
**PERCEPTION OF HOST COMMUNITIES TOWARD THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
PARK LAWS IN OKOMU NATIONAL PARK**

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the reactions of the host communities towards the implementation of park laws relating to wildlife conservation in Okomu National Park. The Park covers a total area of 202sq km which is only about 15% of the 1,082sqkm covered by the Okomu forest reserve. This research was centered on four (4) selected communities; and purposive sampling technique was used to select samples/respondents for the study at 0.98, 1.23, 1.45 and 3% sampling intensities respectively. A hundred and seventy (170) questionnaires were distributed in all the locations considered in this study, Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages. The host communities were explicit in their complaints against the lack of expected benefits from the Park (74.2%), restriction on access to forest resources (52.6%), decrease in the area of land available to them for farming and other activities (55.9%). Some respondents believed there was a good working relationship between the park management and the host communities (69.3%) as a result of friendly/efficient enforcement of park laws by rangers. Increased participation of the host communities in the management of the Park, strengthening of wildlife law enforcement through provision of the required equipments and the sharing of certain benefits accruing from tourism to the people would promote a better environment for wildlife conservation in Okomu National Park.

Keywords; Perception, Host communities, Park laws, Implementation, Wildlife conservation

INTRODUCTION

The contributions of tropical rainforest to rural livelihood and economic development cannot be over emphasized. Forests in Nigeria are recognized as a formidable base sustaining the economy of the Country and the livelihood of the rural populace. The

forests provide the raw materials for both primary and secondary industries while generating employment for a sizeable number of the people. It is estimated that 90% of the world's poor depend on forests for at least a portion of their income and in Africa, 600million people have been

estimated to rely on forests and wood lands for their livelihoods (Anderson, 2006).

Protected areas are the cornerstones of biological conservation although they have usually been set aside from human exploitation. National Parks have become the most widely-used category of protected areas in developing countries, including sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria's present day National Parks and Game Reserves were originally forest reserves, first established in the early 1900s. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) defines a National park as a relatively large area of land or sea where; one or several ecosystem are not materially altered by human exploitation and occupation, where plant and animal species, geomorphologic sites and habitats are of special scientific, educational and recreational interest which contains a natural

landscape of great beauty.

the highest competent legal authority of the country (National or Federal government) has taken steps to eliminate, as soon as possible, exploitation or occupation in the whole area and to enforce effectively the respect of ecological, geomorphologic, or scientific features which have led to its establishment.

visitors are allowed to enter, under specific conditions, for inspirational, educational, cultural and recreational purposes (IUCN, 1990).

The implementation of National wildlife laws is a complex task which requires a network of professionals with recognized expertise in government institutions and non-governmental organizations to cooperate and take actions at all levels. Uniform laws were proposed to help to minimize the lapses in the implementation

of the wildlife laws in various states in Nigeria but law enforcement efforts are inadequate compared to the magnitude and complexity of wildlife crimes. The host communities should therefore be embraced as relevant stakeholders and partners in the conservation of the parks if enforcement of wildlife legislations is to yield desired results, irrespective of the ecological status or geological location of the parks and socio-economic characteristics of the host communities (Emelue, 2011). Moreover, it has been shown that a community involved in planning and implementation of park laws have a more positive attitude, is more supportive and has a better chance to make profit from the park than a community passively ruled-or-overrun-by tourism in a National Park.

Social impact of the park and communities' attitude towards the park

According to the classification proposed by World Conservation Union, National parks are the most restrictive of these protected areas (West and Brechin,1991). This uprooting of indigenous population in the name of conservation and of tourism has had negative impacts on the health, way of life, culture and economies of the local communities involved, and has accentuated the social and spatial inequalities between communities, social groups within these communities, families, men and women, and has contributed to an impoverishment of living conditions (Bidol and Crowfoot,1991; Wells and Brandon,1992). These are significant social impacts (International Committee on Guidelines and Principles, 1994) which were not taken into account at the time these national parks were

established, and which have not been taken into account in subsequent management of these parks. Despite their laudable objective of conservation, National Parks generate major changes and impacts on local communities. With the creation of the National Park, restrictions were imposed on access to the forest in order to protect the wild animals (Saberwal *et al*; 2001). Hunting of wild animals was strictly prohibited and any form of harm or disturbance to wildlife was discouraged (Madhusudan and Mishra, 2003; Mukherjee 2009).

However, extreme poverty and the necessity of meeting basic needs have forced numerous host communities to continue their hunting and gathering in areas that have been set aside for conservation. Other reasons for the host communities' attitude might stem from ignorance of the existing park laws, their socio-cultural aversion towards the park laws and their perception towards implementation of the park laws. The on-going feud at Okomu National Park therefore necessitates an understanding of the perception and resulting attitudes of the host communities towards enforcement of Park laws. Hence, the aim of this study is to assess; If the host communities are aware of the existing park laws and punishment for offenders.

If the park laws are adhered to by host communities (and if not, why?)

The way such park laws are implemented and how it affects the host communities

The perception of the host communities toward the implementation of the Park laws (inclusive or restrictive?)

The factors influencing the host communities' perception toward the

implementation of Park laws in Okomu National Park.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study area was Okomu National Park located in Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State. It lies between longitude $6^{\circ} 21' N$ and latitude $10^{\circ} 11' N$ (FORMECU, 1999) with fresh water swamp along the rivers located within the park. The Park covers a total area of 202sq km (making it the smallest of the seven National Park) which is only about 15% of the 1,082sqkm covered by the Okomu forest reserve

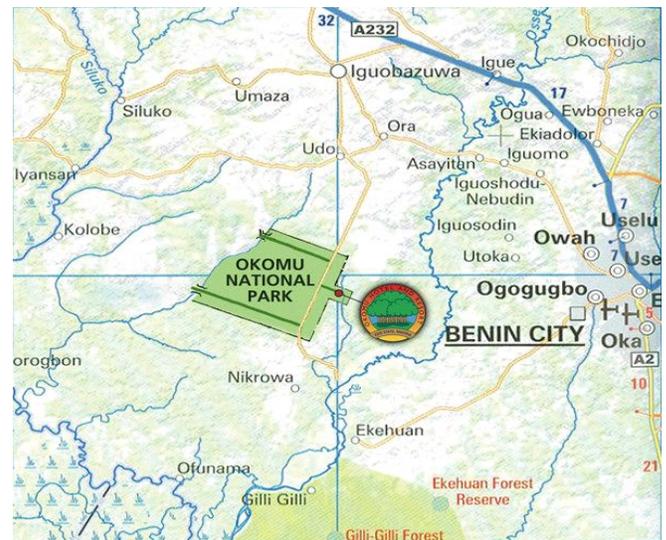


Figure 1: Location of Okomu National Park

Source: Ministry of lands and survey, Benin city.



Figure 2: Map Of Okomu National Park and its Compartments

Source: Ministry of lands and survey, Benin city.

SAMPLING METHOD

This research was centered on Okomu National Park and four selected communities; AT&P/Julius creek, Iguowan, Nikrowa and Udo. A reconnaissance survey was carried out and information on these communities were obtained. Purposive sampling technique was used to select samples for the study based on 0.98, 1.23, 1.45 and 3% sampling intensities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design used was survey design, which has to do with “systematically gathering information from respondents for the purpose of understanding and/or predicting some aspects of the behavior or perception of the population of interest”. A hundred and seventy(170) questionnaires were distributed in all locations considered in this study, while a hundred and fifty(150)

questionnaires were retrieved from the respondents.

DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study were collected by primary and secondary data. Primary data were from the villagers and uniform law enforcement officers (rangers) while secondary data was from the National Population Commission. The primary data were obtained with the use of well structured questionnaires to elicit information during the period under review. The design of the questionnaires was in two (2) types; type 1 and type 2.

Questionnaire type 1: This was administered to the inhabitants of the four selected communities which are; Udo, Iguowan, Nikrowa and AT&P/Julius creek to obtain information on the laws of the Park, their reaction toward the implementation of the laws and the factors resulting in their attitude toward the implementation of the laws.

Questionnaire type 2: This was administered to the uniform law enforcement agents (rangers) in the various range posts to get information on conservation strategies being employed in the park.

METHODS

Questionnaires were interpreted in the language and manner, in which the respondent would understand. Language translations were at times necessary. Rangers were also interviewed from their respective range posts. Each interview session was timed so that enough people could be questioned within a given time and

questionnaires given out earlier on were retrieved.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency and percentages summarized in tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Location and Sampling Intensity of Respondents in each community

Location	Total Population	Sampling Intensity	Sampled Population	Coordinates
AT&P/ Julius creek	4,121	1.23	50	N 06 ⁰ 23' E 005 ⁰ 17'
Iguowan	328	3	10	N 06 ⁰ 24' E 005 ⁰ 21'
Nikrowa	2,783	1.45	40	N 06 ⁰ 28' E 005 ⁰ 21'
Udo	5,101	0.98	50	N 06 ⁰ 28' E 005 ⁰ 17'
Total	12,333		150	

The major occupation of the host communities was farming/hunting (30.7%). This is in consonance with agrarian life style in rural setting in Africa, (Abimbola *et al.*, 2008). Some of the inhabitants of the host communities had knowledge of the park laws (64.9%) while (35.1%) claimed not to have knowledge of the existing park laws Major host communities considered the mode of law enforcement and performance of rangers who enforce the national park laws as friendly and efficient (56.1%) while others considered their mode of enforcing the laws as strict (43.9%)

Lack of perceived expected benefits

The host communities were explicit in their complaints against the lack of expected benefits they enjoy from the Park (74.2%). This was the major reason the host communities were antagonistic and would commit offences when opportunity to do so arises. This is in line with Omondi (1996) who opined that the fact of too little or no benefits received directly by the people accommodating wildlife, irrespective of its distribution will make them less supportive of wildlife conservation. This factor should be seriously considered if wildlife conservation is to continue in Okomu National Park.

Restriction on Access to forest resources

52.6% of the respondents complained about the restriction on access to forest resources especially farming and hunting. This was a major cause of violations of Park laws as majority of the host communities were farmers/hunters and needed to continue tapping from the resources of the park for their livelihood. This finding agrees with Anderson (2006) who reiterated that an estimated 60million people in Africa rely on forests and woodlands for their livelihoods. This finding also agrees with the classification proposed by the world conservation union that National Parks are the most restrictive of protected areas. Saberwal *et al* (2001) also noted that the creation of National Parks imposes restrictions on access to the forest in order to protect wildlife. This finding also corroborates with Madhusudan and Mishra (2003) and Mukherjee (2009) who both opined that the hunting of wild animals was

strictly prohibited and any form of harm or disturbance to wildlife was discouraged.

Social problems caused by the park

The host communities complained of a decrease in the area of land available to them for farming and other activities thereby depriving them from their source of livelihood. The Park's presence also resulted in an increase in criminal activities and reduced moral values of the youths especially the girls who got exposed to tourists that took advantage of their naivety. These are significant social impacts (International Committee on guidelines and Principles, 1994) which were not taken into account at the time these national parks were established, and which have not been taken into account in subsequent management of these parks. This just goes to show that despite their laudable objective of conservation, National parks generate major changes and impacts on local communities. It is worthy to note that due to the efficient implementation of Park laws by the rangers, there has been a better relationship between the communities and the Park.

The study showed that reaction of offenders when caught was cooperative/calm (55.6%) while others evade arrest/aggressive towards rangers when caught (44.4%).

Some respondents believed there was a good working relationship between the park management and the host communities 69.3% as a result of friendly/efficient enforcement of park laws by rangers while others claim otherwise.

CONCLUSION

The perception of the host communities toward implementation of Okomu National Park laws is that of co-operation and acceptance which has brought about a better relationship between the Park and the host communities. The people are cognizant of the laws being implemented in Okomu National Park (which is the National Parks Service Decree (Act) No. 46 of 1999) as reflected in their submissive attitude to arrest when apprehended by the uniform law enforcement agents (also called rangers).

In conclusion, the host communities' perception toward implementation of Park laws in Okomu National Park was based on lack of perceived expected benefits, restriction on access to forest resources and social problems caused by the Park. These three (3) factors have been identified as the root cause of the people's attitude toward the implementation of Park laws in Okomu National Park. This point to the fact that the cases of offences being experienced in the park is not a result of poor implementation by rangers but policy issues on benefit sharing. Consequently, despite all these factors influencing the people's views on the implementation of Okomu National Park laws and even the Park as a whole, the people still stated that the rangers were performing a good job and that their efforts have helped to cement a thriving relationship between the Park and the communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following suggestions are proffered to ameliorate the problems identified and also to enhance a better implementation of Okomu National Park laws and active participation of the host communities in conservation of the forest resources.

The conflicts in Okomu National Park can be resolved by the employment and active participation of the local leaders and youths in the Park system. This will enable them to better understand the benefits and in turn discourage their people against violations in the Park.

Host communities should be allowed to benefit from the Park resources through rational and legal use of Park resources that will not be injurious to the overall goals of wildlife conservation. This has the aim of encouraging a conservative mentality towards the Park resources (Emelue, 2011).

The Park should ensure that certain benefits; such as schools, power supply, good roads, portable drinking water and so on; are made available to the host communities to make

them more supportive of the Park. This can be achieved by co-operating with the people in rural empowerment programmes that will ease the burden on the Park.

Enforcement of laws should be strengthened through provision of the required materials/equipments and training where necessary. This can also be achieved by employing the locals as enforcement agents as they are more conversant of the Park and its environment.

The host communities should therefore be encouraged to actively participate in wildlife conservation. This step will help to reduce conflicts of interests and also eliminate frustration arising from restriction from forest resources. It would also ward off organized resistance and agitation for resource control like the situation in Okomu National Park at present (Emelue, 2011).

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