

Case Study #9: Restoring the Hippo in Uganda’s Murchison Falls National Park and Conservation Area

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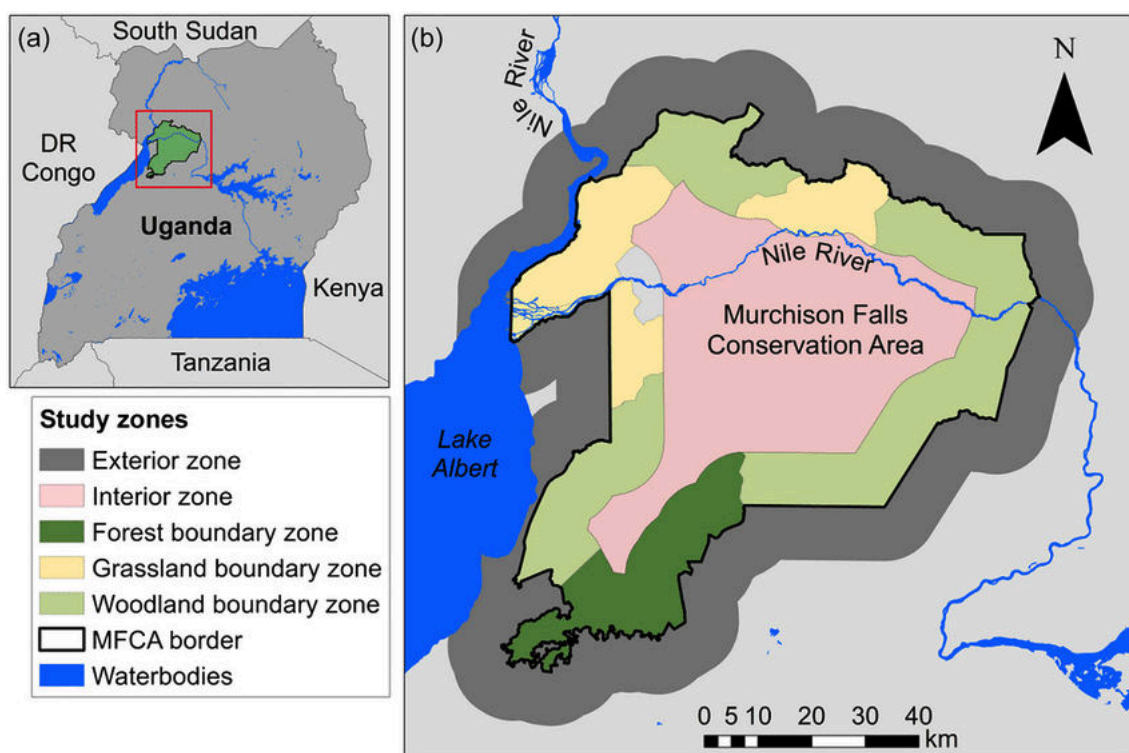
[Image Source](#)

Introduction

The Common Hippopotamus (Hippo) (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), one of Africa’s most iconic and ecologically significant megaherbivores, is facing growing threats in Uganda’s Murchison Falls National Park (MFNP), part of the Murchison Falls Conservation Area (MFCA). Although currently listed as *Vulnerable* on the [IUCN Red List of Threatened Species](#), recent field reports indicate a potentially dramatic decline in MFCA’s hippo population— annual MFCA censuses showed more than a 50% decline in its hippo population in the last five years.

Visual evidence, ranger accounts, and partner observations from the Uganda Conservation Foundation (UCF) point to a steep downward trend in hippo numbers, prompting [the Global Humane Conservation Fund of Africa](#) (GH-CFA) – a program of [Global Humane Society](#) to launch the **Hippo Recovery Initiative** in collaboration with UCF and in support of the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). This initiative focuses on the urgent need for localized monitoring, conservation action, and long-term protection of this keystone species.

While the IUCN Red List assessment describes the species in Uganda as “widespread, locally abundant and increasing,” the on-the-ground reality in MFNP suggests that such global assessments may not fully capture region-specific dynamics. This underscores the importance of site-specific monitoring and adaptive management.



Location of the Murchison Falls Conservation Area in north-western Uganda. [Image Source](#)

Threats to Hippos in Murchison Falls National Park

Several interconnected factors are contributing to the decline of hippo populations in MFNP:

1. Poaching for Bushmeat and Ivory Teeth

A growing illegal trade in hippo teeth—often referred to as “hidden ivory”—has emerged as a serious threat. Investigations by *National Geographic* in [2016](#) and [2023](#), as well as a [2024 report by Africa Geographic](#), have highlighted that this illicit trade occurs in Uganda. It is estimated that approximately **87,000 kilograms of hippo teeth** have been exported from Uganda over the last decade, which corresponds to around 16,700 animals¹². This is a staggering figure with serious implications for wild populations, considering the current population estimate of 130,000 hippo in Africa.

¹² With an average 5.2 kg ivory from a hippo (calculated from data in [ref.](#) 14,000 kg corresponds to 2,700 animals), 87,000 kg of hippo teeth corresponds to 16,730 animals.



The ivory in a hippo consists of the four upper and lower canine teeth plus two incisors. [Image Source](#)

2. Human-Wildlife Conflict

As agricultural expansion and settlement encroach on natural habitats, encounters between hippos and people are increasing. Hippos can cause significant crop damage and occasionally injure or kill people, often leading to retaliatory killings. These incidents are frequently unreported, yet they play a significant role in reducing local hippo numbers.

3. Environmental Instability and Climate Variability

The Lake Victoria Basin—which includes MFNP and the Victoria Nile—has experienced unprecedented hydrological shifts, including [widespread flooding in 2019–2020](#) and [severe drought in early 2022](#). These climate anomalies have displaced wildlife and altered breeding patterns. For example, the flooding negatively impacted Nile crocodile reproduction in MFNP ([source](#)). It is likely that hippos experienced similar displacement, reproductive disruptions, and habitat stress.

The Hippo Recovery Initiative

In response to these escalating threats, GH-CFA, in partnership with UCF and in support of UWA, has launched a comprehensive **Hippo Recovery Initiative** focused on the following interventions:

Habitat Protection

- Strengthening protection of aquatic and terrestrial hippo habitats through increased deployment of wildlife protection units in critical areas of MFNP.



Marine patrol with UWA rangers

Community Engagement

- Supporting UCF's community-based programs that reduce human-wildlife conflict and promote coexistence.
- Recruiting and training local youth through UCF's *Scout Support Program*, fostering conservation stewardship and providing alternative livelihoods.



A mountain of snares and wheel traps collected by rangers on patrol in MFNP

Wildlife Rescue and Veterinary Support

- Establishing a dedicated Wildlife Rescue Unit to provide rapid response to hippos and other wildlife injured by poaching activities, especially snare-related wounds.



Wildlife Rescue Unit vehicle at MFNP



The Wildlife Rescue Unit team prepares to respond to an injured animal

Policy Advocacy

- Raising the profile of hippo conservation issues at national and international levels.
- Advocating for stronger enforcement and policy measures to curb the illegal trade in hippo ivory.

Next Steps: Data Collection and Monitoring

A central component of the Hippo Recovery Initiative involves establishing accurate, up-to-date data on hippo population size, distribution, and demographics in MFNP. This data will provide a baseline for tracking recovery trends, informing conservation strategies, and influencing policy.

Why It Matters

Hippos are **keystone species** and **ecosystem engineers**. Their movements maintain wetland dynamics, and their dung plays a vital role in nutrient cycling and aquatic food chains (for more

information on the ecological role of the hippo, see section 8 of the literature review). A decline in hippo populations could result in far-reaching ecological consequences, disrupting the integrity of river systems and biodiversity within MFNP.

In addition, hippos are a flagship species for ecotourism in Uganda. Their loss threatens not only the ecological health of wetlands but also the economic potential of wildlife tourism and conservation-linked livelihoods across the Nile Basin.

A Call to Action

The hippo crisis in Murchison Falls National Park is a stark reminder that species deemed "non-critical" can decline rapidly and quietly. It also highlights the urgent need for **localized conservation action, updated data, and strong collaboration** between governments, NGOs, scientists, and communities.

The GH-CFA urges donors, policymakers, and international conservation partners to support the Hippo Recovery Initiative. With timely intervention, Uganda's hippos can be protected—and the health of Africa's wetlands restored.

For more information about the Hippo Recovery Initiative or to support our work, please contact africa@globalhumane.org or visit our [website](#).