities in Uganda's Murchison Falls Conservation Area and surrounding villages have worked to change the way people think and feel about conserving the wildlife that's on their doorstep.

Wildlife crime — the illegal taking, trading or processing of flora and fauna — is a major challenge for Uganda's Murchison Falls National Park. Most species caught illegally in the park are destined for national and cross-border bushmeat markets and there is evidence of opportunistic poaching of high-value animals, including elephants, lions and pangolins, which are trafficked internationally.

Poverty and a lack of income-earning opportunities is one driver of wildlife crime in Uganda. But previous IIED-led research at Queen Elizabeth Conservation Area (QECA) and Murchison Falls Conservation Area (MFCA), undertaken between 2014 and 2017, found that people who lose crops or livestock to animals that come from the park, and especially those who feel unsupported by park authorities, are

more likely to participate in wildlife crime.¹ This human–wildlife conflict (HWC) has a negative impact on people's attitudes towards wildlife and efforts to conserve it — and financial incentives, like revenue sharing from ecotourism, may not be enough to tip the balance. Meanwhile, approaches that focus on greater law enforcement risk further alienating communities and increasing distrust on all sides.

This case study explores findings from an evaluation of community-based interventions in MFCA that aimed to reduce HWC and strengthen local enterprise. The intention was that this would in turn improve people's attitudes towards conservation and therefore reduce wildlife crime.

Measuring people's attitudes is challenging; what we say and what we do are often different, nor are our motivations always clear — even to ourselves. And there is always the risk of bias. In reviewing lessons that have emerged from the project, we also propose a number of lessons from the evaluation of attitudes itself.

“If people have their own livestock, they don't go into protected areas looking for meat; if they produce and sell their own coffee, they have enough income to buy meat and don't need to go poaching. Targeted resources will be dedicated to alternative livelihood programmes, to curtail levels of poaching.”

George Owoyesigire, director of the community conservation sub-directorate of the Uganda Wildlife Authority²

Park-led, community-based activities have worked to change attitudes of local people to the wildlife in Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda



02

Balancing law enforcement and community engagement through integrated park-level action plans

Findings from the 2014–17 research suggested that the greatest reductions in local participation in wildlife crime would be achieved through the creation of ‘wildlife-friendly’ enterprises, efforts to mitigate the damage caused by wildlife and supporting community-based scouts. The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) already had a community conservation programme in place to address issues such as HWC and to improve local engagement in conservation activities. However, its efforts have been hampered by resource constraints, varying support centrally and generally limited coordination

between UWA and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Following on from the initial research project, UWA and the research team worked together to develop park-level action plans for QEPA and MFCA that struck a better balance between UWA-led law enforcement and community engagement activities. To help improve coordination and make individual efforts more than the sum of the parts, all activities to reduce wildlife crime were situated within a single theory of change formed of multiple interconnecting pathways (Figure 1).

Putting it into practice

The action plans included two community-based interventions: support to wildlife scouts and support to wildlife-friendly enterprises. Both offered multiple pathways for change, including contributing to improved intelligence about wildlife crime to inform further action and enforcement. They also aimed to be mutually beneficial; one member from each wildlife scout household was enrolled in the enterprise programme and some of the local businesses supported could supply raw or processed materials to mitigate HWC (for example chillies, which elephants avoid).

A second project was developed to help UWA put these two interventions into practice in nine villages adjacent to Karuma Wildlife Reserve (KWR) that borders the south-east side of MFCA (Figure 2). The project, 'Implementing park action plans for community engagement to tackle IWT', ran from 2017 to 2021 and was funded by the UK government's Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund.³ Its immediate aim was for participants and the wider population within project villages to benefit from project activities and, as a result, for local attitudes towards the park and conservation activities to improve. These improved attitudes were in turn expected to contribute to positive, pro-conservation changes in behaviour.

Supporting wildlife scouts

UWA with support from the Wildlife Conservation Society Uganda

Wildlife scouts are community volunteers who protect farms against crop raiding by wild animals coming from inside the park and help households to respond and recover when conflict does occur. But these wildlife scouts are not always well supported with training or livelihood support in-kind. This understandably affects the scouts' motivation and effectiveness in responding when people are affected by HWC, which increases community resentment towards wildlife and the park. In this intervention,

UWA and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Uganda trained and supported wildlife scouts with the aim of reducing HWC and the resentment that drives illegal hunting in particular, and to improve the relationship between UWA and local communities to underpin other efforts to combat wildlife crime.

Supporting wildlife-friendly enterprises

Village Enterprise

Adapting an approach that they had used successfully in other parts of Uganda, project partner Village Enterprise created six business savings groups, each comprising ten businesses of three entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs were selected from scout households and, additionally, from among the poorest households in each village. Village Enterprise provided these entrepreneurs with training and ongoing mentoring in forming and managing small businesses, and established business savings groups to empower them to sustain their enterprises. Each business was provided a microgrant of US\$150 to seed their activities. By increasing legal livelihood opportunities, this intervention aimed to reduce people's need to participate in wildlife crime (and their availability to participate, given increased demands on their time) and to incentivise wildlife scouts to stay active.

Generating evidence for decision making

Our project also aimed to understand the impact of these community-based interventions to inform future decision making. To do so, the project team monitored the attitudes and perceptions of three core groups: wildlife scouts and those enrolled in the microenterprise scheme; people living inside project villages but not taking part in any project activities; and UWA rangers stationed at KWR.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of planned activities to combat wildlife crime

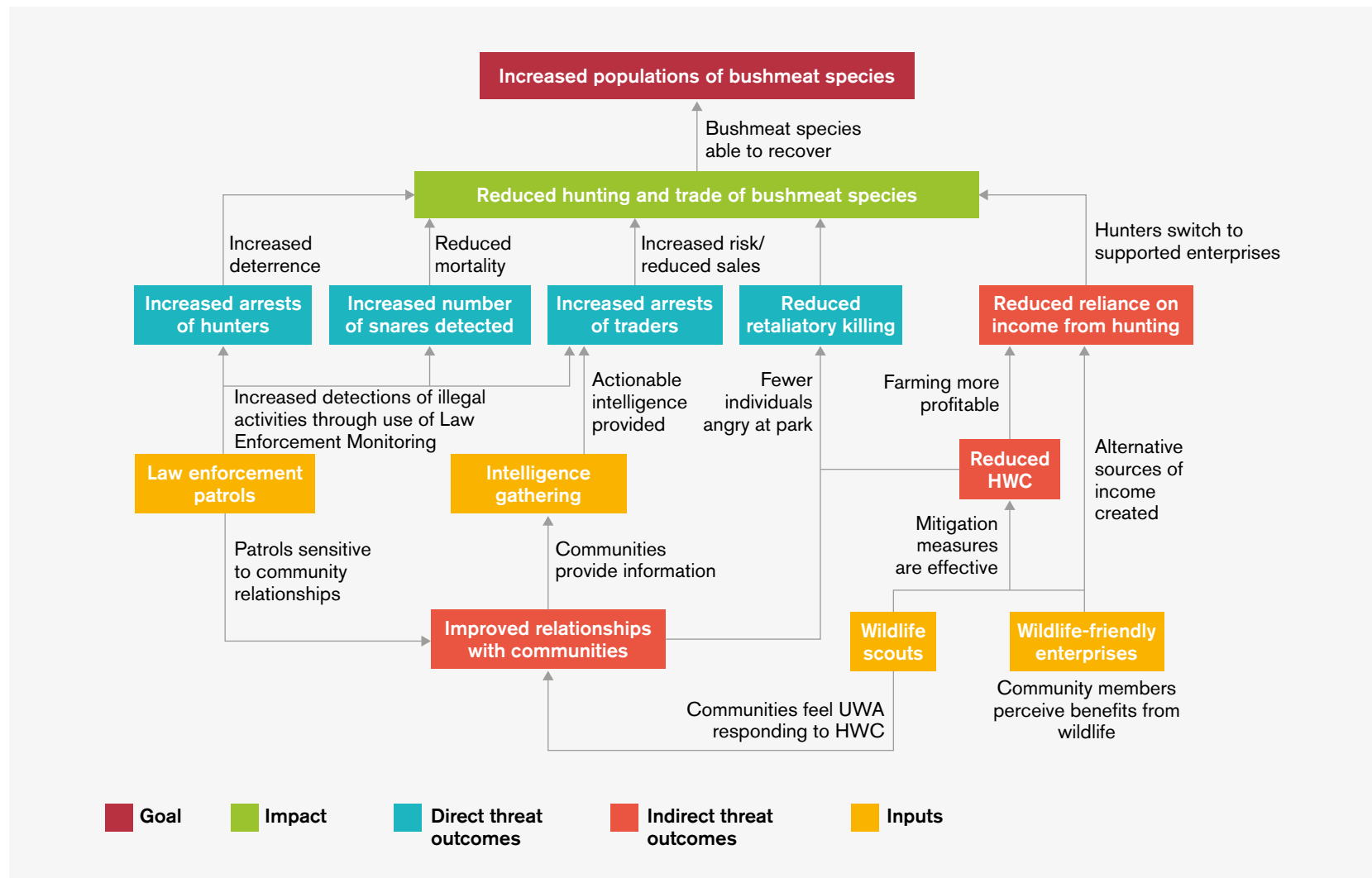
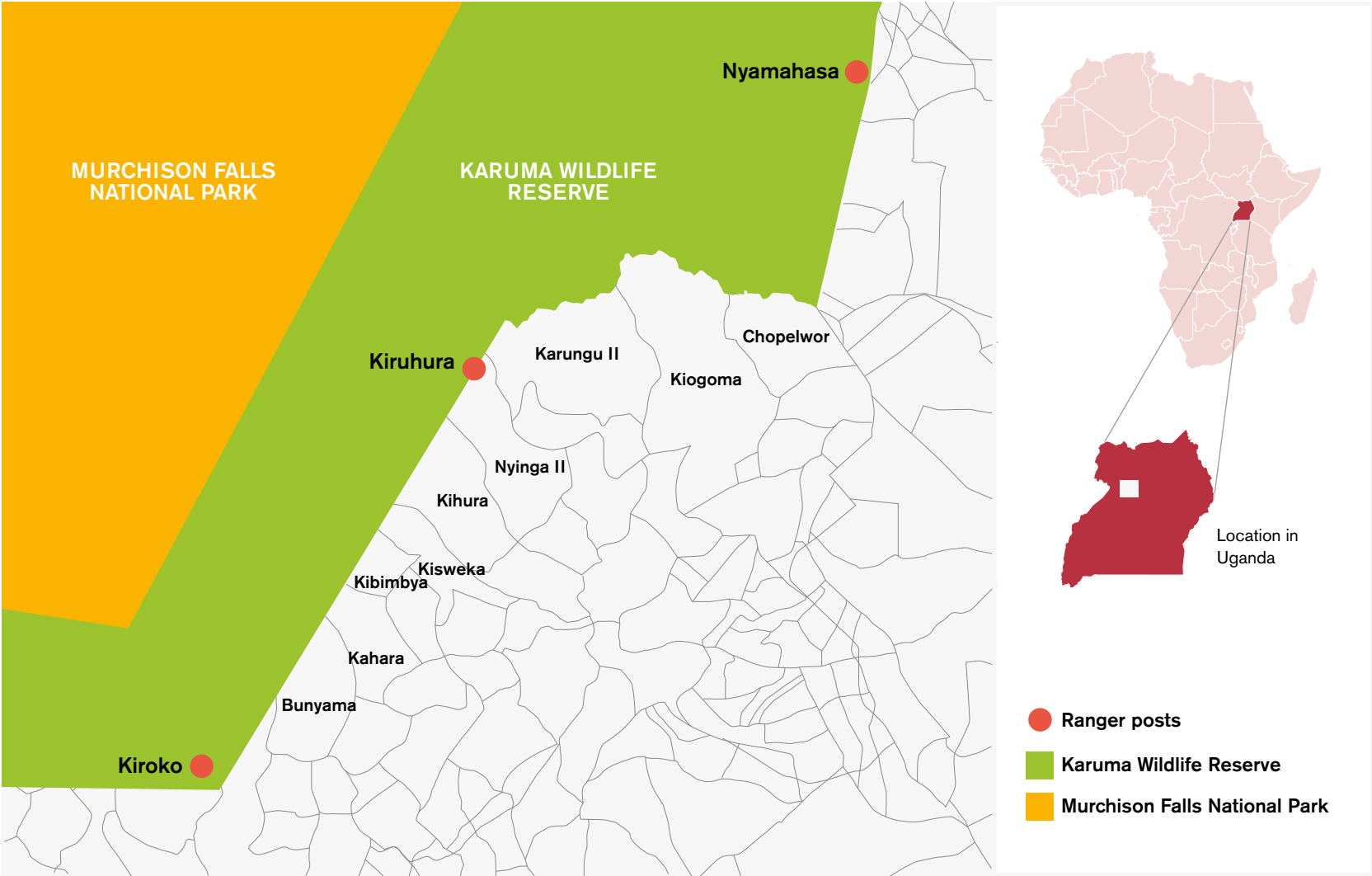


Figure 2. Map of project areas



03

The impact of community-based approaches on people's attitudes and behaviour

The evaluation found that the community-based approaches were improving people's attitudes towards conservation, their recognition of the value of wildlife scouts (and the support that UWA gives them) and their willingness to engage with both scouts and UWA rangers — including providing UWA with information about illegal activities. Moreover, these positive attitudes were widespread within project villages, even among people who didn't take part in either the wildlife scout or the microenterprise scheme.

The surveys of **project participants** asked people to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements about UWA's activities, tourism revenues, conservation and wildlife, and the likelihood that they would ask for help from and provide information to UWA or wildlife scouts. People were

surveyed three times — before, during and at the end of the project. For the final survey, the project team also asked respondents to retrospectively self-report their attitudes at the start of the project (Box 1). To assess change in attitudes, the project team undertook two separate analyses: one using

the original baseline data and one using the retrospective baseline data.

Non-participating households and **KWR rangers** were surveyed or interviewed once, at the end of the project, about their current attitudes and behaviours and retrospective observations on HWC and wildlife crime.

A positive shift among project participants

Both the original baseline and retrospective baseline analyses of participant responses showed largely positive change, with people expressing more pro-conservation attitudes and a greater willingness to engage in conservation efforts (Figure 3). However, the baselines themselves are different, meaning the degree of change also varies. People's original self-reported attitudes were generally more positive than they were when asked retrospectively. Analysis using this original baseline therefore shows a more modest (though still statistically significant) change over time, with attitudes and behaviours becoming more pro-conservation in six of the eight indicators (Figure 3). The only two indicators that show a negative trend in this analysis — though their scores remain very positive overall — were attitudes towards UWA's activities and the importance of protecting wildlife.

People's retrospectively reported baseline attitudes were more negative; the analysis using this data therefore shows a more significantly positive change. Among non-scout households in particular, there are sizeable increases in pro-conservation attitudes and self-reported likelihood of engaging with conservation activities. The retrospective baseline was also much

BOX 1. CHECKING BASELINE ATTITUDES AGAINST RETROSPECTIVE SELF-REPORTS

After the second survey of project participants, the project team noted discrepancies between the change in attitudes suggested by the comparison against the original data and the informal feedback that they had received. This raised the concern that people may have answered strategically before the projects began — for example, voicing stronger support for conservation at this stage in the belief that this would increase the likelihood of them being included in beneficial activities. In the absence of a control group, the team adapted the final survey to ask people retrospectively about their attitudes before the project began. There are potential reliability issues with retrospective self-reporting, notably through recall and social desirability biases, but it provides a robustness check against the project's original baseline analysis.

more variable, in part because fewer people (89%) responded relative to the original baseline.

Wider influence beyond beneficiaries

Improved relationships between communities, scouts and rangers

Attitudes towards the support to wildlife scouts and the microenterprise scheme were extremely positive. Of the people who were aware of the wildlife scouts (79%), the vast majority (85%) were happy about having them in their village and believed there were benefits to them being there (94%).

Responses also suggested potential change in behaviour as a result the projects. Of the people who were aware of the scouts, almost half had requested their help and more than two-thirds had reported crop damage or other HWC to them. Over 50% said they would consider becoming a scout themselves.

In interviews, rangers stationed at KWR reported that this is playing out in practice, suggesting that changes in attitudes are translating into changes in behaviour. In comparing project villages and similar neighbouring villages, rangers reported reduced HWC and hunting,⁴ better relationships with the public, and increased information about illegal activities from both scouts and local people.

The rangers attributed these differences to the presence of wildlife scouts and greater interaction with communities in project villages (which the wildlife scouts also facilitate by notifying rangers about HWC, thereby allowing them to better respond to, cooperate with and gain the trust of the public). The rangers reported that the scouts themselves were highly motivated, and that increased support has contributed to both this and improvements in the information they provide.

The project's own assessment found that, in incidents of HWC, scouts were recorded as having been part of the response in a much higher proportion of cases than UWA rangers (78% compared with 14%). Moreover, although less than a quarter of non-participant survey respondents affected by HWC in the previous year said that they had received help from outside their household, what assistance they did receive came mostly from neighbours or wildlife scouts.

A sea change in people's attitudes towards saving money

Support for the microenterprise scheme was all but unanimous with 96% of the people who were aware of it (47%) saying they felt positively or very positively about the scheme and 99% believing there were benefits to having it in their village. In particular, the business savings groups had a hugely positive effect on attitudes towards saving money among these rural communities.^{5,6}

People saw first-hand the benefits of the project's 'savings with a purpose' scheme; of the 60% of non-participants who said they were part of a savings group, almost half had joined within the project period and almost all said that their experience had been positive or very positive (93%).⁷

Perceptions of HWC over the project period

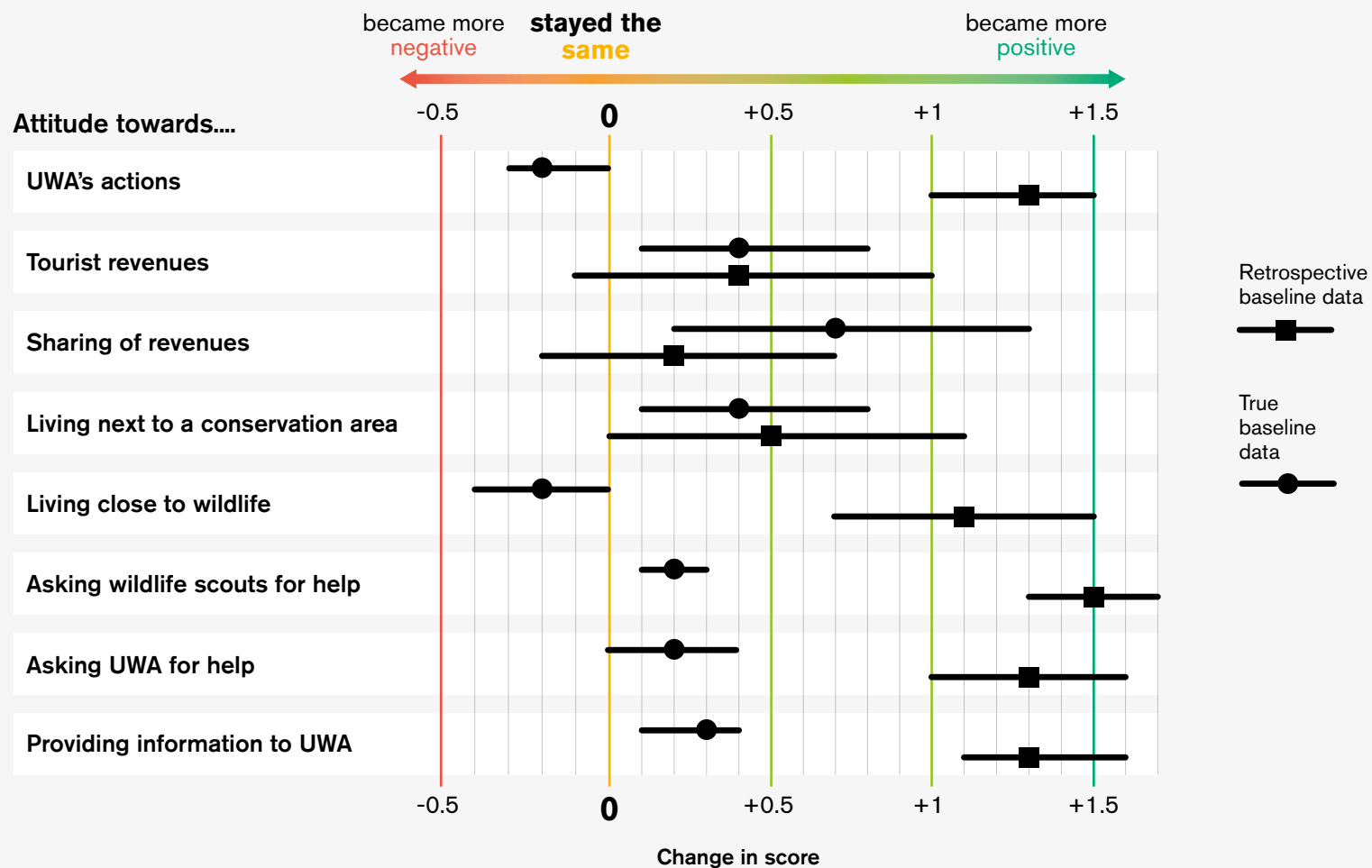
While rangers perceived differences in the rates of HWC in project villages, the surveys and reporting data were more equivocal. Of the surveyed people who didn't participate in the project directly, 70% reported having had trouble with wildlife eating their crops or attacking their livestock over the past year (that is, year four of the project). And although respondents said there had been changes in the severity and frequency of these incidents (65% and 68% of people, respectively), some

reported significant decreases and some reported significant increases. The construction of trenches by UWA (not part of this project) was the most common reason given for decreases in severity and frequency of HWC (and, indeed, some people noted trenches being built elsewhere as one of the reasons for increasing HWC frequency). A significant minority of people attributed reductions in the severity of HWC to scouts and rangers.

“I earned 720,000Ugx (US\$200) after 12 months of saving in my business saving group, which would not have been possible before the programme”

Wanda Michael, a beneficiary of the project's microenterprise programme

Figure 3. Observed change in conservation attitudes and engagement for eight indicators for non-scout beneficiaries using the original and retrospective methods



Note: error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

04

Reflecting on the project: opportunities, challenges and lessons learned

Opportunities and lessons learned

There were challenges in assessing the overall contribution of the project to reducing wildlife crime (Box 2). What was evident, however, was widespread local support for both wildlife scout and microenterprise interventions, and their positive impact on people's attitudes towards conservation. In turn, this supports key pathways in the project's theory of change and suggests that progress towards the goal of reducing involvement in wildlife crime has been made

within the project villages. Here, we discuss opportunities to maximise the positive influence of these types of community-based interventions to shift attitudes, change behaviour and benefit both communities and wildlife.

Park authorities can improve relationships with communities by supporting scouts

One common concern with the use of wildlife scouts is that local people may perceive them as spies for rangers. Given that this could have serious repercussions

— and would almost certainly fail to improve relationships between communities and the park — it was reassuring that only 3% of respondents raised this as an issue.

In fact, not only were respondents overwhelmingly positive about the presence of wildlife scouts, but they also expressed much more positive attitudes towards UWA when they were told that the agency supported the wildlife scout programme. This is evidence that people are benefitting from the scouts and that this is improving relationships.

High-value animals like elephants are poached and trafficked internationally



Chillies are sometimes grown as a deterrent, as elephants avoid them



Attitudes reveal opportunities for positive spillovers and wider influence

Evidence was mixed in terms of specific spillover effects from the microenterprise scheme. While it prompted significant changes in people's attitudes towards saving money, less than 4% of respondents from non-participating households said that they had begun growing chilli since the project began.

That the microenterprise scheme did not initially spur uptake in chilli production is unsurprising;

it takes time for generally risk-averse rural communities to adopt new practices. Moreover, people's positive attitudes towards the savings groups suggest that if the microenterprise scheme does contribute to their wider uptake beyond the supported business groups, the effect on local communities would be beneficial.

Generally, such high levels of support for both the wildlife scouts and the microenterprise scheme among people who did not directly participate is encouraging. It suggests that it may be possible to influence attitudes towards conservation without directly involving everyone in a project.

Explicitly connect conservation to project activities, right from the start

It is interesting that there was no statistically significant increase in people's belief that they benefit from living next to a conservation area, particularly as this was the direct outcome expected to be achieved from people participating in the microenterprise scheme.

In part, this results from the greater variability in the retrospective baseline. But it may also highlight the importance of connecting the microenterprise scheme and protected area conservation, which all project partners worked on through collaborations such as hosting joint meetings, and the way in which UWA arranged training for scouts in the project programme (which in itself demonstrated the value that UWA placed on the scouts).

BOX 2. CHALLENGES IN ASSESSING OVERALL PROJECT IMPACT ON HWC AND WILDLIFE CRIME

Determining whether, and to what extent, wildlife crime is declining as a result of these community-based interventions demands more concrete evidence. And this is fraught with challenges. Detecting illegal activity is difficult — particularly in areas of woodland, such as those bordering the KWR — and often relies on the data collected by rangers during their area patrols.

The project's ambition to use locally collected data to evaluate its impact on illegal wildlife trade was challenging given the rigors of statistical testing. This was compounded by COVID-19 and UWA's construction of trenches during the project period, which also likely influenced the incidence of HWC — both reducing rates in areas immediately adjacent to the trenches and potentially increasing rates in areas in between. This reflects findings from the survey (section 3).

Murchison Falls, Uganda



Notes

- 1 IIED, Building capacity for pro-poor responses to wildlife crime in Uganda. www.iied.org/building-capacity-for-pro-poor-responses-wildlife-crime-uganda
- 2 IIED, Q&A: New policy champions communities in the push to conserve Uganda's wildlife. www.iied.org/qa-new-policy-champions-communities-push-conserve-ugandas-wildlife
- 3 IIED (2018) Park action plans: increasing community engagement in tackling wildlife crime. <https://pubs.iied.org/g04265>
- 4 The rangers did, however, report an increase in illegal entry into the park to take wood for charcoal production and fuel, which they attributed to increased financial pressures imposed by COVID-19. It's also worth noting that, due to technical challenges, the project evaluation was unable to accurately assess changes in either HWC or wildlife crime as a result of the interventions.
- 5 IIED and Village Enterprise (2020) Park Action Plans: Stories of Change from a community enterprise programme around Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda. IIED, London. pubs.iied.org/17665iied
- 6 Aneno, J (15 June 2021) Turning up the heat – how chilli growing is conserving Uganda's wildlife. www.iied.org/turning-heat-how-chilli-growing-conserving-ugandas-wildlife
- 7 However, several organisations have promoted savings groups in the project villages, so it is difficult to attribute this uptake directly to the microenterprise programme.

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In Uganda, many people illegally hunt, traffic or trade wildlife because other opportunities to earn money are limited. But poaching is also driven by anger and resentment towards increasing conflict between humans and wildlife, and the feeling among communities that parks don't take their concerns seriously or do enough to support them.

This case study looks at how park-led, community-based activities in Uganda's Murchison Falls Conservation Area and surrounding villages have worked to change the way people think about conserving the wildlife that's on their doorstep. It draws on findings from an evaluation of the 'Implementing park action plans for community engagement to tackle IWT' project, which was funded by the UK government's Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and aims to provide insights for future efforts to combat wildlife crime — in Uganda and beyond.

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