Community libraries thrive among the rain forests and wetlands of western Uganda’s Kibale National Park  

By Matthew Loving

Are libraries naturally occurring organisms that form and thrive based upon their environment? Are they as naturally occurring as the flora and fauna that scientists are striving to protect and preserve in the earth’s diminishing wild spaces?

Of course they are, and Joel Hartter, a doctoral candidate in geography at the University of Florida in Gainesville, has been
working on an interesting case study of how and why libraries form and thrive—quite literally “in the wild.” In fact, his work as library coordinator for the Foundation for Children’s Education in Uganda (FCEU) is taking place in one of the wildest places left on earth: Kibale National Park in western Uganda.

A sanctuary’s dramatic impact

In 1993, conservation efforts to establish Kibale National Park turned hundreds of kilometers of logging preserve into a lasting menagerie of animals, lush rain forests, and green wetlands. The region contains one of the most diverse primate populations in eastern Africa and the largest known community of chimpanzees. The 795 square kilometers of park is also home to a myriad of other animal species, including forest elephants, warthogs, leopards, and an amazing array of birds, butterflies, and insects. Yet the wonders of this natural sanctuary are at times a difficult pill to swallow for local small-claim farming populations living along the park’s boundaries. These farming families are almost entirely dependent on the land to sustain their livelihoods.

For centuries, people living in the region used the dense forest for food, fuel, building materials, and medicines. The recent creation of the park makes it an excellent area for geographers like Hartter to study the effects of such state-imposed conservation efforts on local livelihoods. “When a national park is established, local people are no longer permitted access to harvesting privileges,” Hartter explains. “They’re all farmers. Everything they do is about the land, and restricting their use of the land really affects their lives.”

One key concern that Hartter has heard again and again from local villagers is the problem of crop destruction by park wildlife. This age-old conflict between man and beast is engrained in the culture of village life, and seeking a balance is at best a challenge. Although the Toro people of western Uganda shared the park’s land with wildlife for several centuries, the inability to hunt or kill protected animals poses problems. While in the past the Toro people supplemented their diet with bush-meat, today’s modern populations are entirely dependent on their crops, livestock, and other cottage industries. Olive baboons, redtail monkeys, elephants, and bushpigs are notorious crop raiders who do not recognize the park’s boundaries. These large mammals can destroy an entire season’s production in the course of a single night.

Research scientists working in Kibale are aware of the long-standing fears of and resentment toward many wildlife species and understand that education may be the only way to create a lasting harmony. Like many other researchers, Hartter also believes education is an impor-
tant way to help local people improve aspects of their daily lives. His work to support rural community libraries is part of this effort and began while conducting local household surveys on crop damage, agricultural productivity, and existing threats to livelihood. Over the last two summers he has worked hard by meeting with local farmers to establish the true data points of crop loss and other wildlife-human interactions.

Giving back with books
Hartter says that he realized even before making the trip to Uganda that he needed to set personal goals to acculturate and see things from the local perspective. To prepare, he studied the local language and culture, paying special attention to the economics of survival. This preparation paid off as he hit the ground running in Uganda. Hartter quickly learned about the difficulties of life in the park’s peripheries and became determined to get involved. “We keep sending researchers to Kibale, and yet we’ve done almost nothing in all these years to really help the people who are helping us,” he says. “They literally tell us, ‘You’re making your career from this, and what do we get out of it?’”

For Hartter, giving back meant getting involved with FCEU’s Ekitabu project, named for the Toro word for books. As Hartter met and befriended many of the local village leaders, farmers, and research assistants, he formed important relationships that would make him an obvious candidate for his work as library project coordinator. Using a vehicle and guide to reach more remote areas, he quickly became an indispensable resource to FCEU founders and fellow park researchers Freerk Molleman and Gosia Arlet.

Molleman and Arlet founded FCEU while working in Uganda and conducting their postdoctoral work through the University of California at Davis. FCEU is a nonprofit foundation based in the Netherlands, existing on support from the United States, the Netherlands, and the international research community working in and around Kibale National Park. One of FCEU’s main goals is to promote and encourage reading by establishing small community libraries, organizing literacy classes, and supporting preschool and secondary education.

Moses Mugenyi is one of the Ugandan field assistants who helps international researchers in Kibale. His generous support of the Foundation’s goals for literacy and learning were an important inspiration for Hartter and others. When the proposal came to place a new public library center in Mugenyi’s small town, he readily volunteered a quarter of his modest four-room house. As Hartter left Kibale at the end of his first summer, he pledged his support and promised to return the following year with books from the United States.

Back at the University of Florida, Hartter did not forget Mugenyi’s generous offer to help create a library. Instead, he began a campaign on campus to collect books for donation and to establish funding for sending the materials overseas. He worked with university organizations, local bookstores, and individuals to gather appropriate donations.

Hartter describes returning to Kibale with 600 pounds of books and materials the following year as a breakthrough moment. “When I returned, Moses had totally forgotten that I had made a promise,” Hartter says. “So often, the promises made by well-intentioned foreigners remain unfulfilled.”

Opening the door to a better life
Hartter is quick to emphasize his support for creating places of continuing education. “These are not just stacks of books—we see our mission as being so much more than simply providing educational materials to impoverished people,” he explains. “We want to open the door to a better life for them through these libraries that serve as centers of learning.”

Without Hartter’s spirited ideal of what public libraries can do for people, much of the success of the community libraries would not have been possible. As coordinator
and stateside advocate, Hartter’s enthusiasm for libraries as a solution for lifelong learning is creating a record of success where so many other previous library efforts have failed in eastern Africa.

“The libraries are autonomous and do not need us to keep running,” he stresses. “We really wanted to avoid what has happened in other countries, like Ghana, where once research and aid workers left, everything left with them.”

To insure that Kibale’s libraries continue to succeed and grow, FCEU created an autonomous local executive board. Members receive a modest compensation for their efforts and are charged with handling the foundation’s budgets. Hartter believes that local ownership of the libraries and foundation activities is crucial, and the agreed-upon operating procedures help the board know that resources are being used efficiently. “Things were set up so that everything is overlapping to create checks and balances for board members. If someone is depositing or picking up materials in Fort Portal, someone else is noting that transaction in the books,” Hartter notes.

Information needs in rural sub-Saharan Africa often go unfilled, and it’s an issue that history’s colonizers and current governments have done little to correct. The lack of a proper public library is a big problem in Uganda, where education is more expensive than in almost any other developing nation.

Universal education efforts in Uganda have recently received a lot of attention. But while reforms are sought, the truth is that the system still fails rural farming families who cannot afford school fees, uniforms, or the loss of helping hands during the working day. Hartter estimates that perhaps less than 10% of children remain in school after 7th grade in the majority of Kibale’s rural communities. “It’s very few who are able to continue beyond that level,” he reports.

The idea of continuing education is important to those who are unable to stay in school. Statistics in the region also show that parents with more education and who are able to stay in school longer will place more emphasis on keeping their own children in school. In this way, the four community libraries around the park act as epicenters of community education efforts. Along with library space, they provide rooms for basic skills and training classes that improve, almost immediately, the quality of daily life for women and children.

For example, although tailoring is considered a man’s profession in Uganda, sewing classes are offered so that mothers can earn extra money to pay school fees. Learning this vital skill has the added advantage of allowing women to be able to sew mandatory school uniforms for their children. Literacy classes are also offered, and materials in local languages are sought for library collections, with preference given to regional literature and works by Ugandan women writers.

At the center of continuing education
The community libraries of Kibale are both inspiring and enlightening for American librarians because of their promise to bring information solutions to some of the most remote and rural areas of Africa. The libraries seem to help define a new streamlined mission of public service to those most in need—a kind of “emergency library.” Their place at the center of continuing adult education in rural Africa is crucial to understanding the place of libraries in every society.

Harter admits that the rapid success of the library project has created new challenges for managing its future. “I need a team to help generate funding and to also work in promotional areas,” he explains. “At this point it has really become a worthy grant project that I believe merits continued funding.”