

Veridique Kakule Interview

Democratic Republic of Congo

July 27, 2022

What initially got you interested in working in the environmental welfare and/or the sustainability sector?

“My dad is an inherent conservationist; he has a great passion for nature (plants and animals). Our home until today has remained like a small forest in the middle of an urban area. Since he bought the land in late 90’s, he hasn’t cut any of the trees that are present on the compound. We grew up knowing that we were allowed to do everything in the compound apart from cutting trees or tampering with the animals (we have around 10 bird species in our plot).

In 2018, I met a young African from Mauritania in a U.S. Department of State-funded fellowship who went on raising awareness to me about climate change and the role everyone has to play to keep the world livable. He explained to me about how entire communities are being affected by recurrent droughts, rising sea levels, extreme weather, and advancement of desertification in his home country in Mauritania.

I went on reading more about environmental protection and climate change. My goal in life being to do my part in making sure we bring Africa to a place where she will contribute effectively in making this world better, especially in this period where COVID-19 has reminded us how our lives are interconnected. So, two years later, I started a nonprofit called ‘[Groupe Utalii Kwetu](#)’ working to support environmental protection efforts and promote eco-tourism in Democratic Republic of Congo.”

Please describe the work you are doing around environmental welfare and sustainability.

“I believe that preserving Africa’s surviving tropical forests and planting new trees to replace those lost to deforestation could help reduce the severity of climate change by absorbing more carbon from the air, and ease the local impact of climate change by regulating local weather conditions. For that reason, and in the specific case of Democratic Republic of the Congo, changing the way the government and people value forests is critical to the survival of those forests.

Education remains my core approach to achieving my environmental goal. In this regard, my efforts are channeled through ‘Utalii Kwetu’ Program, a flagship program of my nonprofit, ‘Groupe Utalii Kwetu.’ That program aims to introduce schoolchildren to ecotourism and environmental protection in all the classes of primary school. We are now in the pilot phase of the program reaching 6,175 schools kids spread across 25 schools surrounding Virunga National Park in Eastern Congo.

So, my work through ‘Utalii Kwetu Program’ is three dimensional:

1. **Education ABOUT** the environment - developing knowledge and skills

Together with my strong team of experts in education, we have created a set of scholastic materials (books, comic books, images). These materials are made of curriculum-based learning adapted both in

and outside of the classroom. Education ABOUT the environment develops awareness and understanding of environmental issues.

2. **Education IN** the environment - connecting to nature and place

Education outside – place-based learning. Education IN the environment fosters values and attitudes by encouraging personal growth and well-being through direct contact with nature. We combine learning expeditions to teachings in the classroom to allow kids to connect with nature as, in the end, you cannot preserve what you don't understand. We also leverage VR/AR to immerse students in virtual experiences, delivering experiences and interactions for students that are either not practical or not possible in the 'real world.' This provides an unparalleled way to immerse and captivate students of all ages.

3. **Education FOR** the environment - taking action to restore, grow and protect

Applying skills, knowledge, and values to take environmental action and participate in local restoration. Education FOR the environment increases a sense of responsibility, confidence, and empowerment through participating in active citizenship and taking collective action to resolve environmental issues.

We include schoolkids in our various projects involving reforestation campaigns. Our goal in this regard is to plant 100,000 trees with children by December 2023. In so doing, we are not only helping to absorb tons of Co2 but planting seeds of future environmentalists."

Who is the target audience to get involved with your projects?/How do you engage your community in learning about these projects?

"My target audience are kids. We recognize the vision of a society by how it treats its children since the children of today will constitute the society of tomorrow. It's sad that in my community we are not investing properly in our kids. So, in my work, my focus is on how to develop today's young people into tomorrow's leaders who will care about the environment. In Congo, we have that saying that one should bend a tree while it is young and before it's too late. Those are the reasons why, through our 'Program Utalii Kwetu,' we reach out to our children leveraging education. Education is definitely one of the greatest weapons one can use to change the world."

What is your favorite environmental education activity for your community?

"We organize an annual contest between the 25 schools enrolled in our program and it's really striking to see kids of as less than six years, for some, proposing creative ways to tackle environmental issues in their own communities. One of this year's competition finalists created a multi-purpose bag using recycled plastic waste. Not only is she responding to a community problem, but helps to fight plastic waste pollution which is a major issue in Lake Kivu, a lake bordering Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo. I really believe that this program will have a lasting impact on the thousands of kids we are working with and many more."

Do you envision any ways in which your projects can be applied in the context of the United States?

“From a discussion I had with an American University professor recently, environmental awareness is not included in the primary school curriculum in the United States. It’s shocking globally to see that even though the climate crisis is one of the existential crises being faced by humanity today, the average human being, even the one educated up to university level, is unaware about the climate problem yet each one of us has a role to play in fighting climate change.

I believe that the USA being a leader in many aspects of life, has the means to take that step forward in mainstreaming environmental education in all primary schools in the United States. The sooner we are taught about environmental protection, the better.”

Are there any ways for people from the United States to get involved with your project?/What would you like our readers to know about your project?

“You can get involved with our project by joining us in advancing our causes through one of our campaigns:

- **Support a child with a book on nature conservation and environmental protection:** On top of the 6,175 children using our books now, we want to reach additional 10,000 children by next primary school year in Democratic Republic of Congo starting in October 2022. One book goes for \$10.00. You can support a kid with \$10.00, support a class of 50 children with \$500.00, or support an entire school of 500 kids with \$5,000.00.
- **Sponsor a tree:** Join us in our campaign to plant 100,000 trees by the end of 2023. Sponsoring one tree goes for \$2.00. The money is used to plant the tree and follow up with monitoring for the next year. Given the good climate and arable lands of the region, after that period the tree grows on its own.
- **Sponsor the purchase of a Virtual Reality Headset:** Our books are combined with Virtual Reality Headsets which are used as a way to experience the knowledge shared in the books. Reading about the rainforest can be interesting, but meeting a jaguar while hiking the Amazon brings those words to life. Although memorizing the stages of photosynthesis could mean a good test grade, diving inside a leaf to view the process firsthand will spark a future environmental scientist. We are now using only one VR Headset for 6,175 children; our goal is to secure a minimum of 50 VR headsets to create a VR Classroom and improve a little the virtual reality aspect of our program. **One VR/AR headset goes for \$500.00.**

We receive online donation on our website : <https://donorbox.org/support-groupe-utalii-kwetu> (www.utaliikwetu.org). Any amount could help.”

Social media handles:

Website: utaliigroup.org

Instagram: @gukrdc