

“Making Bush Meat Poachers Willingly Surrender Using Integrated Poachers Awareness Programme: A Case of Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda”.

S S. Kato⁺ , J O Okumu⁺⁺.

Abstract

This paper is an interesting analysis of a unique case in MFPA, one of the East African National Parks in Uganda, where wild animal poachers are targeted in an intensive integrated education and awareness programme that makes them publicly surrender with their tools. The paper brings out yet another important approach that emphasises that for sustainable management of a protected area to be attained, involvement of local community is very important as opposed to the traditional approach of law enforcement, a practice prominent in the last century with limited success. MFPA was one of the most tourists' destinations in the 1960s only to be devastated during Uganda's civil unrest of 1970s and 1980s owing to the lack of awareness by the local communities that the resources in the PA are important to them too.

As the wildlife population is steadily increasing in MFPA, any approach such as the above that has demonstrated a positive move towards sustainable management is welcome. It is a strategy, which can be tried in other protected areas especially in the tropics.

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Acronyms

| | |
|--------|---|
| CCD | Community Conservation Department |
| CCR | Community Conservation Ranger |
| CITIES | Convention In Trade In Endangered Species |
| CPI | Community Protected area Institution |
| DED | German Development Service |
| EU | European Union |
| GTZ | German Technical cooperation |
| IUCN | World Conservation Union |
| KfW | German Development Bank |

| | |
|------|--------------------------------|
| MFNP | Murchison Falls National Park |
| MFPA | Murchison Falls Protected Area |
| PA | Protected Area |
| UPDF | Uganda Peoples Defence Force |
| UWA | Uganda Wildlife Authority |
| WR | Wildlife Reserve |

1.0 Introduction

Murchison Falls Protected Area (MFPA) is the largest protected area in Uganda; it is located in the north east of the country. The protected area (PA) got its name from Murchison Falls, which are unquestionably the greatest and the most dramatic feature in the White Nile's long meander from the Equator to Mediterranean. The Falls are one of Uganda's most spectacular features. The Victoria Nile's rapids and cataracts leading to the Falls in the PA are among the longest stretches of the white water in the world. MFPA is a regional centre of endemism of the Sudanian vegetation in East Africa, and, given the level of protection afforded by the Park; it has been internationally accorded a high level of conservation priority by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). Sudanian vegetation is characterised by a mosaic of woodlands often dominated by *Combretum* and *Acacia* species and extends from Senegal to Ethiopia. In addition, it is the only PA where the tall grass savanna of the Albertine Rift is represented extensively.

As wildlife populations decline across the African continent, MFPA is increasingly significant as a safe enclave for large mammals, particularly elephants, buffaloes, giraffes, kob, hartebeest and hippopotami. This area formally supported a higher density of elephants than anywhere else in the world, and with appropriate protection, the MFPA has the potential to regain its place amongst the important 'big game' parks of the world. The PA is the last viable breeding population of the Nile crocodile and Rothschild's giraffe in Uganda. Furthermore, the area harbours Uganda's largest population of Jackson's hartebeest, this species having been drastically reduced or entirely eliminated in the other Ugandan Protected areas. Other rare species include soft-shelled turtle and the chimpanzee. The PA is exceptionally important for its birds. Over 450 species are recorded, and the Nile and its delta are particularly important as breeding areas for the regionally endemic shoebill and the saddle-bill stork. The PA also supports a host of migrants, both Palearctic and continental. The Nile Delta is a Ramsa site.

The Victoria Nile flowing through the PA is an important link between the fresh-water ecosystems of Uganda's lakes. The large water catchments system within the negligibly polluted area of MFPA forms a system of high self-purifying power. For the ecosystem of Lake Albert the protection of MFPA is of outstanding importance. In connection with the above, the River Nile, especially the stretch from the falls to the Delta, is a critically important, undisturbed, fish-breeding area, on which fishing communities downstream and around Lake Albert depend. From the Stone Age settlement along the Nile, to the significance of the forests, Falls and islands in the history and traditions of the Acholi, Alur and Bunyoro people of north-western Uganda, the area has an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage. In the 19th century, with visitations by explorers and their interactions with kingdoms and communities, the area becomes a zone of intense interaction in political developments in northern Uganda. The PA is also important for domestic education and recreation. In the past significant numbers of school children, University students and Wildlife Clubs members enjoyed visits to the PA. As the national economy and PA facilities continue to improve, it will become every Ugandan's ambition to visit Murchison Falls as the area exists primarily for the benefit of

Ugandans. The PA also has great economic potential. In the pre-Amin years, 60,000 visitors in 1970 made the Murchison Falls the premier tourist destination in all of East Africa. The return to such levels of tourists would create and support many new jobs and boost foreign exchange earnings.

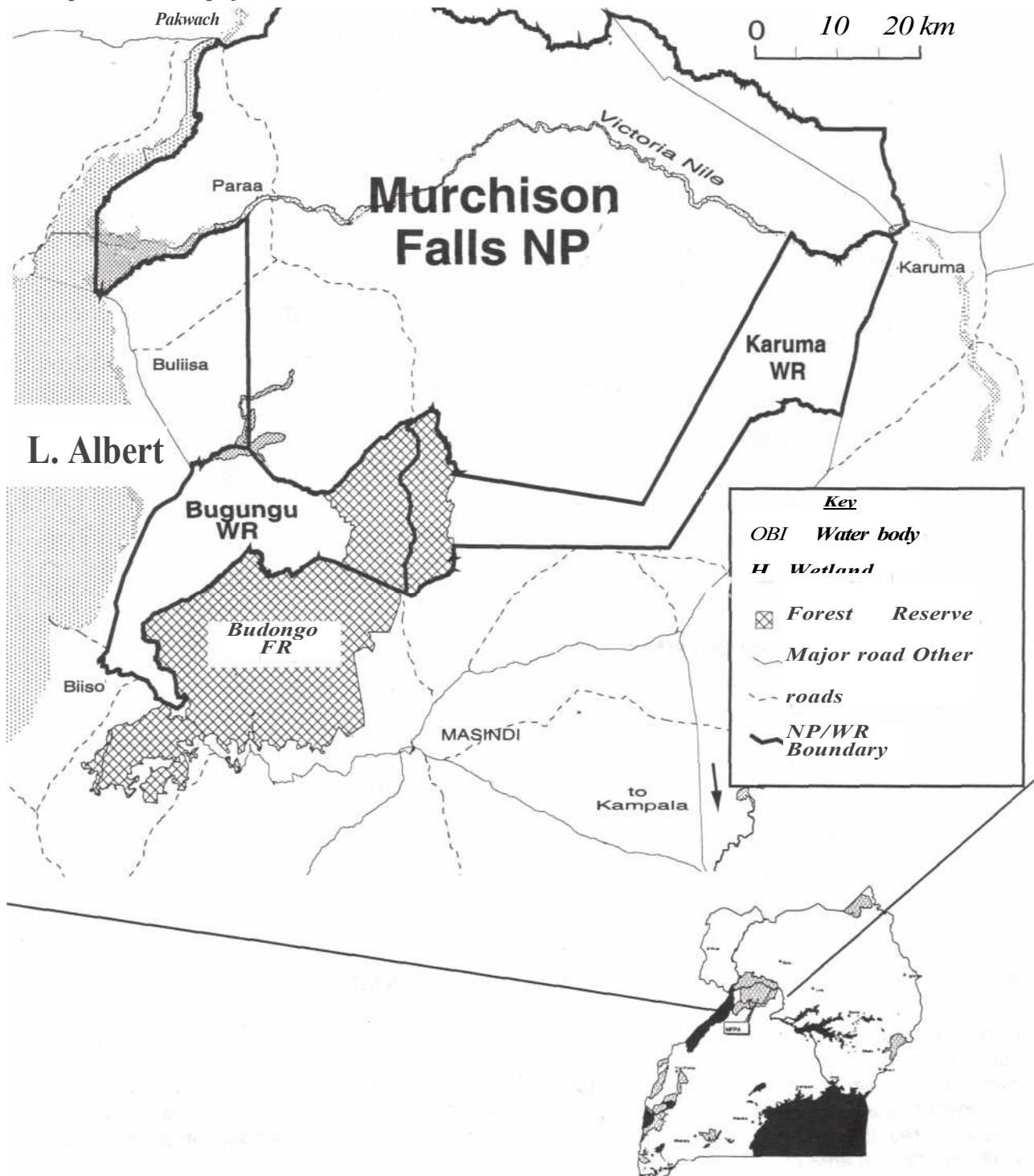
From the onset of gazetting the Bunyoro and Gulu Game Reserve in the colonial era up to independence in 1962, the management approach of MFPA was relying on law enforcement that was done with little regard to the local community some of whom were once living in the PA but later forced out due to sleeping sickness epidemic and the second world war. The wildlife legislations were enforced often with brutality and many people who used to traditionally hunt in the area became 'poachers' and were killed, maimed or arrested by PA staff. It created resentment to PA management. In addition, PA revenues were being remitted wholly to the central government without direct benefits to improve on the welfare of the neighbouring people. Therefore, bad relationships between the parties developed over a period of time. This partly explains the scenario where the local community took to heavy poaching in the PA during civil strife periods to almost disseminating the big game population.

This kind of exclusive management continued up to 1996 when Game Department merged with Uganda National Parks to form Uganda Wildlife Authority. The Uganda Wildlife Authority Statute, 1996, started recognising the importance of working with communities towards achieving sustainable management of the PA. The realisation that protected area can only be adequately conserved if co-operation of the surrounding communities can be obtained, a desire to overcome conflicts with neighbouring communities, a desire to take advantage of opportunities for local people to contribute towards protection and rehabilitation of PA resources and thus reduce the cost of management and a philosophical commitment to human rights and thus fair and equitable treatment of communities living around the PA who have traditionally used PA resources made UWA to take on community involvement approach seriously. It is one of these community participation approaches, which resulted into a peaceful surrender of numerous poachers that has been examined in this paper.

2.0 Background information

2.1 Location and area of Murchison Falls Protected Area

Map 1. General map of Murchison Falls Protected Area



Map 1. shows the location of MFPA in Uganda, and its different components of the protected area. The largest component is Murchison Falls National Park, straddling the Victoria Nile. Along its southern edge lie Bugungu and Karuma Wildlife Reserves. To the south of Bugungu lies Budongo Forest Reserve, a portion of which overlaps with both Bugungu and Karuma WRs. Table 1 below show the land area of the different PAs components.

Table 1. Area of the different component PA of MFPA

| Wildlife Estate | Sq. km |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| Murchison Falls National Park | 3,893 |
| Bugungu Wildlife Reserve | 501 |
| Karuma Wildlife Reserve | 678 |
| Total wildlife estate | 5,072 |
| | |
| Budongo Forest | |
| Budongo overlap with Bugungu | 135 |
| Budongo overlap with Karuma | 99 |
| Budongo outside UWA estate | 474 |
| Total area of Budongo Forest | 798 |

Source: MTTI/UWA Protected Area Assessment Programme, Using a Geographical Information System (GIS) in MFPA General Management Plan

MFPA lies within three districts, Buliisa, Masindi and Amuru and falls immediately adjacent to three others, Oyam, Gulu and Nebbi.

2.2 History of establishment and management of Murchison Falls Protected Area

Between 1898 and 1915 sleeping sickness swept through Uganda. The only effective way known to combat this disease was to evacuate the human population, and between 1907 and 1912 an area of about 13,000 km² was depopulated on both sides of the Victoria Nile. In 1910 and 1928 4,750 km² on both sides of the river was declared Bunyoro and Gulu Game Reserves respectively. These two areas were upgraded to the status of a national park in 1952 after benefiting for 40 years of reduced hunting pressure. The area had abundance of wildlife.

“The main attractions of this park are undoubtedly the unique Murchison Falls and River Nile with its teeming hippo and serried ranks of crocodile on the sand-banks, coupled with large herds of elephant and buffalo coming down to drink and bathe. The park also of course contains numerous other species such as lion, leopard, black rhino, giraffe, waterbuck, Uganda kob, lelwel hartebeest and other lesser antelopes, colobus and other monkeys and a great variety of bird life” (Game Department Annual Report 1952). Later in 1964 and 1968, Karuma and Bugungu Game Reserves were established as buffer zone in the southern and western flanks respectively. Similarly, the huge grassland to the north of the park became Acholi and East Madi Elephant Sanctuary that were later converted to Kilak Control Hunting Area and the Aswa-Lolim Game Reserve. Most of that area was again degazetted for farming and ranching.

In the 1960s MFNP became the most popular wildlife destination for tourists in East Africa, attracting some 60,000 visitors annually. Safari lodges were constructed at Paraa, chobe and Pakuba to cater for the tourist influx. The launch trip to the base of the Falls was the primary attraction, and at the peak of tourist visitations up to 12 launch trips were made each day. In the 1960s up to 14,000 elephants were in MFPA and the huge herds were increasingly destroying habitats that other species would depend on. In 1965 and 1967, Park authorities culled some 2000 elephants.

During the political upheavals of the 1970s, the county's tourism industry collapsed. With little revenue received, Uganda National Parks was unable to effectively manage its protected areas and control poaching, and by the late 1970s the situation in MFNP was out of control. The Nile crossing at Paraa became the frontline in the conflicts of various militias following the downfall of the Iddi Amin regime, and armies on both sides of the river looted the lodges and became involved in the wholesale slaughter of wildlife. The Park's herds of elephants and buffaloes were almost annihilated. By 1980 just 1,420 elephants remained, the decline continuing into the early 90s when just 290 were counted (Douglas-Hamilton et al 1980; Olivier 1991). Over the same period of time the 15,000 buffalo recorded during the 1960s had been reduced to just 1,500 in 1991. Similar situations were exhibited in the Game Reserves and other neighbouring areas with wildlife. The wildlife population trend is shown in table 1 below. The management vacuum also enables the local community join in the killing of wildlife. They acquired automatic weapons that were aimed at both the animals and members of staff, and the use of poisons in the animal drinking places or poisoned baits along animal trails.

Table 1. Population estimates for large mammals in MFPA, from counts conducted over time

| Species | Pre-1973 | 1980 | 1991 | DEC. 1995 | 1999 | 2005 |
|------------|----------|--------|-------|-----------|-------|--------|
| Buffalo | 30,000 | 15,000 | 1,600 | 2,500 | 3,900 | 11,004 |
| Giraffe | 150-200 | - | 80 | 150 | 350 | 245 |
| Hippo | 12,000 | 7,500 | - | 1,200 | 1,800 | 2,104 |
| Uganda kob | 10,000 | 31,000 | - | 4,400 | 7,500 | 9,315 |
| Elephant | 12,000 | 1,420 | 300 | 300 | 780 | 516 |
| Waterbuck | - | 5,500 | - | 600 | 800 | 1,441 |
| Warthog | - | - | - | 900 | 1,600 | 2,298 |
| Hartebeest | - | 14,000 | - | 2,400 | 2,900 | 4,101 |

Source: UNP (1971), Douglas-Hamilton et al (1980), Olivier (1991), Lamprey and Michelmore (1996), Lamprey (1999), Rwetsiba and Wanyama (2005).

The scale of destruction in MFNP in the 1970s and 80s was far beyond that experienced by any other national park in East Africa. In the early 1990s various donor-assisted projects were initiated to rehabilitate the park and its infrastructure, and to ensure that wildlife can once again be protected. Under the European Community- Many roads were rehabilitated and a management plan was written. KfW-German Bank for Reconstruction and Development, GTZ-German Technical cooperation and DED-German Development Service put in place new office buildings, purchased vehicles, boats, an aircraft and communication equipment. The ferry and its landings, bridges and jetties were also rehabilitated. Community conservation department was supported as well as the surrounding local community infrastructure such as schools, health centres, and drilling a bore hole.

Today, MFNP, Bugungu and Karuma Wildlife Reserves are managed together as Murchison Falls Protected Area. The Park also operates the launch and ferry. The lodge at Paraa has been rehabilitated and is operating to international standards. The other lodges at Chobe and Pakuba are being rehabilitated. Two other lodges, Nsambia River Lodge and Red Chilli have been built in the Park and Nile Safari in is near by. Game viewing drives, sport fishing and

birding are also prominent activities in the PA. There is tremendous increase in visitor numbers to over 10,000 in 2007. Regular aerial counts indicate that the population of larger wildlife species are increasing except for elephant, which decreased in 2005. This therefore means some of the current strategies adapted by management are working and management interventions are effective.

3.0 Poaching reduction approaches

One department that MFPA relied on most was Law Enforcement and Security (LE&S), its major occupation is to prevent illegal activities in the PA particularly to stop poaching and control illegal activities in the wildlife trade. LE&S also provide for the safety of staff and visitors to the PA. In so doing so, it works with other security agencies such as the Uganda Peoples Defence Force (UPDF) and Police. Patrol rangers number currently at 190 plus 80 UPDF who are deployed in 25 different locations across the PA. They conduct short and long patrol looking for poachers or any signs of illegal activities as well as monitoring the general wellbeing of wildlife. Once poachers are arrested, they are forwarded to police for prosecution. However, in some occasions they engage in shootout with poachers and both sides may lose lives. Both rangers and UPDF carry automatic assault rifles to counteract the ever increasing sophistication of poachers' weaponry. Basically, animal poaching is done using wire snare, wheel trap, pit, gun, bow and arrow, net and spears. Through network of intelligence, sometimes poachers plans are foiled. In the 1990s, over 400 could be arrested monthly. In the 2000s a number of elephants were getting trapped in wire snares and many got killed or maimed (MFPA, 2000-2007). Perhaps, this explains the reduction in elephant population from 780 in 1999 to 516 in 2005 as shown in table 1. It was clear that law enforcement alone was not effective enough to reduce poaching and a more community integrated approach needed to be brought into play. Community conservation had to be strengthened with appropriate strategies to handle such a situation.

Community conservation is a broad term to describe all work involving interaction with communities living around protected areas and include conflict resolution, consultation meetings and workshops, revenue sharing, problem animal control, collaborative management, education and awareness programmes. In creating environmental protection awareness among the local communities, group discussions, informal village meetings and workshops are conducted by Community Conservation Department (CCD) staff. They liaise with Community Protected area Institution (CPI), a body provided by law and elected by the people surrounding protected areas to link the community and PA management. Community conservation wardens and rangers explain MFPA management policies to the communities bordering the PA. Furthermore, they also conduct programmes on tree nursery establishment and tree planting, beekeeping, energy saving methods and waste disposal systems among the communities.

The community conservation wardens and rangers carry out problem animal control. Problem animals include buffalo, elephant, hippo, crocodile, lion and leopard that cross into people's land threatening lives and damaging crops. PA management receives over 60 reported cases of problem animals per month and usually react by carrying out measures such as scare shooting, digging trench and training of local communities. These interventions have reduced problem animal conflicts between the community and PA management. Under

Uganda's law vermin are recognised as bush pigs, vervet monkey and olive baboons, and the mandate to manage those lies with the various local governments.

Under collaborative management arrangements, communities from six adjacent parishes are allowed to collect PA resources such as fuel wood, medicinal plants, craft materials, thatching grass and clean water. They (communities) in turn support the PA management by reporting poaching activities and controlling other illegal resource off take. This arrangement has helped in improving PA-community relationships.

The UWA act 2000 provides for sharing of 20% of PA gate fees with the local community. The funds are channelled through the PA adjacent local governments to support community projects such as construction of schools, health centres, vocational institution, drilling bore hole, tree planting, beekeeping, protection of crocodile infested sites and goat rearing. From 2001-2007 over \$430,000 has been used in such community projects in the 15 adjacent Sub counties and has improved people's livelihoods tremendously.

3.1 Education and awareness programmes

Community education and awareness programme is done in schools and community groups. The Community conservation staffs teach wildlife and environmental conservation issues. The programme encourages schools, community groups and wildlife clubs to carry out educational visits to MFPA. Some of the visiting groups do residential training at Paraa Educational Centre located at the PA headquarters. Over 2000 people visit the education centre annually.

In 2005 the CCD designed a strategy called 'signature campaign' that targets poachers. House hold visits were made to poachers to convince them to stop poaching. The poachers were identified from arrest and release records, other poachers, local leaders and CPI representatives. They are made aware of the value of wildlife including the range of benefits accruing from the PA. They were also promised no reprisal after owning up to what they had done and surrendered from poaching. After intense persuasions, few poachers began to give in and agreed to surrender. Others were visited up to seven times before they could surrender. The ex-poachers were later encouraged to carry out poacher-to-poacher awareness programme. And in September 2005, the first group of 124 poachers surrendered with their poaching tools at Pakwach Sub County. The surrendering ceremony was organised by the poachers themselves and conducted under a secrete tree. Tools surrendered included over 370 spears, 540 wire snares, 74 wheel traps, 17 axes, 40 knives, wildlife trophies and herbal concoctions of spiritual nature. Some had their tools in the PA and were later collected while in company of the rangers. They then signed a simple document individually signifying stopping poaching and pledging further support to the PA management. The ceremony was laden with singing of songs that expressed their hunting prowess, dancing, demonstrations of hunting tactics and testimonies. One of the testimonies was made by one old man called Mr. Semeo Nono, a poacher who doubles as a witch doctor for poachers in that area, he said,

"From 1963 when I started hunting in MFPA, I have killed 4 rhinoceros, 74 elephants, 152 buffaloes, 3 lions, 128 hippos, 65, hartebeest and many other smaller antelopes. I was never arrested by rangers because I could turn into an ant hill or just disappears from their sights. I always led my hunting expeditions with success. Here I am today with my three sons denouncing and promising to stop poaching forthwith. I have come along with all my hunting tools including the spear that I inherited from my father. I have seen the benefits of protecting wild animals and I want my fellow colleagues to follow my example".

After that ceremony, some poachers went with CCD staff to a local FM radio station, *Radio Paidah* in Nebbi district to sensitise other poachers. In order to further built confidence of the poachers, educational tour was organised for them to visit MFPA.

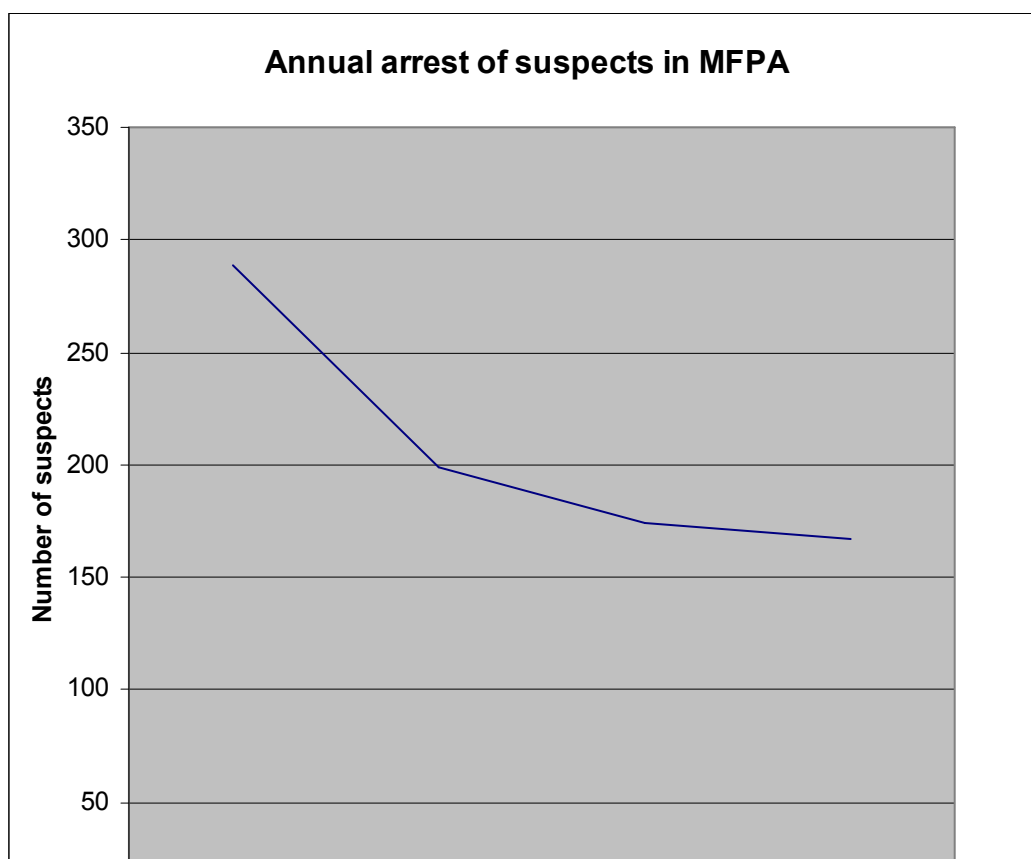
This exercise continued to many other areas and by end of 2007, more than 1,800 poachers had signed that they had stop poaching and would support the PA in its efforts to combat poaching and over 1,700 had notified the PA authority of their readiness to surrender. The ex-poachers have already formed 17 groups and requested for financial support for alternative livelihoods projects that would discourage poaching and promote cohesiveness among them. Their request was approved by CPI and they were given \$35,000 for goat rearing. After training each poacher purchased at least a goat.

Analysis of suspects arrested from 2004 to 2007 in MFPA shows that there is a significant decline in illegal activities as shown in table 3 and graph 1 below. More than half of the illegal activity arrest was not wild animal poachers but tree cutters, fishermen and people who entered the PA illegally. However, it is also true that some poachers have not surrendered yet and there were also reported cases of some poachers who surrendered to have gone back for poaching.

Table 3. Annual arrest of suspects in MFPA

| No. | Year | Number of arrested suspects |
|-----|------|-----------------------------|
| 1. | 2004 | 289 |
| 2. | 2005 | 199 |
| 3. | 2006 | 174 |
| 4. | 2007 | 167 |

Graph 1. Trend of arrest of suspects from 2004-2007 in MFPA



4.0 Conclusions

MFPA management strategies and interventions are working and the protected area is on its path to recovery. This appears to be so because the community involvement component that was integrated with law enforcement approach is acting as the engine that is propelling the PA towards sustainable management. A good example is the poachers' signature campaign, which had significant effects on the levels of illegal activities in the PA; it has led to decline in poaching within a short time without the use of force and high management costs. This kind of interventions can be applicable in most protected areas in the tropics. It is lesson worth emulating.

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