
Cameroon: Baka Livelihoods Damaged by EU-funded Protected Areas

The Dja Faunal Reserve in South Central Cameroon was created in 1950 by the French High Commission for Cameroon. In 1981 it was named a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and in 1987 it became a World Heritage Site. Since 1992 the reserve has been managed by the EU-funded ECOFAC programme, which has been supporting the establishment of a network of protected areas across Africa. In the middle of the 20th century the Baka now living in Miatta village, located many tens of kilometres from the Dja reserve, were forced to move from their ancestral village Mabé, located in the heart of the present reserve, to their present location along the Sangmélima-Djoum road. The period of their move coincided with the implementation of the National Sédenterisation Policy, when many Baka were encouraged to move their main camps nearer to the main transport axes.

After their move, neighbouring Bantu communities benefited from Baka's free labour, their supply of medicinal plants, and reduced prices for game, which the Baka were allowed to hunt. Over time the Baka community in Miatta has become split between those concentrating on cultivation and those relying mainly on hunting and gathering activities in the forest. A key constraint to Baka subsistence agriculture is the lack of customary rights over land near the Bantu communities where most Baka are located. Many Baka in Miatta simply cultivate for others in exchange for food or other material goods, usually on very unfavourable trading terms. Forest-based activities remain a central feature of life for most Baka living under these precarious circumstances, even for those Baka who now rely mainly on agriculture.

Many Baka continue to rely on forest products gathered from areas adjacent to Miatta, as well as further afield, near hunting camps distant from Miatta, even within the Dja Reserve itself. Baka from around the park still visit their ancestral territories in the reserve to harvest plants, fruits from old trees, or other essential forest products, although this must be done in secret, as it currently is against the law. Baka's continuing reliance on the forest is becoming more acute as the production of the forest near Miatta has declined, due mainly to population pressure and consequent over harvesting. Baka in the Djoum area have had to bear the brunt of pressure applied by ECOFAC forest guards who now control forest access, and who find it easy to confiscate game from fearful Baka, even when the game was hunted legally to serve subsistence needs.

"If they (the ecoguards) catch us with only one antelope which we caught in this forest, which is a long way from Dja, they take it and often our other food as well ...they have it for their supper," said Baka from Djoum region.

The FPP project entitled "Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas in Africa: From Principles to Practice" aims to promote dialogue between African indigenous peoples and conservation bodies, to break down barriers of ignorance and understanding and to seek viable ways of working together to implement more sustainable and just conservation policies. This initiative enabled the first ever meeting between Baka community representatives and senior managers of the Dja Reserve working for ECOFAC. For the first time since the park was established there was a formal forum where Baka's views about the Reserve's management could be discussed with park staff. During this meeting Baka

expressed their unhappiness with the reserve and forest protection regimes that they believe are overriding their rights to secure their subsistence needs. This makes them very unhappy with the work of ECOFAC forest guards, especially when they see outsiders coming in to hunt or log with impunity. In the meeting Baka representatives were surprised:

"That meeting was the first time that ECOFAC ever talked to us about the Dja Reserve ... we learned that ECOFAC's employees were not doing what their boss said they should be doing," said a Baka from Dja.

ECOFAC has now launched a wider programme of community consultations all around the Dja Reserve, which will hopefully allow for meaningful participation of the Baka communities who have so far been persecuted by the project. But Baka participation is by no means guaranteed - they have good reasons to be cynical about ECOFAC's motives.

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