
Cameroon: Baka Losing Out to Lobéké and Boumba National Parks

"We are born in the forest and we do everything there, gather, hunt and fish. Where do they want us to make our lives? They say we cannot go to the forest - where are we supposed to live?" Baka community member from the Lobéké and Boumba region.

Lobéké National Park was established in 1999 in South East Cameroon over 220,000 hectares of flora and fauna rich lands, much of which had until then been used for subsistence purposes by Bantu communities and the majority Baka "Pygmy" communities, who primarily hunt and gather in the extensive forests covering the region. To the North West of Lobéké adjoining the Boumba River lies Boumba National Park, which was officially established after Lobéké. The area between the Boumba River and Lobéké Park is home to many communities engaged in farming, hunting, fishing and gathering for mainly subsistence purposes, along with commercial safari companies who operate across the huge (greater than 400,000 hectares) sport hunting areas which were established around the Lobéké Park, the smaller community-managed hunting zones, and several large logging concessions.

The two parks' proximity to the borders of the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo, coupled with the enormous number and variety of large mammals in the region's forest have made this area a prime target for illegal commercial bushmeat hunters and traders, and trophy hunters, who pay hefty fees to local safari companies to hunt. Live parrots, ivory, and other illegally obtained forest resources are regularly obtained in or smuggled through the area, and several logging companies are also active.

For hunting and gathering peoples in Cameroon Lobéké National Park is significant because the Cameroon Ministry for the Environment and Forests along with various international NGOs established legal government permission for strictly regulated access by Baka and other local communities to a minor portion of the park to carry out subsistence fishing and gathering, which under normal circumstances is contrary to Cameroon law. Current plans by conservation agencies active in the zone, including WWF and GTZ, are to ensure that each of the newly gazetted zones surrounding the parks are attributed to clear stakeholders, who would become involved in the management of their areas over time. Key stakeholders in the forests upon which many Baka have relied comprise conservation interests, including large, Northern-based conservation organisations; commercial interests, including sport-hunting enterprises and logging companies; poachers and bushmeat traders, who often have significant local political backing; and Bantu (mostly Bagando) communities relying mainly upon agriculture, but who also rely upon products from the forests around their communities.

This stakeholder approach to conservation is laudable, and one that reflects a wider trend in much of Sub-Saharan Africa towards the devolution of land management authority. However, from a human rights perspective there are serious problems with the matrix of conservation zones around Boumba and Lobéké, especially the way in which Baka customary rights to forest resources are being eliminated under the impulse of conservation pressures from outside the area. For example, Baka communities are key forest stakeholders in the region as they are numerous, and most rely upon

forest resources to secure their livelihoods. However, their views were marginalised during consultations about the establishment of the parks, and they have been almost totally marginalised from most or all of the schemes which are supposed to enable local involvement and empowerment in the management of the different classes of protected areas, including the park and the various types of "buffer zones" which have been created.

One of the new mechanisms for enabling local participation in these different zoned areas is to establish Zones d'Intérêt Cynégétique à Gestion Communautaire (ZICGC), areas where communities are able to exploit the flora and fauna, subject to the development of supposedly community-led management plans with oversight by government conservation authorities. Membership of the group of community delegates responsible for managing the ZICGCs is overwhelmingly dominated by established local elites, and the committee selection methods and criteria, including the need for French literacy mitigates against the membership of representatives from the Baka community. For example, as of November 2002 in ZICGC 9, located between the Boumba River and Lobéké Park, to the west of the Moloundou Road, less than 10% of the delegates were from the Baka majority, and they were broadly chosen by local Bantu chiefs, not by the Baka themselves.

The consequence of this lack of participation by Baka is that decisions of the communal forest management committee, for example, to allow safari companies access to prime forest hunting areas in the ZICGC, usually for a small fee, can come into direct conflict with the livelihood strategies of Baka who rely on these zones to satisfy their subsistence requirements. The Forest Peoples Programme has knowledge of several cases occurring over the past two years where Baka were chased out of their traditional hunting zones located outside the parks by hunting guards operating under this regime. The money paid by authorised users accrues to the management committee, who may use these funds for community development projects; community investment guided by a group which does not represent the whole community.

Most conservation managers in the region agree that subsistence hunting by Baka in and around the protected areas of South East Cameroon does not pose a serious threat to biodiversity. The current consensus of conservation actors in Cameroon is that commercial hunting, especially for bushmeat, presents the gravest threat to endangered species, and legal and illegal logging poses the key threat to rare or endangered habitats. Local conservation authorities have so far found few adequate local incentives to prevent the trade in illegal bushmeat, and governance of the logging sector in Cameroon has been chronically weak, so these dangers are still prevalent in the Lobéké Region, in spite of the presence of several internationally-funded conservation projects. The conservation priority of the international conservation community has continued to override local livelihood concerns and communities' customary rights, and rather than targeting commercial trade in bushmeat and backing it up with strong enforcement measures, the protection measures now in place target those with the most to lose. The paradox is that they are doing this in order to protect the resources and habitats that local people, especially Baka, already cherish, but are powerless to protect because they do not have secure rights to their forests.

Many Baka facing increasing forest restrictions have expressed their desire to enter into an equitable dialogue over conservation plans with protected area managers, but no formal mechanisms to enable this have so far been developed. Based upon their past experience with conservation authorities, Baka are sceptical about the commitment of conservation organisations to principles of openness, fairplay, and negotiation with them. New models of collaboration between Baka communities and the conservation authorities will have to be developed if "participatory" schemes like Lobéké are to be seen as successful, and local peoples' rights to their lands and therefore livelihood are to be made secure.

This article is based upon information generated through community interviews which were carried out in South East Cameroon over a two year period as part of a project to document the impact of protected areas on indigenous peoples in 7 African countries, and to promote the application of the new conservation principles embodied in, inter alia, WWF International's "Statement of Principles on Indigenous Peoples and Conservation," the World Conservation Union's resolutions on Indigenous Peoples, the World Commission on Protected Areas, and the relevant provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity, to which over 177 countries are signatories.

This new model of conservation is based upon principles that recognise the rights of indigenous peoples to use, own and control their traditional territories, and which protect their traditional knowledge and skills. The new approach aims for working partnerships with indigenous peoples based upon principles of full and informed consent and equitable sharing of benefits resulting from conservation activities.

This project is being carried out by Forest Peoples Project and its local partners, with funding provided by the UK Community Fund. For more information see www.forestpeoples.org

By: John Nelson, FPP, e-mail: johnnelson@blueyonder.co.uk