Scaling Global South Climate Solutions | Keepers of the Forest: The Batwa Legacy

Uganda (Bwindi and Mghahinga, Virunga - Kisoro)





Keepers of the Forest: The Batwa Legacy (2025), is Uganda's first virtual reality film and an immersive "living museum" centred on the Batwa people, ancestral custodians of the Bwindi and Virunga forests(only home of the mountain gorilla's); reframing indigenous knowledge systems as "futures technologies," offering alternative frameworks for conservation, climate resilience, and collective coexistence where systems of relational intelligence have sustained biodiversity for millennia in a world shaped by accelerating climate change.

Challenge

Africa, despite facing the harshest consequences of climate change yet contributing minimally to global emissions, holds 23% of the world's carbon in forest biomass. While world leaders are eyeing carbon markets as a source of scarce capital, rapid deforestation continues across the region to meet the human settlement demands of urbanisation. Amidst this, the vulnerable communities that have relied on the symbiotic relationship with Mother Nature for centuries are on the verge of extinction. These groups, including indigenous communities, return to their ancient knowledge systems to protect and balance nature. For centuries, the Batwa have been the custodians of one of the world's biggest carbon sinks: the Bwindi and Virunga mountain ranges, which overlap Uganda, the DRC, and Rwanda. They protect their biodiversity with unmatched wisdom, but their way of life is at risk. As the climate crisis intensifies with devastating effects on vulnerable regions, especially Africa, the film sheds light on the crucial role of indigenous communities, specifically the Batwa people, an endangered group with a population of 6,700 in Uganda, in providing alternative solutions for conservation, fostering sustainable coexistence with nature. This is an important, urgent and timely story – how indigenous knowledge systems used for centuries in Africa, particularly in Uganda, can influence the way Africa and the world approach solutions to reverse the climate crisis.

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Solution

At Keepers XR Studio, we create immersive worlds that reimagine archives as living ecosystems. Our work sits at the intersection of art, technology, indigenous heritage and futures, using extended reality (XR) as a medium for storytelling, research and cultural restitution.

Keepers of the Forest: The Batwa Legacy(2025) is an immersive virtual reality (VR) experience centred on the Batwa people, the ancestral custodians of the Bwindi and Virunga forests, home to the world's only mountain gorillas. Rooted in century-old philosophies, the work reframes indigenous wisdom as a futures technology for conservation where systems of relational intelligence have sustained biodiversity for millennia in a world shaped by accelerating climate change. Designed as a digiphysical exhibition, it merges spatial storytelling, environment design, and VR to create participatory cultural experiences. The project is really an invitation to all of us to rethink conservation as collective work that is deeply relational and whose tools are in place and not necessarily new. Through VR and spatial storytelling, we wanted people to feel part of the forest and understand our collective role as coauthors with nature.

Experiential storytelling through immersive film amplifies the impact of alternative conservation, sustainable practices and cultural preservation to encourage a paradigm shift in how society views conservation, indigenous cultures, intangible heritage, and the critical need for sustainable practices. In doing so, we are prototyping new models for museums and cultural institutions emerging from Africa, with relevance for the world and with the resources now available. Our work expands access to cultural heritage beyond traditional museum infrastructures, particularly for audiences who have historically been excluded from engaging with their own cultural narratives.

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Partners

French Embassy - Uganda(Funder); New Images Festival(Distribution); Dubai Futures Forum(Exhibition Partner); Creation Africa (Exhibition Partner); Next Generation Foresignt Practioners(foresight partner); Batwa Community(community partner)

Impact

The project has been presented internationally at platforms including the NewImages Festival Distribution Market (Paris), Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo, Creation Africa Forum (Lagos), November Numérique (Accra), Go Digital Fest (Abuja), and Dubai Futures Forum, reaching over 1500 direct viewers and catalyzing further commissions in cultural restitution and immersive curation. At a systems level, Keepers XR Studio contributes to shifting how cultural heritage is understood and practiced, moving from preservation to participation, from static archives to living systems and from institutional authority to distributed, community-driven knowledge. In doing so, we are prototyping new models for museums and cultural institutions emerging from Africa, with relevance for the world and with the resources now available.

Keepers XR Studio is committed to serving underserved and historically marginalized communities through inclusive, participatory approaches to cultural production. Proceeds from Keepers of the Forest directly support Batwa community-led tourism and education initiatives. The project created over 80 jobs across local communities and creative teams, including 35 roles for Batwa collaborators. Capacity building is central to our work: since 2024, we have trained over 147 young people in immersive technologies through workshops and applied learning programs. Our work expands access to cultural heritage beyond traditional museum infrastructures, particularly for audiences who have historically been excluded from engaging with their own cultural narratives.