



“Why Forest Conservation in South West of Cameroon is a problem”

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Generally Cameroon is very rich in biodiversity. However this article will focus on the problems identified by researchers in the conservation of forest land around or in indigenous communities in parts of the South West province of Cameroon. It will focus on conservation and land tenure systems in these lands. Some examples of conserved areas in the South West include Barombi Mbo Forest Reserve and Southern Bakundu Forest Reserve. It outlines the ramifications of tenure systems on the livelihoods of the communities in the South West and the viability of the biological resources in above cited forest reserves and similar reserves in the province. It is also based on academic research and literature about this subject in the region.

To begin with forest conservation in the South West dates back to the colonial era. The colonial governments created the nature reserves mainly to protect certain floral and fauna species from extinction. In 1937, recognizing the threat to the beautiful forest of Lake Barombi Mbo caused by high rates of destructive tree felling and farming, the Senior Assistant Conservator of Forests for Cameroon recommended that the above area be constituted a forest reserve. Lake Barombi Mbo forest reserve was thus created by order No.17 of 1940 (in accordance with Forestry Ordinance. 38 of 1938, published in the supplement to Gazette No. 20 of 25 April 1940 page B.42 of Laws of Nigeria) while the Southern Bakundu Forest reserve was crafted in 1937 and approved there after by virtue of decree No. 22 of 25 April 1940 by the British Colonial Government (Ngwany, 2002). The former was established to protect fauna particularly chimpanzees and flora while the latter was created as private state property in which seedlings of rare and endangered species among the rich biodiversity will be collected and replanted in other parts under British colonial rule. These historical creations faced the following shortcomings on their inceptions:

They were created in assumption that native populations formerly using the forest resources in these lands did have and will have enough land not to worry about parts of their land being carved out as conserved areas.

More over, the presumption of the availability of land, was founded on the rationale that many villages in these areas were sparsely populated hence with increases in population today caused by better medical facilities, migrant populations recently, conserved areas are increasingly being infringed and used for farm land, grazing, hunting or even sold to

strangers by indigenes who understand the fact that in Bakundu Forest Reserve for instance, it is difficult to establish in exactitude the true area of the conserved areas or to determine who really has legal title to use them.

Recent land disputes between villagers in these reserved areas coupled with unsustainable management of forest resources or unsustainable farm practices within conserved areas suggest that indigenes have sought to conserve land now allocated to them as community forests by virtue of 1994 Cameroon Law on Forestry rather than forest reserves (The Courier, July-August 2002). Worth noting is the fact that community forests in themselves have been considered to be too small to meet the varied needs of the communities that depend on them (Richards, 1992; Burnham, 2000).

Therefore, for forest conservation in the South West Province to be effective, the following austerity measures and issues must be put in place, considered and redressed:

Firstly, policies or actions must include the possibility of conserving fauna and flora by allocating forested lands to villages or communities as traditional and sacred land which has in many cultures been sustainably managed from generation to generation (Sharpe, 1998a).



Left eru plant which main staple of Manyu Division and most of Central province in Cameroon. This plant that has been sustainably managed by various generations of traditional communities is at risk due new users from other tribes, massive exportation to neighbouring Nigeria and no means of domesticating nationally so far. Picture is courtesy of Arrev Ivo.

The need or possibility of Cameroon's government conferring existing reserves to villages as community forests to boost local sustainable management and ownership recently ascribed to community forest management by recent academic findings.

The need to confer title deeds to families and individuals within and around these forest reserves in the South West so as to avoid land disputes, prevent infringement of protected

land etc. There are some arguments in favour of just giving land formerly taken from communities back to these communities hence enhancing even further the argument about the need to establish legality to land users or activities within and around these conserved areas in the South West and Cameroon (Burnham, P. & Graziani, M. in 'Legal Pluralism in the Rain Forests of Southeastern Cameroon').

Also, there is need to diversify incomes of poor communities dependent on the forest for livelihoods resources and sustenance. This measure is very needed especially among those livelihoods sustained now only from the hunting and selling of forest animals.



Left several primates skinned at waiting to be sold as “bush meat” in Fako Cameroon. For conservation of forest resources to be effective hunters and sellers must be trained on conservation, educated in other fields etc. Picture is courtesy of Arrey Ivo



Left, Picture of man skinning monkey for the market in Batoke Cameroon. Such individuals or households depend on forest animals for the livelihoods outcomes. Diversifying their incomes, or domesticated some wild animals might serve conservation and sustain this livelihoods strategy at the same time. Picture is courtesy of Arrey Ivo

More over, there is need to carry out contemporary research of the local realities now in these areas and disengage or modify the colonial premises of conservation with the modern realities of the people on the grounds. This is possible via sustainable

partnerships with local peoples via participatory approaches, learning processes like sustainable rural appraisal techniques, sustainable rural advisory services, capacity building or beneficiary empowerment interventions etc.

This will only work if local peoples are considered proactive and capable of sustainable forest and livelihoods management techniques not passive victims, poor and with no knowledge of conservation (Sharpe 1998b).

Finally the rich biodiversity of the South West province despite being reasonably recorded must be vigorously and thoroughly documented and marketed to boost influx of foreign and national researchers so as to promote conservation and knowledge exchange globally. Ecotourism must be merged with more documentaries and studies about the livelihoods (Malleon, 2000) in and around forest reserves while funding by government and Overseas Development Assistance agencies stepped up, to make conservation in these areas of Cameroon a livelihoods tool, movement, trend or a reality. Without such holism, the problems are likely to persist.

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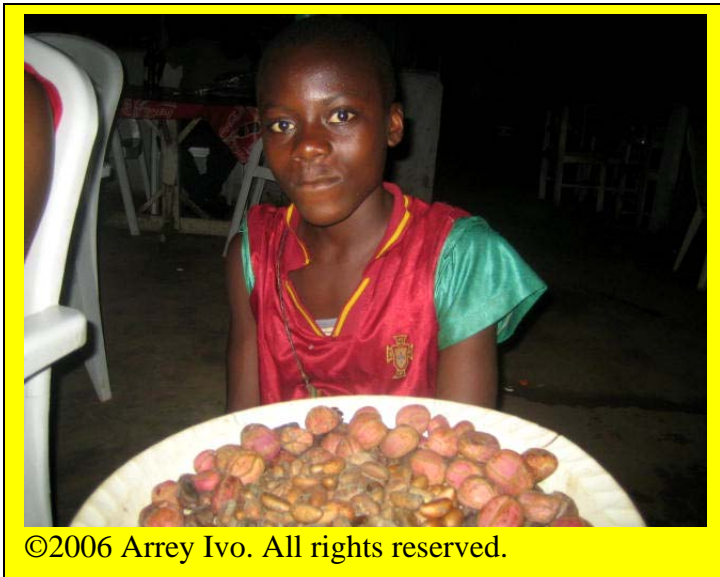
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Left, boy selling “bitter kola” and kola gotten from the rain forests of Cameroon. The former is considered as a sexual stimulant for men and also an accompaniment of palm wine. Breaking kola nuts is also a symbol of friendship and clanship in West Africa. It is the main stay of many households. Worth noting is the fact that many kola nut plantations by local people exist in Bafia around Centre province in Cameroon. However bitter kola is mostly gotten from the forest whose delicate balance is threatened by human activities today hence putting sustainability of these livelihoods in question. Picture is courtesy of Arrey Ivo



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Left, man splitting timber gotten from the forest in Fako Division. Many poor households depend on wood for household fuels as gas is not easy to come by. Wood harvesting is a serious problem when it occurs within forest reserves and is a key reason given for forest depletion in these parts. It is income bringer for poor peoples like the man in this picture too. Picture is courtesy of Arrey Ivo