

A Survey of African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus Erithacus*) Trade and Trafficking in Ekonganaku Area of Ikpan Forest Block, Nigeria
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Abstract

Intensive field based African grey parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) trade and trafficking survey lasting 14 days was undertaken on the request of the Pheasant Conservation Group; International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), to determine the existence or non-existence of parrots trapping, trade and trafficking in the Ikpan Forest Block of Oban group of forest, Nigeria. The surveys which identified and involved occupational parrots' trappers as guides was pursued with a view to identifying Nest sites, Nest density, Parrot roosts as well as investigate parrots trapping, trade and trafficking in the light of Nigeria's biodiversity conservation policy thrust and the country's continued notoriety in the international conservation arena. Studies were conducted using standard field equipment like binoculars, photo camera, vinyl flagging, field camping equipment as well as protective wears. 5 occupational Parrot trappers (2 experienced and 3 trainees) were identified and recruited for the surveys as field guides, field assistants and porters. From the results, 5 trappers' stations were identified and explored and located on existing map. Practical trapping activities were observed and implements employed identified. Parrot catch per Man-day was 8 (range 4-12) and price per wild adult parrot N2000, range (N2500-4500) while trained parrots costs N5000 (range N10, 000 - 15,000). During the surveys 16 parrots were captured while 50 parrots (range 110 - 160) were seen flying overhead especially at dusk. It was discovered that trade and trafficking in parrots existed in the study area and beyond with birds coming in from various localities and sold at major cities of Calabar, Port Harcourt, Lagos, Abuja and Kano. Ineffective wildlife legislations have contributed to escalating illegal trade and trafficking in parrots which are protected by states and national laws. Effective legislation, monitoring, habitat protection and conservation education are recommended for sustainable biodiversity conservation in Nigeria.

Introduction

The Southeastern Corner of Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon all the way to the republic of Gabon, Central Africa Republic, Bioko Islands as far as the Congo is reputed as being the last strong hold of the tropical rainforests ecosystem and as such one of the most important habitat areas as far as biological diversity is concerned in the sub-region. Thus, it is regarded as a 'Biodiversity Hotspot' for tropical African and part of the continuous Guinean forests zone. The area contains an array of endangered and endemic species of Fauna and Flora, which are highly priced in the international Pet trade markets. Apart from the protected areas within the region, other forests are also known to harbour a number of endangered and endemic species of fauna and flora.

Some of these species command great prices in hard currencies because, the rarer the species, the harder it is to obtain a specimen and the greater the demand for it in zoos, sanctuaries, laboratories and captive breeding facilities. These very rare species are among the critically endangered, endangered and

threatened taxa. Faunal classes including Great Apes (Gorillas, Chimpanzees and Bonobos) as well as Primates eg Mandrills, Drills, Guenons, Mangabeys, Colobus monkeys and *Prosimians*, etc., are highly exploited in their natural habitats for Bushmeat and the pet trade. Other charismatic mammalian species such as the big Cats are also traded for various reasons including use of their skin as cultural and souvenir apparels as well as their peculiar behavior and attributes. Birds such as *Psitacines* (parrots, macaws, etc), Cranes and Eagles are sold mostly for their talking or ability to mimic humans and plumes, while Reptiles such as snakes are traded for traditional, cultural and scientific purposes including their skins and to some extent as bush meat. Illegal trade and trafficking in endangered species of fauna and flora is an ugly trend that has been fueled in recent years by increasing demands for exotic species of plants and animals worldwide against the provisions of the Convention on the trade and trafficking in endangered species of fauna and flora (CITES) convention.

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Background to Nigerian Biodiversity Conservation

Nigerian Government's policy goal on conservation of biodiversity is to ensure sustainable use of forest resources and preservation diverse benefits accruing from wildlife conservation for economic development. Among current priority programmes are the extension of National Parks and Reserves and the compilation of the flora and fauna of Nigeria as well as protection. Nigerian Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) reviews the status of biodiversity conservation in Nigeria in an attempt to fill the gaps identified in the country study programme, and develops strategies and action plans to bridge gaps in conservation efforts. This Government's mission is aimed at ensuring that Nigeria's rich biological endowment together with the diverse ecosystems will be secured, and its conservation and management assured through appreciation and sustainable utilization by the Year 2010.

To achieve this laudable goal, the Nigerian strategy embarked on: a) the inventory, identification, and rehabilitation of all threatened and endangered species of fauna and flora; b) increasing the network of protected areas to include all ecosystem types consistent with internationally accepted classification; c) promotion and enhancement measures for both in-situ and ex-situ conservation through identification, inventories, evaluation, monitoring, research, education, public awareness, and training; d) increasing the nation's biodiversity management capability (human, infrastructural, institutional, and technological); e) the development of economically and culturally sound strategies to combat biodiversity loss; f) protection and promotion of policy guidance for bio-prospecting and indigenous knowledge (intellectual property right); and g) the rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems. Despite the foregoing, Nigeria continues to negative ovation in the international conservation arena following several incidents of illegal wildlife trafficking in recent years.

The surveys was aimed at finding out the existence or non-existence of Parrots' trapping, trade and trafficking in a key parrots

habitat area of Nigeria as well as highlight Parrots' ecology by surveying the forest and identifying parrot nests, roosts and potential threats. The objective includes but not limited to investigating trade in endangered parrots and other potential wildlife species in the area with a view to determine trends, participants, cross-border trade as well as provide vital information to the relevant Government agencies for further forest and wildlife conservation within the region.

The Study Area

The Oban Hills group of forests lies approximately within longitudes 05° - 06° North and latitudes $8^{\circ} 12'$ - $8^{\circ} 60'$ East of the equator. This area comprises the southern sector (Oban Division) of the Cross River National Park (CRNP), Nigeria which is contiguous with the south-western portion of Korup National Park (KNP) of Cameroon. The vegetation is Guineo - congolian high forest with closed canopy and scattered emergent trees reaching heights of 40m in some areas. The area is rich in biodiversity including the Mega Fauna (Vertebrates) such as Elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) and an array of primates e.g Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*), Drill (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*), Preuss's Red Colobus (*Procolobus 'badius' preussi*), Red-capped Mangabey (*Cercocercus torquatos*), Red-eared guenon (*Cercopithecus erythrotis*), Prosimians, etc. The *herpetofauna* of the area is particularly rich as well as the Avifauna. Notable ones being the African gray parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) and its allied species; the Red-headed parrot (*Agapornis pullaria*) which until these project was not recorded for Nigeria but was also found to be trapped and traded in the same area.

The Ikpan Forest Block (a sector of the Cross River National Park) and part of the Oban Hills group of forests in itself is the area immediately adjoining and contiguous with the Korup National Park (KNP) of South Western Cameroon. It comprises 3 main forest types, which falls within such categories as National Park (North of Ekonganaku community); a Forest Reserve belonging to and managed by the Cross River State Government (Forestry commission) and lies South of Ekonganaku community, and Community Forests and Farmlands, (within and around Ekonganaku village borders).

The areas within the Ekonganaku village and its community forest is characterized by scattered plantations of oil palm trees; rubbers trees, *Gmelina* trees, plantain and bananas farms, food crop farms, fallowed plots and emerging secondary forests. The forests within the National Park borders are relatively undisturbed forest. On the other hand, the Forest Reserve and Community Forests areas are relatively disturbed by logging activities and collections of assorted species of Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) for trade and local livelihoods of Ekonganaku people and teeming populations of settlers.

Methodology

i Equipment

The equipment used in the survey includes, Geographical Positioning System (GPS), Photo camera, Binoculars, Camping tents, Vinyl flagging, Measuring tapes, Plant press, Collin's Field Guide to the Birds of West Africa, Protective wears and Knives.

ii Location and Selection of Parrot Trappers

On arrival at Ekonganaku village, experienced Parrot Trappers were identified during a focal group discussion and Porters; were recruited for the intensive field surveys. After community protocols, further discussions were held and agreement reached on the terms as well as areas to visit and what roles for each team participant. The groups were divided into 2 teams to work separately in different areas but to cover the 3 major forest types (Intact forest, Regenerating forests or fallowed plots and Sub-urbia). Effort was made to build confidence of each trapper and other participants (EE and CA had known the trappers and their trade for more than 2 years), while MEE conducted the socio economic surveys of natives and households. The research team were granted guided visit to parrot stores but not allowed to make photographs of parrots in captivity.

iii Intensive Field Surveys

Surveys commenced at Ekon Road where the team camped (2.8km) from Ekonganaku village (community forest) and visited the site which was currently being used

by trappers for trapping. At each location, a night camp was established and survey commenced from the camps daily. A total of five camps were established and used for the surveys but all were dismantled at the end of the survey to prevent reoccupation by bush meat hunters.

Results and Discussion

Tracking the Parrots

The trappers all knew the movement patterns of parrots through years of trapping. They normally follow farms/hunter's trails, logging trails and at times streams to search for nests and roosts. But where there are no existing trails, the trappers will cut a new trail which they will leave for one or two weeks depending on the season to allow it mature (become devoid of signs of human occupation) before eventual parrots tracking and trapping.

Actual Trapping

The trappers were found to be very skilled in their vocation. They normally do not collect parrots from nest because they thought the nests were too high up on the trees and that parrots could if provoked pluck out their eyeballs. Thus, they have to rely on a trapping technology that makes use of Gum (Locally Manufactured from exudates from trees and gum commercially sold for catching pests such as house rats). Both different gums are at times mixed together for increased efficiency. 4 of the currently used trapping sites were surveyed and trapping process observed at length.

Trapping was always done in an active roost where many parrots always flock together. In such a roost, a single tree is usually selected (i.e any tree that presents the easiest form and possibility for climbing yet has good crown and height) and parrots are perching is usually the best choice. The ladder (longest possible Indian bamboo is cut and pruned leaving the branches as leg supports to form a ladder which is tied firmly to the selected tree and the trapper climbs to the top (here 1 or 2 bamboo may be joined together) depending on the height of the roost from the ground and the general length of the bamboo. This way 1 trapper climbs first to the top and another (usually apprentice) climbs to join him later.

The trappers work together using machetes to create an opening almost always

within the middle of the crown where they now construct a high hide using forest palm fronds from the nearby palm plantations and branches from the tree. The high hide (shade) is constructed firmly to last and withstand the force of local winds as well as protect them from inclement weather while concealing the trappers from easy view of parrots. At completion 4 green (fresh) palm fronds brushed free of their leaves are pulled up using ropes and from the trapper bags, the gum (usually locally made from a mixture of exudates from tropical gum producing trees or from synthetic gum commercially sold for catching house rat or a mixture of both gums) is spread on the surface of the fronds carefully and a well trained parrot is tied to the middle of each palm frond (usually 2.3m long) and the assemblage (gum, frond and parrots are carefully placed at the top of crown in each direction)almost representing the 4 main cardinal points of the compass). The assemblage is well fastened to prevent it from falling if more than 1 parrot is caught in the trap at once.

Once set, the trapper and his assistant or trainee now enters the high hide and using another parrot (usually trained male) by striking it causes it to screech and whistle loudly. The process which is done in the mornings and evenings (06.00 –09.30 and 16.00 –18.30 hrs) starts whenever the trapper hears or see other parrots leaving or returning to their roost or nest sites. With such loud screeches and whistles other parrots flying overhead are attracted to the traps. Since the end of the palm fraud with gum is always sticking out slightly above the crown and parrots normally perch on such structures, they will mostly likely hit or land on the gum filled surface especially in trying to reach their calling colleague.

On perching, the claws and the feet are enmeshed in the sticky gum, which prevent the bird from escaping. Thus, the trapper easily reaches out for the trap and remove the catch immediately and also reset the trap. The new catch is placed in a box or basket with perforations, thus beginning its new lifestyle of “perpetual imprisonment” till deaths do us part”.

Nesting Parrots and Trapping

Throughout the survey (12 days) only 8 active parrots’ nests and 2 nesting sites were

seen and inspected by CA and EE 6 nest. The explanation given for this observation is the fact that the trappers do not normally work with parrots’ nests but by direct trapping in different feeding areas and roosts. They are also not interested in nestlings and parrot eggs or catching from nests. 2 nests were found on *Alstonia* SPP and 6 found on *Terminalia* sp. Nevertheless, whenever groups of parrots flew overhead, our guides informed us that they are nesting on rocks in the hilly areas of the Ekon Road (within CRNP). A total of 16 parrots were captured while 50 parrots (range 110 - 160) were seen flying overhead especially at dusk CA observed 3 parrots (1 male, 2 females) caught while EE observed 13 parrots caught.

Prospects of Wildlife Trafficking Against Government Policies

Failing Parrots Business?

The study has revealed a thriving parrots business in the study area (Ikpan Forest Block) where the practitioners all recognized their trade as illegal and dangerous. They also accept that despite the fact that Ikpan Forest still harbors a good population of parrots, they acknowledged that parrots population were declining rapidly especially the red headed parrots whose price goes beyond N4000 per adult and which only 7 individuals have been trapped in the last 2 years.

According to the Head Trapper, parrot trapping which he learnt in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria has been his major business for the last 6 years. He pointed out that his catch has been declining and he thinks that parrots have become used to their trapping techniques and as such easily avoided their trapping stations. Reasons, which have forced trappers to roam huge distances in the forest to look out for unwary parrots and in the process, some wonder into the CRNP also. The process continues to open new trails and on each occasions or at each new site, more and more Indian bamboo are cut, young palms robbed of their leaves and fronds. Camping creates more disturbances of forests as well as open new trails for game hunters.

Concerning the markets for parrots, participants confessed that there was a thriving market in Calabar, Port Harcourt and Lagos i.e areas harboring plenty of foreigners (Westerners). Parrot trapping goes on throughout the year with peaks in the Dry

season months but dwindles in the rainy season since rain drops renders their gumming technique useless, thus a trapper spends more on gum and gets less. The adult wild parrot price is N2000 (range 2500-4500) depending on location of sale and the buyer and for the trained parrots, N5000 (range 10000 -15000).

Throughout the study duration (14 field days), participants were able to catch 16 parrots (6 Male and 10 females) while several sighting, about 50 parrots daily (range 110 - 160) usually between early mornings and towards dusk were recorded. Participants do not know how to train parrots but buy trained parrots from a dealer in Port Harcourt. The trained parrots bought at N8000 each (3 years ago) have been kept by them at home with most of their flight feathers plucked. Parrots are fed mostly oil palm fruits and seeds such as maize, black weeds, groundnuts, rice grains, beans, and occasionally wild forest fruits, etc.

Other Faunal Species

Almost any faunal species of reasonable size can be trapped (using wire or metal snares), shot using single or double barrel 12' bore guns crafted locally with common 'AA' cartridge. Primates such as Chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), Mangabey (*Cercocebus torquatus*), Drill (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*), Mona monkey (*Cercopithecus mona*) and Putty nosed guenon (*Cercopithecus nictitans*), Preuss's red colobus (*Procolobus badius preussi*) etc, have been traded for bush meat in the area. Forest duikers (*Cephalophus sp*), Bush pig (*Potamocheirus porcus*) Dwarf forest crocodile (*Osteolaemus tetraspis*) and Forest buffalo (*Cyncerus cafer*) are also found once in a while being sold as bush meat. It is worthy to note that in the Ikpan Forest Block and environs, we have observed that a significant portion of bush meat and live animals especially young primates (Orphans) from the Bushmeat trade arriving at the pet trade market, mostly come from the Korup National Park (KNP) and Environs in Cameroon thus indicating a thriving cross border trade.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey result shows that trade and trafficking in parrots exists in the study area and beyond with birds coming in from various localities including cross border trade from the Republic of Cameroon and sold at major cities of Calabar, Port Harcourt, Lagos, Abuja and Kano. In the light of the foregoing, there is a

need for a long term focused study of the Avifaunal Community of Ikpan Forest Block aimed at identifying the Avifaunal richness of the area which has great potentials for bird watching; biodiversity based research and conservation, as well as eco-tourism for lovers of Natural rainforests ecosystems. Ineffective wildlife legislations and corruption have contributed to escalating illegal trade and trafficking in parrots as well as other wildlife species which are protected by states and national laws. The recent suspension of Nigeria by CITES is a matter great concern to the nation, therefore, effective legislation, monitoring, habitat protection and conservation education are recommended for sustainable biodiversity conservation in Nigeria as follows;

More Research and Field Monitoring:

Research is the 'bed rock' of any scientific endeavour, government should constitute research and monitoring units in the various relevant government establishments to carry out a continuous monitoring of identified trade routes, entry and exit points in order to stem the trade and arrest culprits. It will be a wise decision if in addition, national Governments can constitute an independent team of very reliable and competent Nationals who do not fret at, or fear Expatriates and foreigners in each territory, to quietly monitor the activities of this groups of people as well as Natives especially those of them involved with Biodiversity Conservation or related activities.

Review, Update and Enforce Endangered Species Laws:

In Nigeria most wildlife laws and related legislations are obsolete, ambiguous, and contradictory, thereby making it almost impossible to enforce them effectively. Therefore, efforts must be made to straighten such laws to enhance effective enforcement. In this direction, Nigerian National Parks Service (NNPS) through its various parks must be empowered through effective funding to promote protection activities and law enforcement. They need adequate logistical equipment, (e.g. communication, transport and safety gears, etc) as well as provision of incentives to deserving operatives via scholarships, promotions, etc. Creating the enabling environment for staffers of protected areas to execute their work will enhance effective conservation.

Promote Proactive Trans-Boundary Cooperation:

All concerned Nations (especially CITES signatory countries), organizations and individuals should strive to promote proactive trans-boundary co-operation eg Nigeria and Cameroon viz, the 2 National Parks (Cross River and Korup which Are contiguous to some extent can form a bases or collaborative work). Also, Joint Patrols, Park Management activities, and collaborative research with exchange of information and personnel will boost their success, especially in anti trafficking, anti-poaching operations as well as trans-boundary community/parks relationship.

Conservation Education and Awareness Creation:

All efforts must be made to promote conservation education and awareness creation on the need to combat wildlife trafficking, hunting/poaching at all levels. Policy makers, general public, schools and local communities must be targeted to empower them to frown at their community being used as a trade route by poachers and illegal traffickers in endangered species. People will also be uncomfortable to be seen eating endangered species eg great apes, which are closely related to humans biologically speaking.

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