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How Indigenous Beliefs About Sacred Animals Help Protect Wildlife in the Niger Delta and Cross River

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Habitat selection by Calabar ground pythons, by sex, in the Niger Delta of southern Nigeria. Data come from L. Luiselli et al.'s unpublished researches (1994-2014).

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article



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In many parts of Africa, people believe that some animals are sacred. These beliefs come from traditions, religion, and respect for nature. In the Niger Delta and Cross River areas of Nigeria, these traditional beliefs have helped protect wildlife for many years. People in these regions see some animals as special because they are linked to their ancestors, gods, or cultural stories. Because of this, they do not hunt or harm these animals.

This article explains how these indigenous beliefs help wildlife conservation and how modern challenges affect these traditions.

01

Sacred Animals and Traditional Beliefs

Many local communities in the Niger Delta and Cross River areas believe that certain animals have spiritual importance. These animals are often linked to gods, spirits, or ancestors. Because of this, people protect them.

For example, in some parts of the Niger Delta, the Ogoni people believe in sacred forests. These forests are special places where hunting and cutting down trees are not allowed. The people believe



that spirits live in these forests, and harming the animals there would bring bad luck.

In Cross River, some groups believe that killing certain animals, such as monkeys or leopards, brings misfortune. Because of these beliefs, animals in these areas have been safe for many years. These traditions act as natural wildlife conservation methods.

02

Taboos and Totems That Protect Wildlife

Many African communities use taboos and totems to protect animals. A taboo is a rule that says something is forbidden, and a totem is an animal or object that represents a family or group.

In some communities, killing an animal that is a totem is seen as a serious crime. For example, some families in the Niger Delta believe that the python is their ancestral animal. Because of this, they do not harm pythons. This has helped pythons survive in the region.

In Cross River, there are also laws made by traditional rulers to stop people from hunting sacred animals. Some forests are protected because people believe spirits live there. These cultural laws have been effective in keeping some animal populations safe.

03

How Local Communities Help in Wildlife Conservation

Local communities play an important role in protecting wildlife. In



places like the Oban Hills in Cross River, community members follow traditional rules that limit hunting and tree-cutting. These rules are enforced by village elders, chiefs, and community groups.

People also pass down these beliefs to younger generations through stories and ceremonies. This helps keep the traditions alive and continues to protect wildlife.

04

Challenges Facing Traditional Conservation Practices

Even though traditional beliefs have helped wildlife conservation for many years, they face several challenges today:

- **Modern Religion and Western Influence** – Many people are now following modern religions like Christianity and Islam, which do not support traditional beliefs. This has made some people abandon their cultural practices.
- **Poverty and Economic Pressures** – Some people are forced to hunt wildlife because they need food or money. Sacred animals that were once protected are now being hunted for meat or sold in markets.
- **Modern Hunting Equipment** – In the past, hunters used simple tools like traps and spears, making it harder to catch animals. Today, guns and advanced traps make it easier to kill more animals quickly, reducing their population.
- **Deforestation and Land Use Changes** – Many sacred forests are being cut down to make space for farms, roads, and buildings. As a result, animals lose their homes and are at greater risk.

Because of these challenges, there is a need to combine traditional conservation methods with modern wildlife protection efforts.



How to Strengthen Indigenous Wildlife Protection

To continue protecting wildlife, traditional beliefs should be combined with modern conservation efforts. Some ways to do this include:

- Education and Awareness – Teaching younger generations about the importance of traditional conservation beliefs and why they should protect wildlife.
- Government Support – Governments should work with local communities to create laws that support traditional conservation practices.
- Eco-Tourism – Turning sacred forests into eco-tourism sites where visitors pay to see protected animals. This can bring money to communities and encourage them to protect wildlife.
- Scientific Research – Researchers can study how traditional conservation practices have helped wildlife and use the findings to create better wildlife protection strategies.

Traditional beliefs about sacred animals have helped protect wildlife in the Niger Delta and Cross River areas for many years. These beliefs prevent people from hunting certain animals and destroying their habitats. However, modern challenges like deforestation, poverty, and changing religious beliefs are putting these conservation methods at risk.

To ensure that wildlife is protected in the future, it is important to combine traditional beliefs with modern conservation strategies. By working together, local communities, governments, and conservationists can help preserve these important cultural and environmental traditions.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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