

Reconciling Communities' Livelihoods and Conservation Strategies in western Cameroon: a case study of the Bechati Forest Area

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Conservation and livelihood needs of a community depending on the resources to be conserved are two conflicting issues that must be addressed with consciousness to ensure sustainable conservation values. The Bechati forest area covers an area of about 15000ha and it is located in Western Cameroon, Africa. It is home to two great apes species (*Pan troglodytes vellerosus* and *Gorilla gorilla diehli*), over 5 species of other primates and about 26 species of large mammals. Ten adjacent communities depend on this forest for livelihood, which is present been proposed as wildlife sanctuary due to it biological and ecological importance. This study explores the relationship between communities' livelihood needs and conservation strategies in the forest in order to bring out the challenges involved. The study strongly builds it ideas and conclusions on the local communities' opinions, perceptions and recommendation on conservation strategies. Data for the study was collected through literature review, questionnaire surveys, focus group discussion, field observations and semi-structured interview. Major findings prove that over 77% of the community's members feel that conservation strategies should first address basic community livelihood needs before looking at conservation values. They believe the forest is life and without the forest they cannot survive. The conservation strategy used in the study area has not gained the trust of the local communities as they still not feel belong to the project. Although a significant percentage of the population understood the objectives of the Cross River gorilla conservation program, they considered it as an idea being sold to them to buy it and feel the need incentives and motivations to buy the idea and to support it. Community perceptions in the Bechati forest area still strongly holds that conservation initiatives are driven by conservationists for their own personal interests and benefits and in case of any community benefit, this only comes in as a secondary factor. This is potentially because community members were not made major stakeholders at the initial stage of the conservation program and thus were not fully involved in developing the conservation strategies currently in used.

Beekeeping to a greater extent is currently being implemented in the study area as an alternative means of livelihood support. However the impact is still very small due to the low scale of implementation and the inefficient follow up of beneficiary to ensure the support attain complete success. It is clear that, in as much as we need to conserve the environment for its value, we also need to make sure that, we maintain a balance between conservation values and human livelihood needs. For conservation initiatives to succeed the livelihood of the dependent population on the resources needs to be placed as one of the major priority objective of the conservation strategy. Community perceptions also remains a major issue to be handled to ensure sustainable conservation initiative. These perceptions need to be studied and their impact on conservation values assessed in order to correctly adapt them to meet conservation objectives.



Local Basket made from rattan