

Conservation practices may leave African indigenous populations behind

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Conservation and logging groups in Central and West Africa are failing to fully incorporate local concerns into management, marginalizing the livelihoods of the local population, according to Nathan Clay, Ph.D. candidate in geography, Penn State.

The landscape- or ecosystem-based approach to conservation—a land-use strategy employed in Central and West Africa for more than a decade—is meant to serve as a model for what happens when competing interests work together.

There, conservation groups, tasked with protecting rare wildlife and old growth forests, battle poachers and illegal loggers. Working within the framework set by the conservation groups, the logging industry harvests prized sapele and ayous trees—used for musical instruments and furniture—sustainably, while developing infrastructure and creating jobs for the local community.

The approach is considered a triple win because it serves the needs of all while promoting conservation.

However, Clay found in a case study of conservation practices in Cameroon, the Republic of Congo and Central African Republic that the approach is leaving some behind. He reported his findings in *Geoforum*.

Clay says the logging industry brings jobs to the area and builds infrastructure such as roads and hospitals, and the conservation groups

protect the region and wildlife from exploitation.

"(However), there are 100,000 people who are living there who are not involved in the logging industry and who are not involved in the conservation industry," he said. "They're just living there, and they're making their living through forest products, hunting and small-scale logging and agriculture."

The partnership has most impacted the Baka, an indigenous group of hunters and gatherers who rely on the forest for food, shelter and resources. They appear to have been forced into farming and have less access to the forest. They also lack access to schools. Another indigenous group, the Bagweli, who are more adept farmers, benefit from the infrastructure updates. They are able to attain the most fertile land and turn a profit on their crops, particularly cacao. They are also far more likely to seek logging or conservation jobs.

One shortcoming of the ecosystem-based conservation model, said Clay, is that the model fails to account for these local-level social complexities, but instead divides the landscape in fairly arbitrary ways.

In Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, Clay spent several weeks with representatives from conservation groups, logging companies, academics and program directors before conducting interviews for ten weeks in forested areas of Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo. He visited areas designated for logging, hunting, and as a nearby national park, and met with individuals in six communities. His findings are gleaned from dozens of interviews and nine focus groups.

"The biggest governance issue is how can we promote development and conservation but also make sure we're not impinging on people's ability to make a living from the forest," said Clay. "Decades ago, local groups had to deal with one or the other, either development or conservation,

and they had to negotiate their ability to access resources."

Now that groups have partnered up, he said, there are more complex regulations, making it harder for the community to use the land.

"It's almost impossible to give equal voice to these local groups when you have such powerful actors in logging companies and conservation organizations," he said.

Clay's research focused on the importance of looking into the power dynamics governing a particular area and resolving inequities in the distribution of power.

"More can be done to engage the community," said Clay. "Residents are included in stakeholder meetings among [conservation](#) and industry groups but oftentimes they feel like they're just being placated. Is it enough just to do some stakeholder engagement, or do we need a more fundamental overhaul of, or at least sensitivity to, the political economic system in which there are currently big divides of power between these groups?"

Based on his findings, Clay proposes involving the community in anti-hunting and anti-logging patrols, making them part of the process to see if the resource management strategies can work with, rather than against them.

"To me, the people who are best positioned to understand and effectively manage these changing socio-ecological conditions are the people who live there," said Clay. "The people who are living there should be more involved in the management of these places because they're the ones who best know the region."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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