Project: Assessing Threats and Local Perceptions of Giant Pangolins in Budongo–Mukihani Forest Linkage Zone

QUARTER ONE REPORT (September -November 2025)

By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This first-quarter progress report presents the initial achievements of the ongoing project *Assessing Threats and Local Perceptions of Giant Pangolins in the Budongo–Mukihani Forest Linkage Zone*, funded by the Rufford Foundation. The project aims to fill critical knowledge gaps on the endangered giant pangolin (*Smutsia gigantea*) by documenting its presence, identifying key threats, and understanding community perceptions within the Budongo–Mukihani forest corridor in western Uganda. These early efforts also focus on establishing a strong community-based monitoring system to support long-term conservation.

During the reporting period, the project achieved significant progress across all major output areas. Six camera traps were successfully deployed across three ecologically relevant villages Onieni, Ogadra, and Abangi following community-led verification that resulted in replacing Byasiko with Abangi to ensure accurate site coverage. This marks the beginning of systematic, evidence-based wildlife monitoring in the corridor. In parallel, a strong community-based monitoring system was established through the recruitment of six conservation monitors (four males and two females), selected transparently with the involvement of local leaders. All monitors received essential field gear and comprehensive training in camera trap operation, threat detection, and wildlife monitoring, resulting in a competent and well-motivated team now actively engaged in routine data collection.

Community engagement efforts further strengthened project ownership and awareness. A parish-level sensitization meeting brought together 36 participants, including local leaders, youth, elders, private forest owners, and district natural resource officials. Discussions captured local perceptions, threats, cultural beliefs, and site-specific ecological knowledge that directly informed monitoring strategies and improved project targeting.

Implementation also revealed several key lessons and opportunities. Early community involvement proved critical for accurate site selection, while ongoing mentorship was essential in addressing varying technological skills among monitors. The strong turnout and enthusiasm from community members present opportunities for deeper engagement, expanded monitoring, and integration of findings into district planning processes. Challenges encountered such as village boundary clarifications and differing levels of technical familiarity were effectively managed through adaptive planning and hands-on capacity building.

The project is well positioned for the next quarter, which will focus on routine camera trap checks, analysis of preliminary photographic data, weekly threat monitoring, and socio-ecological surveys with households and key informants. Overall, the first quarter has laid a solid foundation for generating meaningful ecological data and fostering sustained community-led conservation of the giant pangolin within this threatened forest corridor.

INTRODUCTION

The giant pangolin (*Smutsia gigantea*), Africa's largest and most secretive pangolin species, is currently classified as Endangered due to escalating threats such as illegal hunting, trafficking, and habitat loss. Although Uganda is considered a key range state for the species, there remains limited information on its status and threats outside protected areas. This project is being implemented in the Budongo–Mukihani Forest Linkage Zone in western Uganda targeting three (3) Villages of Onieni, Ogadra, and Abangi within Kasenene parish Masindi distict an unprotected but ecologically critical corridor that connects Budongo Central Forest Reserve to surrounding forest habitats. The area faces growing pressure from agricultural expansion, bushmeat hunting, and logging, yet community testimonies indicate that giant pangolins still persist within this landscape

The project aims to fill major knowledge gaps by documenting pangolin presence, habitat use, and threats, while also exploring local community perceptions and interactions with the species. By working with communities in and around the corridor, the project seeks to strengthen local involvement in conservation and build capacity for long-term monitoring

PROJECT RESULTS

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the project's performance relative to its intended outcomes, based on the established indicators and targets. It presents the progress achieved during the reporting period (September-November 2025), highlighting key accomplishments, early trends, lessons and Challenges emerging from implementation

Activity 1: Community Stakeholder Inception & Sensitization Dialogue on Giant Pangolin Conservation

The main objective of this activity was to introduce the project "Assessing Threats and Local Perceptions of Giant Pangolins in Budongo–Mukihani Forest Linkage Zone," build trust with local stakeholders, raise awareness on pangolin conservation, and gather initial perceptions that will guide project implementation.

A single joint community engagement and sensitization meeting was conducted at the parish level, bringing together representatives from the three target villages. The meeting was attended by **36 participants**, where **23 were male (64%) and 13 females (36%) Three (03) of these participants were between the age of 18-25 yrs, Ten (10) were between the age between 26-35 yrs and 23 were of 36 yrs and above**, including community members, elders, youth representatives, Private Forest Owners Association leaders, representative form Masindi district Local government Natural resources Department and local leaders. Holding the meeting at parish level ensured broader engagement, more efficient information sharing, and stronger collective ownership of the project.

This meeting also served as a critical moment for scope verification. Although the project proposal initially identified Onieni, Ogadra, and Byasiko as the target villages, the joint discussions revealed important geographical clarifications. Community leaders and participants jointly confirmed that Byasiko Village is considerably distant from the Budongo–Mukihani Forest Linkage Zone and has minimal interaction with the forest area where giant pangolins are expected to occur. The community emphasized that Abangi Village is the closest and most ecologically connected to the forest linkage zone, with frequent wildlife movement and more direct exposure to pangolin-related threats.

Based on this locally validated information, the project team formally revised the scope, replacing Byasiko with Abangi Village. This adjustment was agreed upon transparently and unanimously endorsed by the attending community leaders, ensuring that the project focuses on areas with genuine conservation relevance.

During this activity, the project team briefed community members on the project's goals, expected outcomes, and implementation plan, followed by an interactive sensitization session highlighting the ecological importance of giant pangolins and the threats they face, including habitat loss and illegal hunting. Participants were then engaged in a facilitator led discussions to share their perceptions, cultural beliefs as "when the pangolins pass through some's garden will receive high yields and traditional healers using parts of the species for rituals   and observations of threats within the forest linkage zone including poaching, habitat disturbance, and the use of forest resources.

In addition, during the engagement meeting, stakeholders actively participated in the recruitment of six Community Conservation Monitors, demonstrating strong local ownership and support for the project. Community leaders, elders, and representatives from youth and women's groups collaboratively identified individuals who were trustworthy, knowledgeable about the Budongo–Mukihani forest landscape, and committed to supporting conservation efforts. Through open discussion and consensus building, the stakeholders nominated and endorsed the six monitors, ensuring that the selected individuals reflected community interests and had the capacity to contribute meaningfully to monitoring pangolin sightings, reporting threats, and supporting ongoing conservation activities. This inclusive recruitment process strengthened community trust in the project and laid a solid foundation for sustained collaboration.

The rich qualitative insights gathered from this single joint parish meeting guided the strategic placement of camera traps and shaping the prioritization of subsequent interventions. Importantly, the engagement strengthened trust between the project team and the communities while reinforcing a shared commitment to safeguarding the endangered giant pangolin

Photo 5: Project Coordinator Presenting to Key Project Stakeholders During the Parish Level Engagement Meeting © Joseph ssemuyaba

Photo 6: Key Stakeholder During a Group Photo After the Parish Level Engagement Meeting © Joseph ssemuyaba

Activity 2: Train at least 6 local community members (2 per village) in camera trapping and threat data collection.

A major milestone during this reporting period was the successful establishment of a fully functional community-based monitoring team. A total of six (6) community conservation monitors four males and two females were recruited from the three target villages (Onieni, Ogadra, and Abangi) through a transparent, community-led selection process that emphasized local knowledge, commitment to conservation, and trustworthiness. These recruited monitors were between the age of 32-45 year. To enable effective fieldwork, all monitors were equipped with essential monitoring gear, including boots, rain jackets, and a helmet. Their capacity was further strengthened through a one-day comprehensive training sessions covering camera trap operation, including installation and angling, as well as threat detection and wildlife monitoring techniques such as identifying snares, poacher trails, charcoal sites, and wildlife signs. This combined effort has resulted in a motivated, well prepared, and gender inclusive monitoring team that now forms the core human resource for systematic data collection and ongoing conservation efforts in the Budongo–Mukihani Forest Linkage Zone.

Photo 3: Community Conservation Monitors Undergoing a Training of Operating Camera Traps and Threat Monitoring © Joseph ssemuyaba

Photo 4: Community Conservation Monitors Posing for A Photo After Receiving Their Protective Gears © Joseph ssemuyaba

Activity 3: Deploy a network of at least 6 camera traps in ogadra, Abangi, Onieni villages (Kasenene parish).

All the Six **(6)** camera traps purchased under the project have been deployed across the three-target village 2 per each village. Placement was informed by a combination of local ecological knowledge, observed habitat suitability, and historical pangolin sighting reports from community members. Each camera trap was given a number and assigned to each individual monitor. The camera traps are currently active and collecting data, with retrievals scheduled for periodic checks every **two to three weeks**. This milestone officially marks the commencement of systematic, evidence-based wildlife monitoring in the linkage zone.

Photo 1: One of The Community Conservation Monitors Installing a Camera Trap in Onieni Village © Joseph Ssemuyaba

Photo 2: Project Coordinator and Community Conservation Monitor During Camera Trap Installation. © Joseph Ssemuyaba

LESSONS LEARNED

Several important lessons have emerged during the early phase of implementation. First, the scope verification exercise demonstrated the critical value of community knowledge in accurately defining ecological boundaries. Although the original project design included Byasiko Village, on-ground consultations revealed that the village lies far from the forest linkage zone and has limited relevance to pangolin conservation. Engaging communities early therefore proved essential in refining site selection and ensuring the project focuses on areas of genuine ecological importance. Secondly, community participation has shown to be a strong asset; the active engagement of over 36 community members and the enthusiasm of the six monitors despite initial technological challenges highlight the community's readiness to support conservation when sufficiently informed and empowered.

CHALLENGES

Several challenges emerged during the early stages of project implementation, particularly during the community engagement process and subsequent field preparations. The **scope verification exercise** conducted during the joint parish-level meeting revealed that one of the originally targeted villages **Byasiko** was significantly distant from the Budongo–Mukihani Forest Linkage Zone. This unexpected finding required the project team to adjust the scope and replace Byasiko with **Abangi Village**, which is closer to the forest and more relevant to pangolin conservation. This change necessitated additional consultations and coordination with Abangi's leaders and community members before full implementation could proceed.

Another challenge involved varying levels of technological familiarity among selected local monitors. Some monitors initially struggled with the use of digital devices and camera trap technology, requiring **additional hands-on training** and follow-up support sessions to ensure consistent data collection.

Despite these challenges, the project team successfully addressed each issue through adaptive planning, continuous communication with community leaders, and continued individual capacity-building for the monitors. As a result, no major disruptions to the overall project timeline are anticipated, and the adjustments made have strengthened both the accuracy and the community ownership of the project.

PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR THE NEXT QUARTER
During the upcoming reporting period, the project will undertake:

- Routine camera trap checks every **2–3 weeks**

- Retrieval and analysis of preliminary photographic data

- Weekly threat monitoring surveys across the 3 three villages

- Conducting **30–45 household interviews** and several key informant discussions

CONCLUSION
The project has made strong and measurable progress during its first quarter of implementation. Recruitment and training of six community conservation monitors, deployment of all six camera traps, and active community engagement across three villages have provided a solid foundation for gathering reliable ecological and socio-cultural data. The community's enthusiasm and willingness to collaborate indicate good prospects for long-term conservation outcomes. The project remains on track to generate important insights that will support conservation of the endangered giant pangolin and contribute to Uganda's national conservation planning efforts