

Survival Strategies of Support Zone Communities in Cross River National Park Okwangwo Division, 1990 – 2010

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Abstract

The objective for the establishment of National Parks in Sub-Sahara Africa is to protect the rainforest, animals, plant and the eco-system from desiccation. To achieve this objective, the park management adopted fortress conservation as a protective strategy to prevent logging, farming and exploitation of agro-forest resources. How far has the park achieved its stated objectives? This study reviews the park activities in the Cross River National Park from when it was created in 1990 till date. It examined the objectives and operations of the Park: fortress conservation strategy, the plight of support zone communities and post-park experiences and their survival strategies since 1990. These findings expose the poverty and futility of fortress conservation policies but prefer State-Community Partnership in the management of protected areas in Nigeria.

Key Words: Park Protection, Community Survival and Rainforest Integrity

Introduction

Cross River National Park, Okwangwo Division is populated by sixty-six villages with approximated population of about one hundred and twenty thousand people as reflection in 1999 census population (Ewah: 30). The communities are largely dependent on access to rainforest resources for their livelihood. The park area is inhabited by four ethnic identities. Utanga/Bechebe, Okwa, Okwangwo and Boki people. Each ethnic group traces ancestral origins to separate locations in Mamfe, Utanga and Nkanje communities in the Cameroon Republic. However, most of the communities are found astride the Nigerian – Cameroon borderline (Ewah, J. O.). These rainforest communities are politically autonomous. Each community is led by a village-head who presides over a Council of elders that administer law, order and good governance. The communities also share the same culture and related dialectal features. The communities are culturally related and highly superstitious societies with little presence of Christianity. The communities are classified by the Park Management into support zone communities found outside the definition of the Park and enclave communities located within protected areas (see map on page 3).



Fig. 1. Map of Cross River National Park: Okwango Division showing enclave communities

The concept of forest and animal conservation was initiated by the British Colonial State in 1956 as Boki Extension forest reserve for gorilla conservation. In 1964, the Federal Government of Nigeria turned the area to Obudu, Boshi and Okwangwo forest reserves. In 1998, CRSG approved the establishment of a National Park in Oban and Kwangwo areas. The World-Wide Fund (WWF) for nature represented by Prince Philip of England persuaded the FG in 1989 to announce the creation of the Cross River National Park (CRNP). The CRNP now comprises of Oban Division (ca 2800sq.km), and the Okwangwo Division (ca 92sq.km) located in Northern and Southern parts respectively (C. Head, 1991). The Okwangwo Division is significantly for its regional watershed, prevention of desert encroachment, protection of bio-diversity and the development of gorilla based tourism. The vegetation is composed of forest and savannah vegetations. The forest vegetation is a mixture of primary and secondary forest, and outright Savannah woodlands. The primate and fauna of the division is diverse with confirmed existence of at least eleven wildlife species including gorilla (CRNP, pp. 27 – 34).

Park Management Policies and Programmes

The park management policies and programmes are geared towards conservation of protected areas. This involves the preservation of bio-diversity and protection of endangered wildlife, watershed, preservation of genetic resources, and provision of research opportunities and promotion of tourism. Though largely unimplemented, the objectives also include socio-spatial development, economic development, and re-orientation of locals within the park areas (C. Head CRNP, Vol. 2, 1991). To achieve these objectives, the park was surveyed and partitioned into two unequal protected areas made of high forest and secondary forest approaches to the park. Only about 20% community forest area is allocated to locals to farm, exploit and hunt. To achieve the park's objectives, the management employed the services of non-locals, designated as rangers (armed guards) to monitor and prevent farming, logging, hunting, trapping and exploitation of forest resources, such as cane-ropes, vegetables (salad), bush mango, and cutting of cattle rearing sticks within the protected areas. The rangers also monitor farming trends in community forest areas, and report to the management.

Within the CRNP, the management went beyond Decree 36 (1991) and Decree 11 (1985), as amended to occupy and colonized Mbe Mountain area adjacent to the park area to facilitate the protection of gorillas, chimpanzees, and endangered monkeys found within Mbe mountain area. The employment policies of the park management favoured only few unskilled locals but excluded skilled elites within the protected area. Above all, rural development projects promised the locals by the state have remained in the pipeline since 1991 when the park was created. The initial perception of locals when the park was created was the community perception of the park as a development agency. This perception is at variance with the aims and objectives of the park management who perceived the park as a conservation agency. These opposed perceptions as examined below, manifested clearly in the activities of the park and the survival strategies of the locals.

Post 1990 Challenges and Survival Strategies

Local responses to park creation and management policies informed the main focus of this study. It examines the implications of local responses to the long term sustainability of the park as a protected rainforest area. Topmost amongst these responses is the division of the rainforest area into community forest owned by locals and high forest owned by the state promotes increased land disputes between locals and communities who operate within community forest which no longer accommodate the growing population. For now both enclave and support zone communities have access to secondary forest for farming, hunting and exploitation of forest resources. Population growth and increasing desire to engage in plantation farming often lead to trespass and land disputes. Between 1991 and 2000 the following land disputes attracted communal and local government intervention in disputes between Ugowefu vs Ochakwai (Bumaji villages), Kakwe vs Butatong communities, Butatong vs Becho and Becho vs Okwabang. Communal findings/reports suggest strongly that the disputes were largely the direct consequences of land alienation occasioned by the creation of the park. Disputes such as Butatong vs Beebo, Bukalum vs Kayang are pending in High Courts and Court of Appeal (Chief Ligbo Eban and others, 2009).

Land development and control is another challenge of support zone communities. The park is hosted by Beebo, Bumaji, Alankwu, Buentsebe, Abo and parts of Boje clan. In executing its development and conservation policies, the management selected Okwa, Okwangwo, Butatong, Kakwe, Wula, Bukalum, Bamba and Kayang communities as development centres in a park that is housed by 66 communities.

This land definition approach, led to opposition of park plan to resettle Okwa I, Okwa II and Okwangwo outside the park area. Other communities outside protected areas attended the Resettlement Conference but refused to grant the park re-settlement space for the enclave communities until all villages are granted development centre status (Bete and others). Within Mbe mountain area, are Wula, Bukalum, Bamba, Kayang and Abo communities; these communities rely on animals and forest resources of the area for livelihood. The park alienated these communities and refused them access to the area to enable the park enforce the protection of gorillas, drills, monkeys and elephants and their habitat. The park also selected Kayang as the only development centre in Mbe mountain area and introduced rangers in 1992. This policy led to the opposition of the elites within Mbe mountain area, and also led to the formation of Mbe Mountain Development Association to champion the interest of locals.

Park management policy on recruitment is opposed by the local educated elite. The management employs unskilled labour and non-indigenes as professionals not easily available within support zone communities. Contracts are few and often limited to favour chiefs and village heads. Employment and contract policies generated anti-park orientation amongst elites within support zone communities. Besides low employment and few contracts awarded by the park, the park also failed on promises to provide loans and skill acquisition opportunities promised to communities. The perception of the people on the park as a state development agency began to generate adverse reactions and opposition. According to a source, what CRNP/WWF/ODA promised locals on educational development, road rehabilitation, health care delivery and employment, is similar to what local government council, state and federal government promised Nigerians but do nothing at the end. The above perception of locals is understandable if we assess the level of underdevelopment within park area. Like other rural communities in Nigeria, socio-spatial development is often externally induced by different levels of government and international agencies.

Hunters were the first locals to react to park policies on enforcement of conservation. Hunting materials such as traps, guns, face lamps and transit camps are confiscated and destroyed by more numerous and better armed rangers. Often the conflict turns protected area into war zones between park rangers and local hunters. In organized forums such as workshops, local hunters and farmers organized by the Park management, locals have often maintained that the park cannot prevent them from accessing the park without viable alternative sources of livelihood. They will rather die hunting than give up hunting and exploitation of the forest.

To achieve their objectives, hunters have between 1990 to present, develop new strategies to hunt. The Arata Bomb explosives used by miners is now used to kill animals, and for fishing within the protected areas. The challenge of locals is not limited to rangers who arrest and destroy their hunting equipment, but are often confronted by invasion by wild animals as elephants, gorilla, chimpanzee, drills, bush pigs and monkeys of cultivated farmlands. These animals periodically invade farmlands from the wild in search of food. When invasion occurs, affected large expands of farmlands are destroyed. While the rangers restrict hunters and farmers from trespassing into the wilderness, they are very reluctant to check the movement of birds and animals into farmlands or to pay compensation. Often, these conflicts between locals and park officials turn the rainforest into 'war' zones. Rangers often drag farmers, hunters, and other forest exploiters to regular courts in Bateriko, Obudu and Ikom for persecution (Chief Akwo Oshuo and others).

Besides confrontation with wild animals, the park management restricts enclave communities to designated and limited forest areas. Expanding population and plantation farming promotes incessant land dispute between enclave individuals, families and communities within the park area. Repeated cultivation of farmlands within secondary forest areas has reduced the fertility of soils and production per hectare since 1990. Within the first decade of the twenty first century, unemployed youths who often migrate into communities within Ikom – Obudu highway and urban areas now prefer to return home and cultivate either cocoa or banana plantations. This scenario is informed by unemployment in urban areas and low wages within support zone communities of Abo, Wula, Okwabang and Bateriko located along Ikom – Obudu highway. The seasonal improvement on Okwa – Butatong road and Okwagwo – Butatong road also encouraged the return of locals to farming. Farm products can now be transported piece meal on motor bikes, tractors and land-rovers to community markets located within Ikom – Obudu highway. This reversed migration trends and increasing pressure on the park has serious consequences in the integrity of the rainforest area (Otu Aria and Others).

The reactions of external timber loggers in collaboration with locals equally reduce the integrity of the rainforest. Inaccessible road, high cost of transportation by land and park restriction have driven loggers into water transport. Logging of high profile woods such as mahogany, cam wood, ebony, exploitation of cane ropes and cattle sticks are cut and bundled into Bembe and Oyi rivers that drained the rainforest into the Cross River at Agbokim and Ikom beaches. This is possible after compromising the park rangers, timber Tax Force and Forestry officers at Ikom and Agbokim beaches. The impact of extensive logging in protected areas is obvious to environmentalist or conservationist. Gradual desiccation of the rainforest will erode the habitat of protected animals and cause further extinction, destroy ecosystem and reduce water tables.

Impact

The enforcement of fortress conservation laws which prohibits the use of guns, traps, and chemicals for fishing and hunting within Okwangwo rainforest area has led to the use of dynamites such as Arata bomb to hunt fishes and animals. These explosives were introduced within rainforest area by road construction and oil workers. These explosive chemicals when detonated inside water, suffocate fishes due to excessive carbon released into the water. The use of explosive and chemicals by non-professionals to hunt often result to injuries and death to hunters. Fishes and aquatic life killed by explosives and chemicals are polluted with hydrogen that also consumes oxygen inside the water. After explosion, the waters become polluted for human and animals use. Animals and fishes killed with explosives have damaging effects on the health of humans and animals. Animals and fishes often killed with explosives are African palm civet, pangolin, brush tail porcupine blue duiker, birds, cane-rats and African cushmanse. These animals are being hunted in both high and secondary forest areas.

Communal revolts against the park management are always a direct consequence of park desire to halt locals from entering the park area to exploit forest resources. In Okwa I community, villagers revolted against the park rangers for seizing their guns, destroying the traps and hunting tools of a hunter who was sub-secretary of the community. The locals embarked on a great trek about 30km to Butatong (headquarters of the park) to protest the role of rangers to the management. The host community Butatong took sides with the park and drove Okwa locals out of Butatong. Rebuffed attackers returned home and chased all rangers and park staff out of their camps located within Okwa community forest area. Another result of the impact of fortress conservation was the Bamba experience. Park officials arrested Fulani men who contracted Bamba community to supply them with sticks. The arrested Fulani men were freed by the community. They also fined and ostracized natives who supported and sympathize with the park management to arrest and prosecute the Fulani men. Pro-park locals who were fined but refused to pay were expelled from the village, including resident Okwa park staff. Locals later invaded the park and exploited timber sticks and fruits in the forest. Oral informants are firm that the state prefers plants and animals to humans. To them the forest provides the resources to educate their children and seek medical attention. The forest provides banana plantains, yams, fruits meat fish vegetables. It is in farming and exchange of these resources that we acquire money pay taxes to the state and local government councils (4, Boniface Mato and Others).

In Okwangwo, 15 women who were exploiting salad in the forest were confronted by a park ranger who fired his gun to frighten the women. The shot caused stampede amongst the women who ran back home with injuries sustained from the stampede to tell the story. The community reacted by invading the forest in search of the ranger and two others who did not return. The community further reported the incidence to the park management at Butatong. The management invited chiefs and elders for settlement at the headquarters. The community insisted that the offending ranger must pay N30,000 fine and relocate from Okwangwo. The park relocated all rangers based in Okwangwo but refused to pay the fine.

Prolonged absence of a motorable road is a big challenge to enclave and support zone communities. To improve access road network, locals organize periodic manual labour, using local tools like saw engines, knives, hoes, shovels, diggers and others to improve access roads. This approach has considerably improved access for motorbikes into rainforest communities. Locals from Okwa I, Okwa II and Okwangwo create stone-bridges above water level to enable pedestrians, motorbikes and tractors to pass during the dry season. Road engineering amongst enclave locals a very tedious. It takes prolong labour and time to assemble stones above water level per stream. The bush path linking Butatong (park headquarters) to Okwangwo and Okwa I and Okwa II communities is hilly, stony and about 40 kilometers long. To reduce these natural obstacles, Okwa communities between 1990 and 1996 constructed a new road linking Okwa I to Butatong (30km).

The new road is considered 10km shorter, less hilly and stony compared to Butatong – Okwangwo – Okwa road used by locals, cyclist and land rovers that ply the seasonal road. During construction communal tax is imposed on indigenes in diaspora. Communal labour and CRNP/WWF/ODA at times provided as counterpart funds and materials by the park to facilitate the maintenance of the road.

The improvement of spatial network from Okwa and Okwangwo communities to Butatong has serious implication on the park as a protected rainforest area. Improvement on roads has enhanced the expansion of cocoa, banana and plantain plantations deep into protected areas. Locals who cultivate these crops, harvest and transport them through motorbikes, land rovers and tractors to Butatong, Wula, Okwabang and Bateriko local markets along Ikom – Obudu Ranch highway. This exploitation is possible through force and compromise. Farmers from Okwa, Okwangwo and Bamba often use force to trespass into park areas, or compromise park officials guarding the rainforest. The presence of non-indigenes, tourist and timber exploiters have increased since 1990. Senior park officials have been indicted by state conservation panels and retired because of collaboration in the exploitation ebony and cam wood in protected areas of Okwa, Okwangwo, Bukalum and bamba. The retirement of the General Manager of CRNP and the Programme Manager Okwangwo Division in 1992 was attributed to the above reason. Federal government threat to use the police to effect the destruction of plantation farms within park area, is currently creating tension amongst local farmers who are likely to react violently (Chief Parl Agbo and others, 1996).

What is to be done

So far, the enforcement of fortress conservation by national parks in Nigeria have yielded limited results. Beyond the establishment of reserves, parks and sanctuaries to protect landscapes, game, fauna, flora cultural and scientific sites, no concrete efforts have been put in place check the current and increasing challenge of land and resource alienation of indigenous population. This neglect threatens the objective of fortress conservation and integrity of protected areas. To check this looming threat, the Federal government should move beyond fortress conservation to practice conservation with rural development. This involves the recognition of indigenous historical rights over protected areas and collaboration with locals to manage national parks found within underdeveloped communities. Within protected areas, economic growth and development is rudimentary and externally stimulated by local, state and national governments. To achieve harmony in nature and society, the state should adopt and expand conservation with development. Park partnership or collaboration should involve provision of non-agro forestry livelihood alternatives to reduce local dependence on the forest. The provision of funds by the state and international organizations to retrain locals on sustainable agriculture, social development in areas such as spatial development, education, health care delivery, local communities should co-operate with the park by providing skilled, semi-skilled security labour within protected areas.

Another approach towards protecting the rainforest in Nigeria is to encourage rich and industrialized nations to settle poor nations financially and materially. This opinion emerged in Copenhagen failed task on climate change. The industrialized nations especially U.S.A., India and China opted to fund tree planting and protection of existing forest areas. These states argue that reforestation represents about fifteen percent of annual green house gas emission. Major producers of carbon that causes global warming are USA, Brazil, India and china. Carbon dioxide emission is from coal. Coal is the cheapest and dirtiest source of energy used by world fastest growing nations. Coal industries produce more carbon than all the world's cars, trucks, trains and ships combined. While states could not agree on omission cut targets, they were unanimous that deforestation is central to climate stability (Jan. 11, 2010 News Week, pp. 5-6).

Recent research revealed also that deforestation can actually be reversed. This runs counter to the longstanding prediction that nothing can reverse forest destruction. In 2009, Brazil rainforest was reduced by 2/3. Realizing this, Brazil stepped up protection and insisted on tree planting. Brazil now reaps from the benefits of rising living standards which have reduced subsistence farming and tree planting within protected areas. Recent environmental studies show that some tropical forest have bounced back. Biologists long believed that secondary forest were nearly worthless, regenerating slowly but offering little of the biodiversity of their old growth predecessors. But evidence from Costa-Rica and panama revealed that tropical forest can recover ninety percent of their original biodiversity as little as twenty years. Thus, protecting growing forest could cut as much emission as preserving old growth jungles.

Protecting both types of forest is much cheaper ways to limit carbon than switching to renewal energy. One million dollars spend on forest protection buys as great a carbon reduction as six million dollars invested in emerging technologies such as solar power. From the above analysis, it is clear that the Nigerian state should put its money on replanting trees in protected areas (Stefan Theil “Forest save the Day” in news week January 11, 2010).

Resettlement of enclave locals in protected areas in Nigeria should be encouraged to reduce alienation. This should be done in line with United Nations guidelines on relocation of populations which emphasize win-win relations between the state and host communities (Washington: World Bank Press, 2002). The World Bank which undertakes the funding and monitoring of resettlement programmes insist that states embarking on relocation of people must not exceed the population of 40,000 people who are to be provided with better conditions such as afro-forestry zones and integration of resettlers into the forestry management plan prepared for capital intensive and people oriented projects. The bank management policies it implemented, will limit the transformation of locals into conservation refugees displaced by protected rainforest areas. To check increasing poverty amongst the people, the state should go beyond no man’s land approach of fortress conservation in favour of population resettlement. (M. Cernea and Kai Schmidt Solttan, 2003).

The forestry management plan prepared for capital intensive and people oriented projects. Capacity building of management staff and orientation of locals in Nigeria parks is very low. Informants are firm that training workshops for rangers and administrative staff are rarely sponsored by the park management. Parks are poorly equipped with funds trucks, land rovers bicycles, transit camps and medical facilities. Training locals on non-agro-forestry livelihoods by parks management and NGOs is rudimentary. Apart from the effects of WWF, ODA Pandrillus, EU WCS and NCF very little have been done with regards to conservation and integration of locals by the park. The achievement of Cross River State Forestry commission in the management of Afi sanctuary with the encouragement and support by WWF, ODA, EU and WCS in promoting conservation should be sustained and promoted by national parks management. The state should emphasize the training of both staff and locals in community participation and conservation. Training should concern economic empowerment, processes conservation wildlife economist and management of park/community relations.

Conclusion

Conservation of biodiversity and rural empowerment of communities should be the direction of national parks to ensure sustainability of protected areas in Nigeria. To facilitate this objective, formation of Conservation Development Commission should be established by the state to ensure the transformation of support zone communities. This option is not new. The establishments of NDDC and River Niger Energy development commission have reduced underdevelopment amongst benefiting communities and promoted peaceful co-existence between the state and affected communities. This commission when established should coordinate the state and international development partners to provide funds to promote conservation and rural development within protected areas.

Equally relevant to conservation efforts in Nigeria, is the need to recognize the historical rights of communities over protected rainforest areas. The land use, Act of 1978 (amended) and Decree No. 36 of 1990 (Amended) did not recognize the rights of locals over protected areas or partnership with locals in management of the parks. To reduce restiveness amongst locals in the management and control of the forest the state should review these laws to define the rights of locals in management of national parks.

The inclusion of locals in the ownership and management of parks by locals will encourage communities to see the forest not only as a supermarket but also as insurance policy for today and the future. This innovation is not new. Parks in South Africa, Malaysia, Brazil, Kenya, Congo and elsewhere have recognized local historical rights in the management of protected areas. This approach will over time resolve the dilemma between biodiversity, conservation and poverty reduction amongst support zone communities (Stocking M. Verkins, S. Brown, K.).

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