

Exploitation or healthy coexistence: Are sacred forests in Nigeria mutually beneficial to the ecosystem and indigenous people?

Prof. Dr. Jonathan C. Onyekwelu

Federal University of Technology Akure, Nigeria

Sacred forests (SF) are an indigenous community-based conservation method. They link people, the environment, religious beliefs, cultural heritage and ecosystem services. The question is whether this synergy between SFs and indigenous people is exploitative or mutually beneficial? Data were collected from three prominent SFs in Nigeria to examine the extent to which socio-economic and cultural benefits derived from SFs contribute to biodiversity conservation. Mixed-methods approach (semi-structured questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussions) assessed ecosystems services and livelihood support. The SFs are relatively intact with minimal disturbances. High biodiversity indices indicate their effectiveness in biodiversity conservation. Tourism, NTFPs collection, income generation were some socio-economic gains by indigenous people that drove biodiversity conservation. The cultural benefits from SFs include festivals, worship and kingmaking. Institutional involvements hold promising positive effects on SFs, i.e. the designation of Osun-Osogbo SF as a national monument and UNESCO World Heritage site enhanced its conservation, increased tourism and socio-economic gains, and preserved cultural values. Thus, there are synergies between SFs and indigenous people; the long-term preservation of SFs and their biodiversity depends on protection by the people while the livelihood of indigenous people is enhanced by the socio-economic and cultural benefits derived from SFs. Thus, co-existence of SFs and indigenous people is healthy and mutually beneficial.

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