

Protecting and Encouraging Traditional Sustainable Use in Cameroon:

Customary Use of Biological Resources
by Local and Indigenous Peoples
in Western Dja Reserve, Cameroon

Case study on Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas

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Baka mother and children, Western Dja Reserve, Cameroon. Photo: CED



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Introduction

This summary report¹ is an overview of preliminary findings of consultations by the Centre for Environment and Development (CED) and the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) with indigenous and local communities concerning their role in the management of the Dja Wildlife Reserve, Cameroon. The goal of this work is to document a case study of indigenous and local communities' forest use, their role in the management of biological resources, and the impact of protected areas on their rights, as defined in national laws and international conventions, especially Article 10(c) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).² The final case study due in early 2006 will contain community forest use data from three protected areas in Cameroon, and is aimed to contribute towards a review of progress of the implementation of the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas.³

Communities and Protected Areas in Cameroon

The first phase of the case study was carried out with indigenous Baka hunter-gatherers and local Bulu, Maka, Kaka and Badjoué communities from 15 hamlets in Bengbis Arrondissement, located in the western reaches of the Dja Wildlife Reserve, Cameroon. The Dja Reserve comprises approximately 526,000 hectares in the middle of Cameroon's forest zone. In 1987 it became a World Heritage Site, according therefore the highest level of protection under Cameroon law. It is a key component in a planned matrix of protected areas overlapping Cameroon, Gabon and the Republic of Congo.⁴

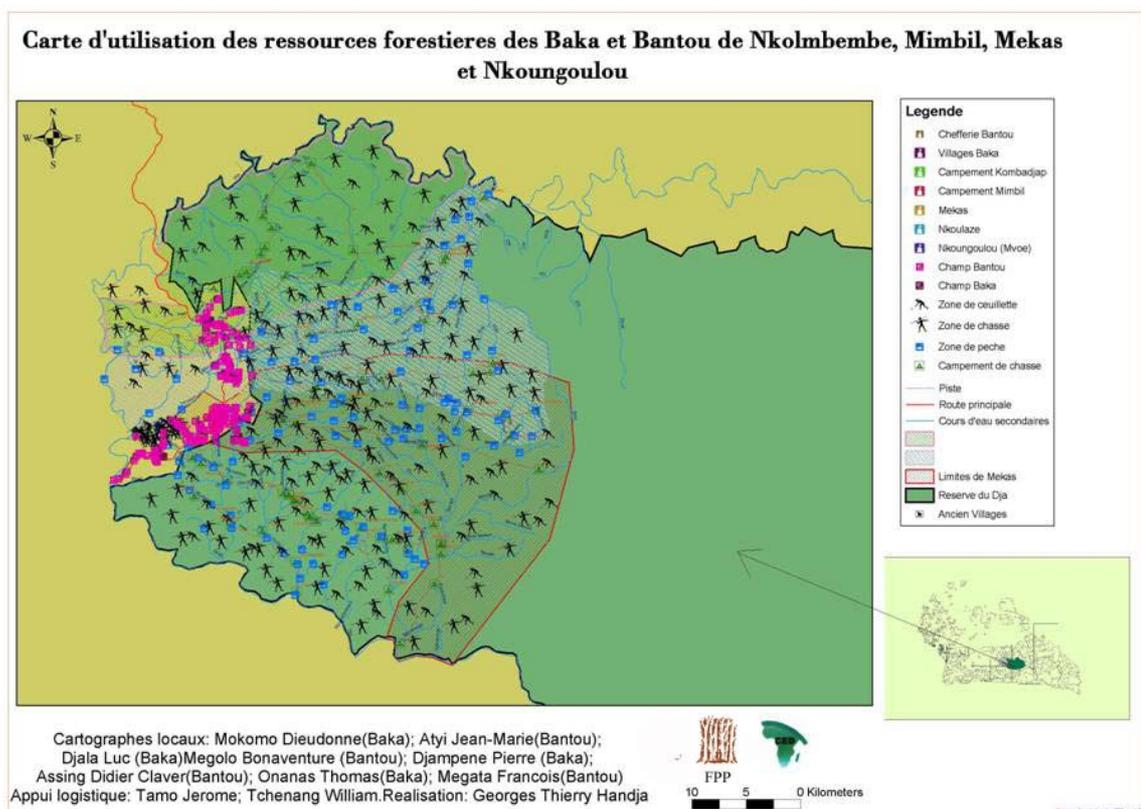
All local communities face restrictions against the use of forests lying within the park. Baka are particularly affected due to their reliance on hunting and gathering. In general in Cameroon Baka are considered to be the original inhabitants of many parts of the equatorial forest. They traditionally exist by hunting and gathering, live in small groups, and lead a semi-nomadic forest-based life. Their presence in Cameroon's forests is well-recorded and certainly pre-colonial. In many places where Baka live it is generally accepted by other local communities that their ancestors arrived to find Baka already there. There are up to 50,000 Baka in Cameroon's forest zone.⁵

The effect of policies by colonial and post colonial administrations, road development, and immigration by sedentary communities gradually led Baka groups all over Cameroon to establish permanent camps and villages along roads, which for many have become base for their productive activities as well as in surrounding forests. In addition to working other people's fields in exchange for food, goods and occasionally money, many Baka establish and cultivate their own fields to supplement their basic hunting and gathering diet. Baka language, culture and religion are strongly allied to the forest, which remains the basis of most household livelihoods.

Bengbis Baka share all these general characteristics. Around Bengbis Baka hunt and gather using traditional methods to nourish their families, and also to harvest game, fish and other forest produce to trade locally for basic necessities. Some Baka may occasionally hunt with guns, usually provided to them by others to supply meat, in exchange for money, or more often, alcohol and tobacco. Some of those loaning firearms to Baka are part of extensive bushmeat trading networks that operate around the Dja Reserve, and who are the main cause of commercial poaching.

Baka in all of the communities involved in the Bengbis case study maintain traplines in the forests, and there is evidence that they regulate their use according to traditional knowledge of animal breeding periods, and the sustainability of the resource. Community mobility is a major tool for sustainability, as communities move from place to place in search of tubers, nuts, honey, craft materials, herbs, fruit, fish and game. There are several distinct cultural traditions amongst local Baka that tend to prevent hunting of protected animals. However, some Baka also trap using steel wires, forbidden inside IUCN Class I protected areas such as the Dja. Bengbis Baka retain strong relationships with local sedentary communities on the basis of exchange or reciprocal aid, and through these many are trapped by debt or labour bondage. Literacy rates amongst Baka around Bengbis are negligible, and communities face strong social and political marginalisation. The cost of education, combined with their social marginalisation and poverty prevents most from attaining even basic qualifications. Most Baka households continue to rely on traditional medicines from the forest, as access to formal health services is beyond their reach. They are a vulnerable population.

Using GPS technology, and training by CED, Baka from Bengbis are documenting the locations they use for agriculture, and the areas they use for fishing, hunting and gathering. Many of these overlap extensive areas within the Dja Reserve.⁶ Community land use maps reveal a familiar land use pattern comprising a matrix of overlapping uses by all the different groups, including agriculture, hunting and gathering. Individual community maps⁷ demonstrate clearly that most households in all communities cultivate to some extent, but Baka production, and their culture, are particularly tied to hunting and gathering in forests, including those deep inside the Reserve (see map).



Community Land Use around the Dja Wildlife Reserve

Maka, Kaka and Badjoué communities' production is mostly dominated by cultivation, including of cacao in shaded groves, many of which extend into, and apparently pre-date, the Reserve boundaries.⁸ Community crops are regularly damaged by animals roving outside the reserve, and the impact of elephants in particular are a consistent source of complaints by farmers. Under current rules they are not entitled to compensation, and also forbidden from hunting the protected species for which the Dja Reserve was created.

Documentation by FPP and partners with other Central African communities over the past four years reveals that indigenous and local communities are often marginalised from planning for forests they use.⁹ Between 1992 and 2004 the Dja Reserve was managed by ECOFAC (Ecosystèmes Forestier d'Afrique Centrale). Work in 2002 by FPP and CED¹⁰ showed that after 10 years local communities were still not involved in planning for the Dja Reserve, and had almost no role in the management of the park. The effects on local and indigenous communities of this management approach were often very severe,¹¹ and included aggressive persecution of communities by ecoguards for their subsistence hunting activities, even of non-protected species collected far outside the Reserve. In Bengbis communities also suffered at the hands of government-authorized ecoguards. Baka in particular recount a number of incidents where they have been threatened, or had game and hunting equipment confiscated by ecoguards, without any compensation, or charge. Their testimony mirrors the experience of many other forest communities elsewhere in Cameroon

The Cameroon government and ECOFAC promise to initiate a new management phase soon, using new funding to be secured from the European Union. To comply with Cameroon law and the CBD the new management plan will have to consider all relevant aspects, including new information concerning the use by local communities of forest resources. Bengbis community maps will be used to promote meaningful participation by local and indigenous communities in proposed planning discussions through their direct input to park management discussions, and the government-approved management plan.

Approval by the Government of Cameroon for forest plans that recognise community forest rights will contribute towards Cameroon's implementation of Article 10(c) of the CBD and the programme of work on protected areas by ensuring that communities' 'traditional, sustainable use' is protected in the new management plan for the Dja Reserve, and in the forest zonation to be developed through the GEF-funded Tri-National Dja-Odzala-Minkébé (TRIDOM) project.

Cameroon Legal Framework and CBD Implementation

In Cameroon all untitled and unused land belongs to the State. Under national law communities have always retained usufructory rights to put land 'into value'¹². This usually applies to lands for agricultural production. Cameroon's ratification of the CBD in 1992 helped establish a legal framework further protecting communities' customary use of forests that was subsequently integrated into the 1994 Cameroon Forestry Law protecting community usufruct rights, for 'personal' use only, over all lands except those inside protected areas. Article 26 in particular echoes Article 10c of the convention by stating:

'Classification of state forests must take into account the social environment of indigenous populations in order to protect their normal usage rights. These rights can be restricted if they contradict the objectives for the forests. If their rights are restricted, they should be compensated...'

Such provisions for participation also exist in the Environment, Wildlife and Fisheries laws. Despite this strong emphasis in principle and law, in practice in Cameroon there is a continuing lack of participation by local and indigenous communities in the development and implementation of forest management plans. This remains one of the barriers to the implementation of the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas.

This case study reveals that Baka from Nkolabembe, Mimbil, Mekas and Nkougolo near Mengbis, Cameroon continue to rely on traditional and extensive hunting and gathering in Dja forests to secure their livelihoods. Their rights to continue to access and use forest resources are under continuing pressure due to the biodiversity conservation priorities of Dja, which are linked by legislation to Cameroon's ratification of the CBD. Communities have not been consulted about any of these forest plans. The persistent marginalisation and negative experience of indigenous and local communities over protected area plans for their traditional areas, the continuing violations of their rights by ecoguards, and with mounting evidence that the situation is similar elsewhere in Cameroon,¹³ underlines serious gaps in the implementation of the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas in Cameroon, especially its Programme Element 2 on Governance, Participation, Equity and Benefit Sharing.

Preparation for the 8th Conference of Parties in 2006 could become productive ground for improvements to protection for community forest rights in Cameroon in line with the CBD. Concrete actions be required if these steps towards implementation can be made.

Improving Implementation of the Programme of Work on Protected Areas by Recognising Rights and Ensuring Full and Effective Participation

Cameroon's 1999 National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan (NBSAP) underscores an emphasis on public participation, and the role of communities and indigenous knowledge in the management and conservation of biodiversity. Around the Dja Wildlife Reserve in 2005 public participation in the management of the forests is extremely limited, and indigenous communities are particularly marginalised. Around Bengbis indigenous and local communities' land use maps clearly show their critical role in the use and management of forests inside the Reserve. Their rights to continue to sustainably use these forests are protected by the CBD, yet around Bengbis their rights are under constant pressure by restrictions imposed by forest authorities against their forest use. These restrictions have been imposed without communities' consent.

The Cameroon NBSAP Objectives make clear the need to promote the recognition, documentation, and protection of traditional knowledge in the management of biodiversity, and that communities' traditional sustainable use of forest resources should be protected. Around Dja little progress has been made against the relevant Criteria and Indicators since 1999, and there is ample evidence to suggest that this situation is not unique. The social costs of this failure in Cameroon are high.

In order to promote implementation in Cameroon of the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas there needs to be greater emphasis by PA policy-makers and managers on the revision of protected area policy-making and management plans in order to take into account indigenous and local communities' use of forests in line with Activity 1.1.4 and various activities under Element 2 of the Programme of Work. This should be achieved through the recognition of community rights in protected area plans and through the full and effective participation of

indigenous and local communities in protected area policy and practice. The final FPP-CED case study of Bengbis and other communities living around protected areas, due in early 2006, will seek to illustrate how this can be achieved in Cameroon.

Endnotes

¹ This is a summary of an interim report by the Centre for Environment and Development (CED), Yaounde, Cameroon, analysing land use by indigenous and local communities living in and around Mekas, western Dja Wildlife Reserve, Cameroon, to assess implementation of Article 10c of the CBD. Source: Nounah Stephen Mangkuo and Handja Georges Thierry (2004) Protéger et encourager l'usage coutumier des ressources biologique par les Baka à l'Ouest de la reserve du Dja. Compiled by John Nelson, Forest Peoples Programme.

² With funding from DGIS and HIVOS.

³ Target for Goal 2.2. 'Full and effective participation by 2008, of indigenous and local communities, in full respect of their rights and recognition of their responsibilities, consistent with national law and applicable international obligations, and the participation of relevant stakeholders, in the management of existing, and the establishment of new, protected areas.'

⁴ Otherwise known as the TRIDOM landscape, under new funding from the GEF to establish the landscape management plan.

⁵ There is a lack of census data on these communities.

⁶ Additional data has also being gathered with communities during socioeconomic surveys and interviews by CED staff, and during CED training for the community cartographers (Baka and Bantu) responsible for collecting data for their maps.

⁷ A comprehensive set of these maps will be published separately by CED and FPP in early 2006, after communities have presented their validated maps to forest management authorities.

⁸ Ref location of crop damage.

⁹ Nelson, J and L Hossack (2003) Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas in Africa: from principles to practice. Moreton-in-Marsh: Forest Peoples Programme.

¹⁰ Nguiffo, S (2003) IN: Nelson, J and L Hossack. , op. cit

¹¹ For direct evidence, see FPP (2003) Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas in Africa: from principles to practice. Community testimony from Cameroon. Videod interviews, French with English subtitles.

¹² *'mise en valeur'*.

¹³ For example, around Campo Ma'an National Park and Boumba Bek National Park that were established through GEF funding.