



# LAKE VICTORIA: PRECIOUS AND UNDER PRESSURE

By Xenya Cherny with contributions from Daniel Ntende

**Environment is often the unmentioned casualty of piecemeal development and civil unrest. In this feature, we travel to the second largest freshwater reservoir in the world, Lake Victoria, to see how three grass-roots groups living on its shores in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania are working to provide clean water for their communities while keeping the shared resource healthy.**

Lake Victoria is one of Africa's best known natural landmarks. Bordered by Uganda in the northwest, Kenya in the east, and Tanzania in the south, the Lake is an economic powerhouse, on which 30 million people in the riparian countries are dependent.

The Lake Victoria basin is a vast reservoir of biodiversity. Of the 500 species of fish living in it, more than half are found nowhere else on the planet. But the Lake is also facing a myriad of environmental challenges from the fishing industry, urbanisation, pollution and land-use changes in the catchment area. In recognition of these unprecedented pressures, Lake Victoria was declared a threatened lake of the year 2005 by the Living Lakes partnership.

In recent years, the countries that share the 68,000 square-kilometre lake have joined with the international community in efforts to manage and preserve its water resources, fisheries, and environment. The lake's significance as a source of the Nile River has also boosted international cooperation.

At the grass-roots level, three Clean Up the World member organizations in the three countries surrounding Lake Victoria are taking small but important steps to address the lake's problems, and in so doing improve the wellbeing of both their communities and environment.

Here are their stories.

## Mission Hyacinth – Kenya

On the Kenyan shore of Lake Victoria, in Homa Bay, some 2000 volunteers are busy preparing for a major operation: combating one of the world's worst water weeds.

Organized by the Lake Victoria Permaculture Network Initiative, "Mission Hyacinth" will be held in conjunction with the Clean Up the World Weekend, celebrated globally on the third weekend of September and attracting participation of some 35 million volunteers from 110 countries.

The beautiful, large purple and violet flowers of the South American water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) make it a very popular ornamental plant. This notwithstanding, it is one of the worst aquatic invasive species in the world, and has inflicted enormous environmental and economic damage on Lake Victoria, among many other places in Africa and around the world.



*Pretty but voracious: water hyacinth has infested Lake Victoria.*

The water hyacinth is a very fast-growing plant, with populations known to double in only 12 days. Infestations of this weed literally block waterways, interfering with their use and preventing sunlight and oxygen from penetrating the water column and reaching submerged plants, thus dramatically reducing biological diversity. It also happens to be the preferred habitat for *Bilharzia* (parasitic flatworm) hosts and malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

In addition to "Mission Hyacinth", Lake Victoria Permaculture Network Initiative also organizes clean ups of beaches and waterways; recycling campaigns; tree planting and agro-forestry forums in villages and schools; and workshops on water, soil and energy conservation. The initiative is currently fundraising to set up a Lake Victoria Resource Centre, which will offer information on sustainable management of the lake's resources.

"We are privileged to be part of Clean Up the World. By promoting networking and global partnerships such as this one, we are one step closer to achieving the millennium development goals," says the Initiative's coordinator Jacob Ogweno.

## T is for Learning – Tanzania

"Tujifunze" in Swahili means "learning". Located on Lake Victoria's south coast, in the Tanza-

nian city of Mwanza, the Tujifunze Centre Information Technology (TCIT) uses information and communication technologies to empower their community, especially its disadvantaged groups such as orphans, women and the elderly, and promote care for the environment.

“It is well known that information and technology are key components for sustainable development as well as essential strategies for poverty reduction,” says Timothy Timanywa, TCIT coordinator. “So what we are trying to do is use these modern technologies to benefit people living in Tanzania’s lake zone.”

To achieve that, Tujifunze seeks to act as a forum for information and technological development of local communities and aims to assure that women have equitable access to information technology.



*Communities in Tanzania unite to clean Lake Victoria – the lifeblood of their community*

As part of the Clean Up the World campaign, Tujifunze organizes annual clean ups of the lakeshore and the city. It also partners with Caretakers of the Environment, a global network of secondary school teachers and students active in environmental law and education, to promote sustainable management of the lake’s resources.

“The Lake is our major source of freshwater, food and energy. Without it, we will have nothing to sustain us. That’s why we need to keep it healthy,” says Timanywa.

Tujifunze works to make practical information on sustainable water management available to all members of society, so that better decisions can be taken.

“Knowledge and information are one foundation of decision-making. What often happens, however, is that communities who are the primary users of natural resources are excluded when important decisions are being made. By making information accessible to people, especially the marginalised groups, we empower them to take action in making their community more sustainable.”

### **Role Models for Water and Sanitation – Uganda**

Adequate water and sanitation is literally a matter of life and death in Uganda. The country’s Water and Sanitation Programme statistics show that over 400 children die every week in Uganda because of water and sanitation-related diseases such as diarrhoea, typhoid, dysentery and cholera.

It is further estimated that \$20 million are spent treating such diseases each year. Even though many of the water-borne diseases are preventable, only one-fifth of the population is routinely taking precautionary measures such as boiling water before drinking it.

The Ndeje Roots & Shoots movement in Uganda took the lead in improving water supply, health and sanitation in the Makindye Ssabagabo community in the Wakiso District on Uganda’s Lake Victoria shore.

“In our community, there is only one spring well, and it was in bad shape. So we partnered with the local council authorities and convinced them to help us clean the well. We borrowed tools and worked for three days,” says Daniel Ntende, Roots & Shoots coordinator.



“As we worked, we learned of another danger: bacteria contamination in the well that could cause various diseases in humans. In partnership with Save Our Planet Earth, we organized meetings and presentations in different communities to combat this issue, advising people to boil drinking water to kill the bacteria,” he explains.

From this first success, the project has continued and two other wells were constructed, and several clean ups in and around town were held during the Clean Up the World Weekend.

“Our plans for the future are vast, and we hope to act as role models for other suffering communities,” confides Ntende.

*Xenya Cherny is a freelance journalist living and working in Sydney, Australia. Daniel Ntende is Roots & Shoots coordinator in Uganda. This article is available for reproduction free of charge as long as due acknowledgment is given to Clean Up the World Pty Ltd and the author, and the meaning of the article is not changed.*

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