

Awareness and Perception of Local Communities towards Wildlife Conservation in Obi Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria

Kwaga, B. T.

*Department of Forestry and Wildlife, Federal University of Technology,
Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria. E-mail: amanoyang@gmail.com*

Khobe, D.

Department of Crop Science, Adamawa State University, Mubi, Nigeria.

Ateh, G. O.

*Department of Forestry and Wildlife, Federal University of Technology,
Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria*

ABSTRACT

This study assesses the awareness and perception of local communities towards the conservation of wildlife resources in Obi Local Government Area of Benue State with a view of proffering suitable options towards wildlife conservation in the study area. One hundred and eighty copies of questionnaire were randomly and proportionately administered in six Wards of Adum, Adiko, Itogo, Odiapa, Obarike and Okpokwu out of the twelve existing Wards in the study area. Data obtained were subjected to descriptive statistics (percentage, pie chart, and histogram). The findings reveal among others 52% of the respondents perceived that wildlife conservation is for the establishment of game reserves, and few indicated that poaching is a major problem of wildlife conservation in the study area. The research recommended the enforcement of laws, enlightenment campaigns, and employment of the locals and provision of social amenities to the communities.

Keywords: Awareness, perception, conservation, wildlife, protected area

INTRODUCTION

Wildlife resources contribute directly and indirectly to local and national economy through revenue generation and wealth creation. People depend on wildlife for shelter, food, other ecosystem goods and services and the fulfillment of critical ecological functions that are important for the web of life and its associative or supportive systems. Ormsby and Kaplin (2005) and Allendorf, Smith and Anderson (2007) report that attitudes (awareness and perception) toward protected area staff and the perceptions of management practices affect people's attitudes. Conflicts with managers due to resource extraction, strict rules on forest resource use, and access (Heinen and Shrivastava, 2009; Shibia, 2010), rude behaviour (Ormsby and Kaplin, 2005), or harassment by park rangers (Infield and Namara, 2001) generate negative attitudes toward protected areas. Mutually supportive relationships between communities and nearby protected areas are critical to the long-term success of conservation efforts. In Sub-Saharan Africa, many protected areas were first created

during colonial times as hunting grounds or parks for European elites, with little or no regard for the needs or desires of local communities (Anderson and Glove, 1987; Neumann, 1998; Adams, 2003). Conservation practices all over the world are changing from the traditional management approach with emphasis on trees to managing natural resources in a way that ensures greater flow to all stakeholders especially local communities. The shift in emphasis is informed by the fact that the local communities are inextricably tied to their cultural resource base whether used as a source of food, medicine, fuel or for maintaining ecological balance (Bisong, 2001).

As human population grows, demand for necessities of life increase. The lack of involvement of the local community in the decision making processes and in forest management groups are important determinants of negative attitudes towards protected areas (Silori, 2007). The prevalent negative attitudes towards conservation exhibited by rural and some urban people stem out of poverty. This people tend to practice a kind of biomass-based subsistence economy where they collect their daily needs such as food, fuel, building materials, medicine and the like freely from the immediate environment (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999).

As biodiversity in the tropics becomes ever more threatened, scientists are increasingly recognizing the need to address the problems of poverty and socio-economic development along with conservation in the developing world. In the past decades, integrated conservation and development projects have become an emerging trend in the conservation of biodiversity in and around protected areas (Newmark and Hough, 2000). This study therefore, assesses the level of awareness and perception of local communities towards wildlife conservation in Obi Local Government area of Benue State, Nigeria with a view to proffering suitable options towards wildlife conservation in the area.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study is conducted at Obi Local Government Area of Benue State. The State is located between latitudes 12°41'N and 10°40'N and Longitudes 8°3'S and 9°50'S. It has an estimated human population of 350,000 people (National Population Commission, NPC, 2006). Structured questionnaire, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and formal interviews were used to elicit information about the communities' awareness and perception towards wildlife conservation in the study area. One hundred and eighty copies of questionnaire were randomly and proportionately administered to the respondents in six out of the twelve existing wards in the Local Government, however, only 144 copies of the questionnaire were retrieved. Data collected were subjected to descriptive statistics (frequency tables and percentages) based on Uzoagulu's guidelines (1998), which state that the employment of statistical tools depends on the type of data collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics: Table 1 shows the results of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. More than 50% of the respondents were males while the remaining were females. The results of the ages of respondents in the study area showed

that respondents within the ages of 15 – 19 years were the least in number. Majority of the respondents had tertiary education. Hunting and civil service jobs were more prominent within the study area than farming, fishing, trading and applicants. The demographic characteristics of respondents in the study signified that majority of them were males. The involvement of more men in wildlife activities especially poaching constitutes threat to wildlife conservation. The age group of respondents indicates that those between the ages of 40 – 44 years are more involved in the wildlife harvest. They are also the most energetic and active members of the society, which shows that the aged people have more interest in wildlife resources. Majority of the respondents in the study area attained tertiary education. More destruction is expected on wildlife if this trend is unchecked or allowed to continue. The primary occupations of the respondents are hunting and civil service while few are traders. The involvement of the majority of the respondents in hunting activities is equally a dangerous signal to wildlife conservation as observed by Oates (1990).

State of Wildlife in the Study Area: Table 2 shows that few of the respondents indicated that wildlife is on the increase, 18% responded that it has decreased while 19.4% responded that it is neither increasing nor decreasing. The status of wildlife in the study area as observed by the majority of the respondents is yet to be decided. Only 3.4% responded that wildlife is in the increase. They might have probably refused to disclose the true status so as to enable them continue with poaching activities. Oates (1990) observes that poaching has great negative impact on wildlife population.

Problems of Wildlife Conservation: Some of the problems observed were poaching with 29.9% respondents, land acquisition 25%, wildfire 7.6, poor funding 4.2% and political instability 2% of the respondents, while those that were indecisive were 31.3% (table 3). This result corroborates with that of Oates (1990) who observes that one of the immediate problems of wildlife is poaching.

Respondents Suggestions toward Improvement in Wildlife Conservation: Data obtained on table 4 show that 14.5% of the respondents suggest the avoidance of bush burning, 36% opted for the enforcement of laws, 31.3% suggested enlightenment campaigns, 3% were for wildlife patrol intensification, while 4.2% suggested the prohibition of poaching.

Reasons for Wildlife Conservation: Data on table 5 indicate that 52% of the respondents showed that it is for the establishment of game reserves, 16.7% are for introduction of species, 11.1% for provision of social amenities, 8.3% for the creation of employment, and 11.8% were indecisive. Allendorf, Smith and Anderson (2007) and Silori (2007) report that wildlife conservation provides employment and social amenities. Other reasons not indicated by the respondents or they are not aware of included recreation and tourism as observed by Allendorf, Smith and Anderson (2007).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents in the Study Area

Sex Distribution	Frequency	Percentage
Male	78	54.2
Female	66	45.8
Total	144	100

Age Group		
15 – 19	9	6.3
20 – 24	21	14.6
25 – 29	22	15.3
30 – 34	12	8.3
35 – 39	25	17.4
40 – 44	40	27.7
45 and above	15	10.4
Total	144	100

Educational Level		
Informal	3	2.1
Primary	46	31.9
Secondary	44	30.6
Tertiary	51	35.4
Total	144	100

Occupation		
Farming	23	16
Hunting	34	23.6
Fishing	18	12.5
Trading	15	10.4
Civil Service	34	23.6
Applicant	20	13.9
Total	144	100

Source: Field Survey, 2012

Table 2: Respondents' Comment on the State of Wildlife in the Protected Area

Comments	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Increasing	5	3.4
Stable	28	19.4
Decreasing	26	18
Undecided	85	59
Total	144	100

Source: Field Survey, 2012

Table 3: Problems of Wildlife Conservation in the Study Area

Problems Identified	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Poaching	43	29.9
Wildfire	11	7.6
Land Acquisition	36	25
Poor Funding	6	4.2
Political Instability	3	2.0
Undecided	45	31.3
Total	144	100

Source: Field Survey, 2012

Table 4: Respondents' suggestions towards wildlife conservation in the study area

Suggestion	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Avoidance of bush burning	21	14.5
Enforcement of Laws	52	36
Enlightenment Campaigns	45	31.3
Wildlife Patrol Intensification	4	3
Prohibition of poaching	6	4.2
Undecided	124	11
Total	144	100

Source: Field Survey (2012)

Table 5: Respondents' Reasons for Wildlife Conservation

Reasons	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Establishment of game reserves	75	52
Introduction of species	24	16.7
Provision of social amenities	16	11.1
Creation of employment	12	8.3
Indecisive	17	11.8
Total	144	100

Source: Field Survey (2012)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The awareness and perception of local communities towards the conservation of wildlife resources in Obi Local Government Area of Benue State was surveyed. The primary aim was to proffer suitable options towards wildlife conservation within the study area. Results obtained indicate that most of the residents subsist on hunting and poaching in the area. In other words, it could be said that their economic life depends on the use of wildlife resources. The greatest implication of this negative attitude, if not checked, is that posterity will suffer in terms of diminishing natural resources in the protected areas. Poaching and hunting must be discouraged. Although local communities have suffered from neglects in the past, wildlife resources exploitation should not be seen as the only source of livelihood. Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are hereby advanced. The Government should create gainful employment, provide social amenities, enforce laws against poaching and finally, intensify awareness on wildlife conservation through enlightenment campaigns.

REFERENCES

- Adams, W. A.** (2003). Nature and the colonial mind. In *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in the Postcolonial Era*. W.A. Adams and M. Mulligan (eds.) London: Earthscan.
- Agrawal, A. and Gibson, C. C.** (1999). Enchantment and Disenchantment: the role of community in Natural Resources Conservation. *World Development*, 27(2), 225 – 247.
- Allendorf T. D., Smith J. L. D. and Anderson D. H.** (2007). Residents' perception of Royal Bardia National Park, Nepal. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 82, 33 – 40.

- Anderson, D.** and **R. Grove** (1987). *The scramble for Eden: Past, present and future in African conservation*. In D. Anderson and R. Grove (eds.) *Conservation in Africa: People, policies and practice*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Bisong, B. F.** (2001). *Farming systems and forest biodiversity conservation: Towards a theory and model for sustainable natural resource management*. In Bisong, F. E. (ed.) *Natural resource use and conservation system for sustainable rural development*. Calabar: BAAJ International Coy.
- Heinen, T. T.** and **R. J. Shrivastava** (2009). An analysis of conservation attitudes and awareness. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11111-009-0086-0>. Retrieved 12th September, 2013.
- Infield, M.** and **Namara, A.** (2001). Community attitudes and behavior towards conservation: an assessment of a community conservation programme around Lake Mburo National Park, Uganda. *Oryx* 35, 48-60.
- National Population Commission (NPC)** (2006). *Population Census, Official Gazette (FGP71/52007/2, 500)*. www.nigerianstat.gov.ng. Retrieved on 15th June, 2013.
- Neumann, R. P.** (1998). *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Newmark, W. D.** and **J. L. Hough** (2000). Conserving wildlife in Africa: integrated conservation and development projects and beyond. *BioScience*, 50(7), 585-592.
- Oates J. F., White D., Gadissy E. I.** and **Busong P. O.** (1990). Conservation of Gorilla and other species. A feasibility report to Cross River National Park, Okwango Division. Unpublished.
- Ormsby, A.** and **Kaplin, B. A.** (2005). A framework for understanding community resident perceptions of Masoala National Park, Madagascar. *Environmental Conservation*, 32: 156-164. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0376892905002146>.
- Shibia, M. G.** (2010). Determinants of attitudes and perceptions on resource use and management of Marsabit National Reserve, Kenya. *Journal of Human Ecology*, 30, 55-62.
- Silori, C. S.** (2007). Perceptions of local people towards conservation of forest resources in Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, North-Western Himalaya, India. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 16, 211 – 222.
- Uzoagulu, A. E** (1998). *Practical Guide to Writing Research Project Report in Tertiary Institutions*. Enugu: John Jacob Classical Publishers Ltd., Nigeria.