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Cameroon's Lessons in Conservation for Sub-Saharan Africa

KELVIN S.-H. PEH

Sub-Saharan Africa's political and economic troubles are well known, but global media coverage usually ignores equally significant and persistent challenges: nature conservation and environmental protection. The region needs to decisively reduce threats to its nature and environment to make significant progress toward the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (www.un.org/millenniumgoals/).

The fight against illegal tree cutting—which includes fuel-wood harvesting, overgrazing, and forest clearance for farming—requires significant improvement if sub-Saharan countries are to provide their flora and fauna with the safe havens they so direly need. The eradication of poaching and alien species on protected areas across the region is just as important. Growing human populations and their overexploitation of natural resources are the cause of the progressive degradation of national parks and nature reserves.

For sub-Saharan Africa, a vast region with megadiverse biota and extremely high endemism, the long march to effective management of protected areas seems never ending. Cameroon exemplifies this situation. For example, the thriving bushmeat trade in Cameroonian protected areas—and in most other protected areas in the region—represents the norm rather than an exception. The reason is purely financial: illegal bushmeat hunters can earn CFA 20,000 (US\$49) per day, a lucrative business in a country in which 2.6 million people live on less than US\$1 per capita per day (Morikang 2007).

Cameroon's difficulties in nature conservation have substantial parallels in other sub-Saharan countries, which share Cameroon's distinctive ecology and many features of politics and economic development. However, because Cameroon

enjoys relative peace and stability in an otherwise turbulent region, it can play a pivotal role in sounding an early warning of what could happen in other sub-Saharan countries. Effective management of protected areas in sub-Saharan countries requires sound practices based on knowledge of natural history and conservation biology, but implementation depends on bold initiatives, and these depend on broader political and economic factors. Here again Cameroon represents a microcosm of regionwide efforts.

As is often the case, broader political settings affect any discussion of the management of protected areas, if only because no such effort is effective without the necessary legislative framework. Governments should be more committed to enforcing and, in some areas, to strengthening laws and regulations to achieve better protection of national parks and nature reserves. However, for the moment, illegal activities are thriving in the understaffed protected areas across sub-Saharan Africa, and the law has not been able to contain them. Expanding law enforcement capabilities is therefore essential. The recent—and most welcome—recruitment of more forest guards in Cameroon represents both an opportunity and a challenge. To reap the full benefits of the additional manpower, the Cameroonian government must ensure that all of its wildlife personnel have unimpeachable integrity and character. In particular, the forest guards must not be part of any illegal attempts to make a profit out of the system, a tall order in a relatively poor country. Nonetheless, simply ensuring that salaries are paid regularly and that financial rewards are based on exemplary performance and effectiveness should result in immediate improvements.

At the same time, firearms need to be better controlled to effectively combat armed poachers and timber thieves. An inventory of local weapons and new restrictions on firearms are necessary, not only to improve environmental protection by containing groups that are manufacturing light weapons and small arms, but also to strengthen internal security in general. Yet again, an effective, up-to-date legislative framework is essential. The effort can succeed only partially: it is difficult to ban the production of firearms altogether in Cameroon and other sub-Saharan countries, because firearms are used in many traditional rituals. However, better control of such activities will significantly reduce illegal hunting and improve the safety of the forest guards on duty.

Sound conservation policies play a central role in the protection of nature, but to define sound policy for sustainable and rational management of natural resources, good statistics on nature and the environment are necessary. Those statistics, which are vital to evaluating the effectiveness of protection provided by the nature reserves and national parks, are hard to come by in the region, and even harder to keep updated. Lacking reliable statistics, countries such as Cameroon can have only conservation strategies, not conservation policies. For example, on the inventory of natural resources, countries in sub-Saharan Africa lag far behind other developing regions. Cameroon started its first forest inventory only after signing a protocol agreement

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with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in 2003, and progress since then has been painfully slow because of various obstacles that the field teams faced, such as highway robbery (Kendemeh 2004). Credible government statistics are crucial to helping stakeholders fulfill their economic, social, and environmental functions through sound policies.

Next, the economic impediments to achieving sustainable management in forestry and wildlife sectors must be addressed. This calls for a sharp focus on reducing the poverty of people who live in and around the protected areas. The World Bank's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative identified many sub-Saharan countries as potentially eligible to receive debt relief. Cameroon attained the "completion point" (see www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/hipc.htm) of the HIPC initiative in 2006 and benefited from the cancellation of debt by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank's International Development Association, and other multilateral creditors, up to a total of US\$270 million. The debt relief has given the country more fiscal room for maneuver to combat poverty and to foster economic growth.

However, because of infrastructure expansion, higher demand for energy, and the exploitation of other revenue sources (such as timber), the debt relief also increases pressure on the protected areas. The forestry sector, for instance, is already contributing US\$63 million to the Cameroonian economy annually (Beauchemin 2008), and is scheduled to become even more significant. Strengthening governance in protected areas is therefore a key step toward reconciling natural resource management and fighting the poverty of the local populations. For example, the exploitation of resources outside the designated zones must be

checked, and company payments and government revenues from logging concessions bordering the protected areas must be made more transparent at the local level. An initiative akin to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative for oils, gas, and minerals, launched by the British government in 2002, will strengthen accountability by verifying and publishing government revenues from timber and nontimber products.

To alleviate the poverty of local communities in and near the protected areas, financial assistance from the government to the rural poor—microfinancing help, for example—is necessary. Large financial institutions should also step up their small-loan assistance to enable poor households to start or expand income-generating activities. To reduce people's consumption of bushmeat, provision of an alternative source of animal protein is much needed. Fighting poverty also means promoting profitable economic activities that raise the living standard of poor people—bee farming for honey production, for example, is an exemplary activity that is noted for its economic and conservation values. However, many Cameroonian farmers are likely to remain poor as a result of their government's unsound economic policies. For example, in 2007, the Cameroonian government launched a campaign encouraging farmers to grow coffee, with the aim of doubling coffee production to 124,000 metric tons by 2015 (Mongo 2007). The idea sounds good, in theory, because commodity prices are currently very high, but uncontrolled production with little coordination with other competitors will result in the collapse of coffee prices—after all, coffee is grown throughout the tropics (Harford 2006).

Political and economic problems confound conservation issues in at least 32 countries across Africa. Thus, for some time to come the foreign community

must continue to make a key contribution to the preservation of nature in sub-Saharan Africa. The international community's present commitment to place global governance capacity and skills at the disposal of the continent is encouraging, but the countries in sub-Saharan Africa still have a lot of catching up to do if they are to achieve the 2010 biodiversity target. Although preserving nature is without doubt a long-term program, it must start immediately. A forward-looking reform agenda should, apart from establishing more protected areas, maintain the ecosystem functions of the existing ones; promote sustainable management of natural resources; develop livelihood programs for the welfare of the communities living in and around protected areas; strengthen fiscal institutions to finance biodiversity conservation; and improve governance. It is a challenging agenda, and not one that a single country or an individual can undertake alone. It is a task for the global citizens who are persuaded that success carries a large reward: the betterment of all life in sub-Saharan Africa.

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