Integrating Traditional Conservation Mechanisms into Modern Management of Ecotourism Resources in Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park

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DOI:https://doi.org/10.33281/JTHS20129.2017.6.2.7

Abstract
Indigenous communities within and around protected areas have developed a number of consistent mechanisms for resource conservation, which by implication provide the basis for ecotourism development. The adoption of traditional methods of environmental resource protection by protected area managers will not only give the local people a sense of belonging but also power and control over their resources; thus fulfilling the goal of ecotourism development. This paper examines the traditional methods of resource conservation in Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park and how they can be integrated into modern management system in order to effectively realize ecotourism objectives in the region. Data was collected and analyzed using in-depth interviews, group discussions, field observation and descriptive method of circular interactive framework. Result shows that Support Zone Communities have traditional methods of natural resource conservation that were and are still effective despite the modern management methods in place. Among these methods are local taboos, sanctions, restrictions, fines, seasonal exploitation of non-timber forest products, including hunting and designation of objects and forest lands as sacred. However, the major challenge of these traditional systems of conservation is that they have not been recognized and considered by park authority. The authors recommended the adoption and incorporation of these traditional mechanisms of resource conservation into the modern park management system in order to fully and effectively realize ecotourism objectives.

Introduction
The quest to conserve natural resources has gradually metamorphosed into ecotourism which provides economic benefits at the grass root while maintaining the integrity of the ecosystem. The development of tourism as an important tool for conservation and promotion of economic growth in less developed and developing nations has demonstrated that it can play a significant role in balanced sustainable development, and can be effectively harnessed to generate net benefits for the poor (Nwahia, Omonona, Onyeabor and Balogun, 2012). In recent years, tourism has received considerable attention especially, ecotourism, which according to some observers, is the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry with an annual growth rate of 10 to 15% worldwide (Nwahia, *et. al*, 2012). Boo (1991) and Campbell (2002), see ecotourism as nature travel that contributes to economic development and environmental conservation through generating

funds for protected areas, creating employment opportunities for local communities and offering environmental education. Essentially, ecotourism leads to an understanding of cultural and natural history of the environment and boost the integrity of the ecosystem, while providing opportunities for the conservation of natural resources beneficial to host communities (Eagles, 1992).

As noted by Rim-Rukeh, Irerhievwie and Agbozu (2013), indigenous people throughout the world have certain traditional conservation cultures that represent a class of informal institutions where local laws and taboos govern and define human behavior. These regulations remain the prime factors that shape their conduct towards the exploitation of the environmental resources. Therefore, host communities can help to address the future disagreements and conflicts if they are incorporated into the planning process to express their concerns and also exercise their traditional regulations of resources conservation. The modern concept of conservation has sometimes been thought of as a protective 'locking away' by powerful elites who are thought to set these areas aside for themselves to enjoy the beauty of nature and extract resources: an essentially selfish and anti-development practice (Mackinnon, Mackinnon, Child and Thorsell, 1982). Tole, (1998) stated that the colonial attitude towards natural resource conservation, which is still prevalent today, is that of preserving the resources from the people and not for the people. This system of resource management stimulates antagonism from the host communities who see themselves as being deprived of their natural endowment. However, on the contrary, well designed protected area management that actively involves host communities in decision making and also adopt the traditional systems of resource conservation can be a source of sustainable benefit to the society. Local people have developed a number of consistent mechanisms of resource conservation which by implication is the basis for ecotourism development. The adoption of traditional methods of environmental resource protection in conserving the ecotourism resources will not only give local people the sense of belonging, but will also give them power and control over their resources; thus fulfilling the primary goal of ecotourism development.

Literature Review

Before the advent of modern methods of resource conservation, indigenous people had a number of protective mechanisms to safeguard their environment, which enabled them to live in harmony with nature. Appiah-Opoku (2007), maintains that resource conservation is not a recent phenomenon in the existence of man, past generations especially in tropical Africa, Asia and South America knew about environmental degradation and

the need for preservation. The use of traditional beliefs and local laws in the conservation of environmental resources can be traced back to man's creation (Shastri, Bhat, Nagaraja, Murali and Ravindranath, 2002). In native African community, environmental resource conservation is not a recent phenomenon. This found expression in religious and cultural practices of Africans since they believe that the environment has strong spiritual meaning and therefore must be regulated by strict rules. Ayotunde and Ada (2013) found out in their study of Biodiversity conservation in central Cross River State that indigenous people have laws guiding the utilization of environmental resources. According to them, the regulations carefully define what can be taken away from the forest and what can be described as sacred. Rim-Rukeh, *et.al.* (2013) revealed in their study of traditional beliefs and conservation of natural resources in Delta State, that local regulations and law are capable of protecting environmental resources and biodiversity in particular as long as indigenous people have a stake in it. Indigenous ecological knowledge is filled with concepts and practices that can be related directly or indirectly to resource conservation at various scales. Such objects of conservation include certain forest resources, lakes, mountains and rivers. Local people understand that certain portions of land usually referred to sacred groves, trees, animals, birds and water bodies must not be destroyed. Such areas are dictated by sanctions, punishment and taboos. These aspects of culture according to Okpoko et. al., (2008) forms important mechanism of resource conservation.

In their study of traditional African religion in natural resources conservation and management in Cross River State, Eneji, *et. al.* (2012) revealed that most local communities preserve plants and animals for the worship of deities, burial of traditional rulers and priests, certain masquerades and performance of rituals. In general, Africans are deeply rooted in the belief that all things were created by the Supreme Being for harmonious continuity www.newvision.co.ug/new_version/news. According to Environmental Protection Council (1976), natural phenomena in Africa were seen to possess spiritual power. Certain trees cannot be cut down because they are considered as 'god's trees' and are therefore sacred and have healing powers. This practice ensured the preservation of forest and controls the indiscriminate falling of trees that is experienced today. Bisong (2010) revealed in his report that, land was seen in African societies as goddess. Certain water bodies were also seen as goddess such that any human activity that marred their beauty were considered taboo; therefore no form of human waste is discharged into these water bodies lest the culprit will be punished by the gods.

Sacred groves and landscapes are among the variety of traditional belief systems of resource conservation. Tiwari, Barik and Tripathi (1998) identified 79 sacred groves in Meghalaya and a critical examination of the associated plant species revealed that these groves are home to 514 species representing 340 genera and 131 families. Their result also revealed that about 1.3% of these groves were undisturbed, 42.1% had dense forest, 26.3% had thinly spread canopy cover and 30.3% had open forest. Ramanujan and Kadamban (2001) conducted a study on two sacred groves (Oorani and Olagapuram) in north-west Pondicherry and found a total of 169 flowering plants. The Oorani grove had 74 angiosperms in 71 genera and 41 families (4 parasites, 30 woody species and 8 lianas). The Olagapuram had 136 species in 121 genera and 58 families (9 lianas, 21 woody species and 3 parasites). Wadley and Colfer (2004) revealed the conservation of non-human primates using traditional methods by Iban forest farmers in Kalimantan. According to them, this tradition formed an important part of their subsistence economy and aided the promotion of certain aspects of the traditional agroforestry system. In his study on traditional and indigenous method of biodiversity conservation, Ntiamoa-Baidu (1991) revealed three traditional methods of biodiversity conservation in Ghana and Nigeria. Tonukari (2007) found out in his study that the indigenous communities of Urhobos have a custom of conserving the environment based on certain religious beliefs. The people believe in totemism, with a strong custom of a supernatural connection between a group of people and certain animals. It is a taboo to harm, kill or eat any animal that is considered as totem.

In Nigeria today, government has taken over the conservation of most forestlands and other natural resources from the hands of local authorities by creating forest reserves including Cross River National Park. According to Eneji, *et.al* (2012), this change has given the rights and authorities of the local people in managing the forest and its resources to the government. It is pertinent to note that the forest is very important to traditional African communities because African traditional religion is anchored on the forest and its resources. Apart from religious attachment, local communities benefit from such forest products like resin, gum, cane wood, ropes, bush mango, afang, bitter kola, mushroom, hot leaf and other vegetables. The non-tangible forest benefits include protection of watershed, climate modification, windbreak, nutrient recycling and carbon sink (Eneji, *et. al*. 2012). Forest also serve as a valuable source of income and provide some therapeutic medicine (Falconer, 1992; Wilson, 1998).

It has long been understood that the forest and its resources are under very serious pressure and threat from the activities of man. Although a number of management techniques have been adopted by the government to

protect these forests, this seem not to yield the required result. It is important to fathom that traditional methods of resource conservation can provide the best result since the local communities have direct contact with the forest. Therefore, the adoption of local laws, taboos and sanctions in the protection of our forest will go a long way to safeguard our natural environment.

Traditional and Protected Area Resource Conservation

Before the 19th century, ecological systems in Africa was largely controlled and retained in the hands of indigenous people in rural communities, especially those who inhabit the forest regions (Ebin, 2001). Local people had extensively developed indigenous knowledge of the local woody vegetation, which provides them with fruits, shelter materials, fodder, fuel wood, fibre and medicine, all for their survival needs. These provisions actually enable them to ensure judicious utilization and preservation of resources through the mechanism of traditional laws and regulations. According to Ebin (2001), the local people of Okwangwo Division revered their ancestral powers, taboos and traditional sanctions and fines were imposed on actions considered not to be in the overall interest of their communities. At that time, most communities were small with very little outside influence. Neighbourhood set-ups also constituted one of the institutions that local communities used to manage their natural resources under common property that was quite effective.

With the advent of colonial rule, traditional authorities began to lose control over natural resource management (Adams and Hulme, 2001). By the early 1920s several natural resource regulations were introduced which forced most African nations to reluctantly surrender their rights and control of their environment to a system totally alien to them. This practice according to Beinart, (1987) was followed through and became adopted even after independence. However, unfortunately, the usurpation of decision-making power by governments was not thoroughly carried out. It created problems of 'assurance' (Little and Brokensha, 1987), the local population, especially the peasant farmers lacked confidence in the capacity of either the state or local institutions to properly regulate resource use, thus creating ambiguities over who has legal access to resource ownership and utilization. Ebin (2003) observed that one of the reasons some rural communities do not trust government agencies is because they are seen more or less as people who lead resource extractors to their area to carte away their resources, especially timber. As a result of this, resource protection system has been viewed by local communities with suspicion and apathy.

However, the above notwithstanding, resource management under the protected area system is more advantageous than the traditional system

of resource conservation. While protected area systems are better organised and ensure a more effective control of resources, traditional systems manage natural resources as a common property and depended on the goodwill of the citizenry to enforce the law and often times authorities under the traditional systems did not have absolute control over the resources (Adams and Hulme, 2001).

Study Area

Okwango Division is located in Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State. It is one of the two divisions that make up the Cross River National Park, established in 1991 along with six others. The Division was created out of the former Okwangwo-Bushi and Bushi Extention Forest Reserves to operate as a single range (Okwango Range). The area lies at the north-east part of Cross River, extending along the Cameroon border between latitude 6˚17"N and 6.28˚33"N of the Equator and longitudes 9˚14"E and 9.23˚33"E of the Greenwich Meridian. It covers an approximate area of 1,000 square kilometers with an altitude of 1500 - 1700m above sea level (Austine, Sijah and Rebecca 2014). The vegetation of Okwangwo Division is characterized by an eco-tone of unbroken and little disturbed forest within the heights of 150m to 170m. The annual rainfall is between 2500 to 4500mm with a mean monthly temperature of 18.32˚C at lower altitudes and 14.16˚C at higher altitudes especially around Obudu mountain ranges. Okwango Division is surrounded by some 90 communities with a total population of approximately 70,000 (Lateef, Abere and Lameed 2015). It is managed by the National Park Service with its Divisional Head Office at Butatong, about 5 kilometers from Ikom-Obudu highway. The area is separated from the Oban Division to the south by a disturbed rainforest of about 50km.

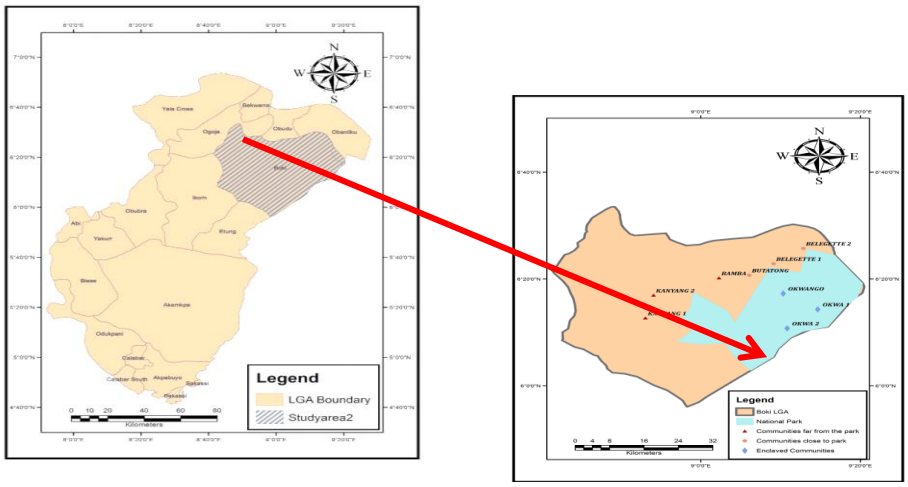

Fig. 1: Location of the Study Area

Method of Study

The study adopted a descriptive design. Nine communities were selected from the total population that makes up support zone communities of Okwangwo Division using 10% sampling intensity. Stratified random sampling technique was used to select the communities within the three categories of support zone communities - communities located inside the park (enclave communities), communities close to the park and communities far from the park, whose activities directly or indirectly affect the park. These communities were: Okwangwo, Okwa I and Okwa II; Butatong, Belegette I and Belegette II; Bamba, Kayang I and Kayang II all in Boki and Obanliku Local Government Areas. The communities were selected because they depend almost entirely on forest products derived from the park for their livelihood needs and their activities are known to directly affect the park. Snowball sampling method was used to select 80 people believed to have relevant knowledge of the subject matter. Thus, 27 community leaders (chiefs, women leaders and youth leaders), 36 community members (farmers, hunters, business owners and civil servants), 10 park staff, 4 staff of NGOs working in the park and 3 staff from Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation, Calabar; Cross River State Ministry of Forestry and Natural Resources and Cross River State Tourism Bureau were selected and interviewed. Snowball sampling technique was used because it enabled the researchers to identify one member of each group of interest in the target population that were interviewed. Through in-depth interview and focus group discussion, data were collected using tape recorder and field notes. Field observation, photographs and documentations were also used to obtain

data. Data were analysed using descriptive method of circular interactive framework.

Findings

Research findings revealed that host communities have an aged-long tradition for conserving their forest and its resources. Resource conservation in support zone communities is shaped around local rules and regulations that are most often enshrined in their religious and cultural beliefs and enforced by prohibitions called *Atahm* in Boki language. The beliefs were strong enough, particularly in the past to make community members to obey. Interview result revealed a wide range of prohibitions on the utilization of certain natural resources. When asked how they conserved and/or conserve their resources, participants commented:

> *We have sacred groves and sacred rivers that are dedicated to Ntafu (god of the forest) and Akpabe (water god), we also have specified seasons for harvesting of afang (Nectum africana), hot leaf (Piper guineensis), snail, ropes, and other non-timber forest products and hunting. We have totem animals like Iguana (Ejak) and Kangaroo (Ekpalebelengun) that cannot be killed or harmed as taboos and huge fines are attached to them.*

These traditional regulations and practices are very important tools for resource conservation.

In Boki generally, trees like *Njan* (Iroko: Botanical name: *Chlorophora excelsa*), *Ebkpunkpu* (Mahogany: Botanical name: *Swietenia macrophylla*) and *Ntal* (Obeche: Botanical name: *Triplochiton scleroxylon*) are regarded as gods and possess special spiritual powers. According to Chief Benedict Nde of Bamba, "these trees are abodes of the gods and cannot be cut down without performing some sacrifices." A participant who is also a wood carver in Okwangwo revealed that smoked catfish mixed with fresh palm oil and egg is scarified to *Njan* tree before being cut. The following prayer is said "*I am about to cut you down and carve you into a beautiful object because you are beautiful, please don't harm me, instead give me the wisdom to make you more beautiful.*" This taboo has tremendously helped to promote the wise use of trees of this category. The locust bean tree (*Ebyaka/Parkia clappertoniana*), palm tree (*Ebong/Elaeis guineensis*), Shea Butter tree (*Butrespermum parkii*) and many others in this category are protected for their economic benefits. Some trees, herbs and shrubs are also conserved for their medicinal purposes. A herbalist in Kayang remarked as follows:

> *No one takes anything from the sacred Ekulugbe Abuntahkadop (Abuntahkadop forest) except people like us. Every plant in this forest is medicinal and has spiritual*

> *powers that punish any one that cut or burn them without sacrifice. A male dog is sacrificed to 'Nnihm' (the god of the forest) before entering, and this is usually at mid-night. No plant is completely uprooted and they are collected in very small quantity.*

The above expression shows that traditional laws are used to restrict the use of biodiversity and natural resources. The fear of retribution from the gods prevents their inappropriate utilization. Focus group discussion also revealed that their traditional methods of resource conservation are anchored on the people's belief system and local perception about nature. The designation of areas as sacred groves and sanctuaries is believed to be a deliberate attempt to nurture the forest areas and to conserve biodiversity. Direct observation revealed that some sacred groves and sanctuaries (*Nki, bunya, bano and bufe*) are too small and mainly made up of rocks in locations that rarely support biological resources. However, there were many others that were identified (*Egbaja, Adop, Ndarr, Ajan, Nkpankpa etc*) to be important habitats for organisms that interbreed freely under natural conditions. Sacred groves also serve as watersheds where sources of drinking water, streams, rivers and their aquatic components are protected.

In Balegette, *Erafoko* forest was identified as a royal cemetery where dead chiefs are buried. This large forest and its resources are locally protected because they believe that the spirits of their late chiefs live there and therefore it is sacred. Harvesting of forest products and hunting are highly prohibited in this forest. On the other hand, Crocodiles are considered as totem animals while others like Gorilla, Chimpanzees, Elephants and species of monkey are protected via local sanctions and fines against any defaulter. This explains why a good number of them are still found in this region.

However, these methods of resource conservation vary among support zone communities. Findings revealed that some sacred groves have stricter regulations than other. For example, while entry into *Erafoko* forest in Balegette for whatever reason is highly prohibited except for special people that constitute the royal family and can only gain access when a royal death occurs, the utilization of resources in *Etoro* forest at Bamba community is restricted to certain species of biodiversity. Agricultural lands are also conserved locally by way of shifting cultivation and bush fallowing. This system, according to Chief Edward Osang, is enhanced by traditional system of land ownership usually inheritance. However, the major challenge of these traditional systems of conservation is that they have not been recognized and considered by park authority.

Discussion

Consistent with findings from previous studies, this research revealed that support zone communities have traditional methods of natural resource conservation that are still effective despite the modern management methods in place. Among these methods are local taboos, sanctions, restrictions, fines, seasonal exploitation of non-timber forest products, including hunting and designation of objects and forest lands as sacred. These local rules and regulations are enshrined in their religious and cultural beliefs. This finding is consistent with that of Eneji, et.al (2012) who revealed that most local communities in Cross River State preserve plants and animals for the worship of deities. Results also show that this tradition has been in practice from the existence of these communities and are passed on from generation to generation, supporting the reports of Appiah-Opoku (2007) that resource conservation is not a recent phenomenon and Shastri, et. al. (2002) that the use of traditional beliefs and local laws in the conservation of environmental resources can be traced back to man's creation.

A number of trees were found to be the abodes of gods and therefore cannot be cut down without performing sacrifice to appease the gods. Shea Butter, Locust Bean, Palm trees and others in this category are preserved for their economic significance, while others are protected for medicinal purposes. Different landscapes that are set aside as sacred places help to regulate the activities of man in the forest and reduce the utilization of resources, thus supporting the findings of Ayotunde and Ada (2013) that indigenous people of central Cross River State protect sacred landscape with regulations that carefully define what can be taken away from the forest and what can be described as sacred.

Result also shows that some sacred groves may not have biological significance because of some of the objects involved and their locations. Some of them were identified to be mere rocks and stones located in rocky terrains that cannot support the existence of any form of biodiversity. Apart from sacred groves, cemeteries of traditional rulers with the associated plants and animals were also protected. There are differences in the enforcement of these laws among support zone communities. While some communities enforce total restriction, others were found to practice selective exploitation of forest resources, all of which are effective in conservation of natural resources. Although management (government) is aware of the significance of local laws, taboos and sanctions in the protection of the forest and its resources, they have not been fully adopted and incorporated into the park management system. Tradition and modernity can exist and be mutually beneficial when properly used. As stated in modernization theory, modern methods of resource conservation are not meant to totally disregard the

existing traditional mechanisms, but to embrace and integrate them into ecotourism principles in order to achieve long-term conservation of resources.

Conclusion

The study examined the traditional conservation methods in support zone communities and the role they can play in natural resource conservation in Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park. Findings indicated that indigenous communities have a number of traditional mechanisms that protected their resources long before the advent of modern methods of resource conservation. These traditional regulations are still effective. The attribution of supernatural powers to certain portions of the bush, trees, mountains, rocks, water bodies and animals enabled indigenous communities of the park to voluntarily participate in natural resources management. However, this indirect participation has not yielded the desired result as park authorities have not fully adopted and integrated them into the modern management of ecotourism resources. The incorporation of the traditional methods of resource management into modern methods of conservation will not only give the local people a sense of belonging, but also strengthen the process while supporting the proposed ecotourism project in the area.

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