

THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AND PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT IN CAMEROON

This is a summary of the discussions held during the 2019 October workshop, “Resolving Conservation Conflicts in West/Central African Protected Areas” in Yaoundé, Cameroon

Wildlife populations are collapsing inside and outside protected areas throughout Western Equatorial Africa. In Cameroon, there has been a significant decline in large mammal populations in savannah and forest habitats. Top predators are disappearing even from national parks, which are supposed to receive the highest levels of protection. Some years ago, Cameroon lost its last cheetahs and likely its last African wild dogs. The future of other large carnivores is hanging in the balance, and Cameroon could soon see the lion go extinct, a symbol of strength and power, and the symbol of sports teams in Cameroon, including the national soccer team. Forest primates, our closest relatives in the animal world, also face a looming risk, with over 50% of primate species threatened with extinction. Populations of Cross River gorillas, drills and Preuss’s red colobus monkeys, some of Africa’s most endangered primate species that are found primarily in Cameroon, have declined significantly over the last decade. African forest elephants have undergone dramatic declines of up to 90%, and some populations are locally extinct. These declines are not limited to large mammals but have also been reported for several bird species.

We are a group of scientists, including faculty members from respected universities in Cameroon and abroad, representatives of protected areas management units, law enforcement organisations, and international organisations. In October 2019, we met in Yaoundé to assess the current status of conservation in the country and discuss innovative, sustainable, and community-based ways forward to solve what we consider to be a conservation crisis. Based on our combined experience, which encompasses both the social and the ecological sciences, and the data presented at this workshop and in the literature, it is clear that, in many ways, conservation in Cameroon is failing. But many opportunities exist for a more positive future.

Some of the threats to nature and wildlife in Cameroon include poaching of protected species and unsustainable hunting, illegal wildlife trade, and the loss, degradation, and fragmentation of habitat. Increased bushmeat hunting to meet rampant demands of a growing urban population has become unsustainable and is currently a major force driving the decline of a large number of species, most notably arboreal primates and duiker antelopes. The illegal trade of wildlife as pets or for body parts (including ivory and pangolin scales) also directly threaten populations. Mining, dam construction, unsustainable logging, and the expansion of large-scale agriculture such as oil palm plantations are reducing the extent of wildlife habitat, converting them into isolated fragments. All these different threats act synergistically, aggravating wildlife population declines and disrupting the free ecological services that these natural areas provide to millions of people.

These threats are affecting the local people as well as all the areas where we work in Cameroon. From our research, experience, and observations, it is difficult to believe that there is currently even a single area of forest, including protected areas, that is untouched by poaching with cable snares or guns, or other forms of habitat degradation. This does not only imperil ecological integrity but is also a threat to the wellbeing of Cameroonians through the disruption and loss of environmental services. Conservation is not a luxury. Wildlife and nature play an essential role in the livelihoods, cultures, and religions of the Cameroonian people living in rural areas. The current conservation crisis could lead to a food security crisis among vulnerable communities, including indigenous people. Local cultures and religions have formed complex relations with nature and wildlife. Thus, the loss of the Cameroonian natural heritage would in turn severely affect its rich cultural heritage. The country is also losing an important potential source of foreign income through ecotourism.

We conclude that the current crisis will not be solved unless there is political will and investment at multiple levels: legal, financial, educational, and social. **We call for an increased commitment to developing a national legal framework based on scientific evidence, revising outdated laws, and speeding up legal processes for reviewing laws and legal procedures for conservation, and to change the current paradigm of conservation as a whole.** For example, protected species catalogues must be updated to be in line with current scientific evidence. Science must also inform the design of conservation projects, decisions, and actions. We propose that the social, economic, and ecological outputs and impacts of conservation initiatives must be rigorously monitored and evaluated by an external body, and standardised monitoring and evaluation protocols must be developed and implemented within an adaptive management cycle. Such monitoring and scientific evidence could help using the limited resources available for conservation more wisely, but we also need strong prioritisation of the available resources to prevent critically endangered species from extinction.

Equally important will be to professionalise, diversify, and support protected area management. Protected areas are one of the cornerstones for conservation but currently suffer from inadequate infrastructure and equipment, unmotivated personnel and poor management, as well as a general lack of support from surrounding human populations who have been previously excluded from conservation processes. For this, all protected areas must have ratified management plans that are achievable. Local communities must be consulted and involved not only in developing such plans but also in their implementation. Currently, most managers find themselves trying to solve problems at the programmatic level, rather than focusing on small level changes suggested by local community members and supported by interested organisations. Management plans can be developed considering the site-specific characteristics rather than trying to follow globally implemented models. Consequently, novel methods and approaches to management must be explored and tested out. Management can become adaptive by including regular and independent monitoring to inform and adjust management actions. This will not only help improve the success of protected area management and resource management but will also ensure its accountability and transparency. It is important to add that protected area management must be led by people with the required technical proficiency paired with government staff. This should also include innovative approaches to protected area

management including delegated management models under public-private partnerships. There is already good in-country expertise that can be used. However, we believe that training in conservation science must continue being supported and improved. We call for curricula development of conservation science at the local academic institutions, with the inclusion of field courses and fostering interdisciplinary training for diverse students. Finally, we recommend the establishment of a Wildlife Research Institute to support this and all the above-proposed measures to improve conservation in Cameroon. Such an institution could become a hub of research, education, management and policy-development for conservation and be the seat of an independent body in charge of monitoring conservation initiatives in the country.

We urge the government and other relevant stakeholders to draw attention to this crisis and encourage them to jointly develop and commit to practical solutions that can help the nature and the people of Cameroon.

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