
GASHAKA GUMTI, NIGERIA – FROM GAME RESERVE TO NATIONAL PARK

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Gashaka Gumti covers an area greater than 6,500 square kilometres and is the largest national park in Nigeria. Protection of forests covering steep slopes within the park preserves an important catchment area for the River Benue, Nigeria's second largest river. The park contains forest, savannah and montane vegetation and is a region of exceptionally high biodiversity. Gashaka Gumti is situated within the subhumid zone, now subject to immigration from more densely cultivated areas north and south of it. Expansion of the livestock industry in this zone is also occurring as a means of reducing settlement and grazing impact on the semi-arid zone to the north. Pressure on Gashaka Gumti is increasing.

Significant areas of montane grassland are located within the national park boundary contiguous with Mambilla plateau, offering abundant pasture, high rainfall and also no tsetse fly. Fulani pastoralists settled permanently within this valuable grazing region during the 1960s. When a game reserve was established in 1972 they were not evicted, but actively participated during the planning process in the demarcation of areas for agricultural settlement and livestock grazing.

State management of the enclaves effectively ceased during the 1980s when funding for the reserve dwindled in response to declining government oil revenues. The game reserve deteriorated, yet traditional management institutions survived intact. Grazing of livestock within each enclave and the allocation of land to newcomers is still controlled by a traditional Fulani leader or **ardo**.

Established conservation practices continued such as the movement of livestock between the uplands and flood plains to prevent overgrazing. Annual burning of the vegetation controlled bush encroachment and helped maintain sufficient forage throughout the year for both domestic and wild ungulates. Many **ardos** also discouraged commercial hunting by outsiders.

However, the authority of the traditional management system was seriously undermined by the state's untimely intervention in 1991, when Gashaka Gumti was decreed a national park and responsibility passed from state to federal control. Confused conditions under which it was unclear who controlled access to resources came into existence.

As a result, many households began to abandon the enclaves because they feared that eviction was inevitable. Salmanu, one of the oldest residents of the enclave of Chappal Hendu expressed his fear of eviction from the national park in the following way:

'It is like a marriage from which the love has gone out. If there is no love remaining the wife knows that sooner or later, she will have to go.'

When enclave communities fear eviction at any time, it is not surprising that many decisions are made for short-term gain at the expense of any sustainable future of the resource.

Land which becomes vacant within the enclaves is quickly occupied by herds of cattle originating from Mambilla plateau where there are serious problems of overgrazing and increasing levels of conflict between farmers and herders. Local herders are employed to tend these cattle whilst the owners, rich and influential men, remain on Mambilla. Cattle ownership within the national park

is gradually shifting from ownership by resident Fulani to ownership by non-resident Fulani. Almost half of all the herds now grazed within the national park are owned by absentee Fulani. Many original Fulani settlers of the region are unhappy about this encroachment of cattle from Mambilla but feel powerless to do anything about it. Increasing numbers of cattle within the enclaves has been blamed for a reduction in the quantity of forage available compelling many herders to take their cattle into the national park to find sufficient pasture:

`with too many cows now we must go into the national park or starve' (Alhaji Yuguda).

Milk yields are declining and there is increasing incidence of disease amongst livestock. Currently no-one has the authority or ability to control immigration of herders and cattle from Mambilla into the national park.

In recent decades the formerly abundant wildlife populations of Gashaka Gumti have declined as a result of overhunting and recurrent rinderpest epidemics. However, certain species, notably the baboon and porcupine, have increased to such an extent that wildlife is no longer regarded by the local community as a resource but as a liability to be endured. Before the game reserve was established, wildlife pests were held in check by traditional methods of control. But all forms of hunting are now prohibited within the national park and local people are expected to tolerate crop damage and losses to their livestock without compensation.

The confusion and hopelessness felt by local people was highlighted by Ardo Dikko of Filinga enclave:

`When *your* cattle (the wild animals of the national park) destroy *my* farm you pay me no compensation, yet when my cattle graze inside the national park we are taken to court. The baboons eat our salt and the national park pays me no damages. Why?'

A recent survey estimated that crop damage by wildlife pests may account for as much as one third of the annual crop harvest. Farming success critically depends upon the availability of labour for crop protection. Responsibility for such tasks is often borne by children, inevitably to the detriment of their formal education. Some households have abandoned farming altogether. Hunger has become a common and serious problem within the enclaves.

Many local people hold the national park responsible for the burgeoning population of wildlife pests:

`the baboon would not let me farm' (Sima Ruga, Chappal Nyumpti).

`the law says we must not kill them, that is why the baboon and hyaena are many' (Ardo Bakari, Chappal Hendu).

`The hyaenas are many because they are eating my cows and because they are protected by the national park' (Jibrin Mwa, Chappal Nyumpti).

Local people have little idea why the national park was created, or for whom.

`only God knows why the national park is here.'

`the national park is here for the white man: you people bought the bush,'
`the national park was created for the chiefs and ardos.'

The Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-UK) together with financial support from the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) are assisting the Federal Government of Nigeria in protection and development of the region. Current management focus within the national park is largely traditional with emphasis on anti-poaching patrols, research, infrastructure, tourism, and conservation education. NCF have funded a small number of community development initiatives at Gashaka Gumti such as the building of local schools. NCF maintenance of roads and river crossings protects the vital access to enclaves inside the park, and provides local employment benefits. The NCF is also attempting to control populations of the baboon and other primates around Gashaka village which is situated just outside the national park.

The national park authority is committed to restoring stewardship for the enclaves to existing traditional management institutions, supported by legislation that recognises their authority and empowers them to administer sanctions against transgressors of agreed rules and regulations. Local people are now actively participating in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of a management plan for the national park and surrounding area. Secure land tenure and the ability of local people to limit access by outsiders is considered to be an essential requirement for sustainable management of the enclaves.

The long term future of Gashaka Gumti National Park clearly depends upon strengthening the right of local people to become stewards of resources which they can manage and conserve for their own benefit.

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