

Use of traditional belief systems in reducing bushmeat hunting in Ghana: An African solution to a conservation crisis

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Background to wildlife management in Ghana

Ghana has a land surface area of 239,000 km², in which live 19 million people, speaking six main languages. Traditional authority systems are stable, and include traditional conservation practices. Wildlife is conserved in both protected areas, and also sacred groves.

Protected areas of Ghana can be broken down according to the IUCN categories to comprise:

- 1 Strict Nature Reserve;
- 7 National Parks;
- 2 Wildlife Sanctuaries;
- 6 Resource Reserves.

Between them, they cover a total area of 13,852.5 km², or 5.6% of the total land surface.

Wildlife is managed under a broad legal framework, including the Wild Animal Preservation Act 43, 1961, Wildlife Res. Reg. L.I 710, 1971 and Wildlife Conservation Reg. L.I. 685, 1971. These prescribe restrictions on hunting, a closed hunting season (1st August to 1st December), the need for export permits for wildlife, and other regulations concerning bushmeat.

The single greatest threat to Ghana's biodiversity is the hunting of wildlife for bushmeat.

Estimates are that about 385,000 t of bushmeat, worth approximately US\$350 million, are harvested every year. In 2001, even during the closed season some 3,000 large mammals were killed for bushmeat. Restaurants in major urban areas serve bushmeat. The main methods used to hunt are guns (60%) and chemicals (32%). In addition to local consumption, bushmeat from Ghana is exported, including to London, UK and other parts of Europe where entire suitcases and travelling bags packed with bushmeat have been seized.

African traditions as a means of reducing hunting

One way of involving all Ghanaians in the efforts to reduce hunting is through the totem system. The word "totem" arose among North American Indians, and refers to a vegetable or animal revered by individuals, particularly groups of people or tribes, as sacred. In Ghana, the totem system can be viewed at many levels: through traditional rulers, clan members, social clubs, political parties, or at national level.

Central to the concept of totems in Ghana is that of sacred animals. Preserving totem animals appeals to Chiefs, their lineage and leadership authorities. Conservation International (CI) has had a campaign in Ghana, the focus of which is to appeal to people to re-awaken their culture by protecting totems. The core result has been that

35 Ashanti chiefs have banned the most destructive types of hunting throughout the region.

Human health concerns and hunting

The focus of the campaign linking human health concerns and hunting has been raising awareness about the use of chemicals to hunt animals, and the health impacts of doing so. The result of the campaign has been a consumer boycott, resulting in 92% of local restaurants stopping selling bushmeat.

Government policy and enforcement

The focus of the campaign on government policy and enforcement was to lobby key officials, informing them of the then disincentives for staff to enforce the law. Specifically, the penalty for killing a mona monkey was 50 cents, but a poacher could earn \$700 by selling one such monkey for export. The result of the campaign has been new restrictive requirements that bushmeat being exported must be certified. X-ray machines in Ghana and UK will soon be used to screen luggage for bushmeat.

Key elements of the CI strategy

Core to the strategy is that the programme has been run by a coalition of partners, including government, research institutions, traditional authorities, NGOs and the media.

A core aim was to raise awareness greatly through publicity. This was done through a massive media campaign, which ran from February 2001 to August 2002, including 22 newspaper articles, 12 radio interviews and eight television interviews (including the BBC), and production of large numbers of posters and t-shirts.

Lessons learned

- Appealing to cultural traditions is an effective way to mobilize support for conservation activities.
- Coalition-building requires strong leadership and flexible funding to achieve results.
- CI's focus on field-driven conservation strategies is successful in gaining local buy-in.

Recommendations

- Wildlife laws in Ghana need to be reviewed.
- Capacity-building programmes for traditional authorities are required.
- Different socio-cultural and political groups should be involved more fully in future programmes.
- Education and awareness programmes need to be managed in a way so that the knowledge is disseminated sustainably.