

The Efficacy Of traditional Conservation Practices In Protecting Biodiversity In Erei, Biase Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT:

In recent times, our forests and aquatic Ecosystems that have been maintained and handed to us after many generations are fast disappearing due to illegal activities in spite of government regulatory policies to conserve biodiversity. This has prompted the researchers to conduct a study on what methods and instruments that our forefathers used to protect our forest and waters (biosphere) so that it yielded the greatest sustainable benefit to their generations while maintaining its potentials to meet the need and aspirations of our generations. The study sought to find out as customs, totemism, rituals, cultural and religious practices.

The study adopted survey inferential methods of research design, force group discussion interviews and participant observation.

It was discovered that people fear traditional beliefs system more than conventional laws and policies in guiding against wanton destruction of the ecosystem.

KEYWORDS: Traditional, Conservation practices, efficacy, Erei-Biase, biodiversity, sustainability.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

It is becoming almost impossible to control the extent of the disappearance of the forest with formal laws, environmental laws of ordinances. While we ponder on the rate of the disappearance of both the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystem, it important we ask ourselves these questions:

1. Did we come to meet the forest and marine ecosystem? The answer is in the affirmative
2. Is there any relationship between the environment and culture? The answer is also yes
3. Why our forefathers (forebears) were able to preserve or conserve these ecosystems and handed them over to us? This is exactly the essence of this study. The research intends to find answers to this question in order to establish the ability of the traditional practices to protect the ecosystem while the common law cannot.

It is not a new knowledge to state that we inherited these ecosystems (Terrestrial/Aquatic) from our forebears (forefathers/mothers) going by our traditional method of land ownership. Land in Erei is not really a source wealth but also a symbol of power (Politics); religion, prestige and social standing, therefore it is owned by the living, the death and the unborn children.

This is our African traditional belief

A simple observation shows that most communities in Erei have a very strong relationship between the environment and culture in whatever way one looks at it. The implication of this is that the diversity of life on earth is formed, not only of the variety of plants and animals species and ecosystem found in nature (Biodiversity) but also by the variety of culture, Languages, Religions and philosophies in human societies (cultural diversity) (Ukam, 2018). Suffice this to mean that there exist strong relationships between biological and cultural diversities and as such they face a common threat. It is on the basis of this that in 1992, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) the earth summit in Rio de Janeiro, Agenda 21, stated that the relationship between human and environment is highly complex and diverse and as such

biodiversity crisis should be understood on the basis of a more detailed evaluation of the interactions among a wide range of social, cultural, economic, political and ecological variables.

Bioley (2000) in his study on anthropology and global Environmental change, said that anthropology are always concerned with the relationship between the people they studied and the natural environment and that since the late nineteenth century, the first professional anthropology focused their research on tribal people who were directly dependent on a natural resources for their survival.

It is the dependents on the environment for survival that the people of Erei and particularly Ibini Village where the researcher comes from that has made them to have stringent traditional laws and practices, including superstition that enables them to conserve the natural resources.

The Aim/objectives of the study; the very essence of this study is to evaluate the efficacy of traditional practices that has hither to protected our forest, water and other land resources for generations.

To achieve this aim, the researchers have the objectives of identifying the various traditional methods of conservation as it applies to the study area.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY: The significance of the study to all stake holders of our environment is that it will enable them to appreciate the effectiveness of the traditional conservation practices that has kept our forest and aquatic for gene rations, when the conventional and environmental laws cannot protect the environment (forest/water).

The study will also create awareness to communities who traditionally own these forests and aquatic ecosystems that they should use the traditional methods to protect their forests rather than allowing the forests to undergo systematic dissipation thereby losing their only means of livelihood and in heritage. With the loss of forest cover, the impacts of climate change are becoming more threatening and dire.

It will also give direction to policy makers to explore other options for addressing deforestation. The awareness of community members and other civil society actors on deforestation will also increase in this regards.

The traditional society will therefore come to the realization that, if only they will not bring in foreigners to exploit their resources uncontrollably, they have better and more effective method of protecting the terrestrial (forest) and Aquatic (Water) environment compared to the modern days conventional laws, environmental laws and forest commission policies.

STUDY AREA: The study was conducted in Erei villages in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Erei comprise of sixteen (16) villages.

The villages are Abanwan; Afono, Eud, Egbor, Etana, Ibini, Ipere, Obum, Unuolo; Urugbam on the flank of the Cross River and Abamba, Abapia, Abaribara; Abredang; Ijom and Inuk on the eastern flank of the Cross River, all in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. The ten villages on the western flank form Erei clan while the six villages on the eastern side from Abayong clan. The two clans together are commonly referred to as Erei Ise-mise (Meaning Erei on both sides of Cross River).

The people of Erei belief in the existence of the supreme God (the Almighty God), However, they more confidence and trust in the power of their duties, gods and goddess whom priest they know.

The people also practice tokenism and are equally very superstitions. There are also title societies such as Ekpe, Abu, Ebiabu; (to mention this few) that help in the day-to-day administration of the people.

The Natural groups, (Men, Women and Youths) are very powerful organization, culturally recognized and used for the enforcement of traditional laws or rules and regulations of the Communities. The paramount ruler, Chief and Elders Council constitutes the highest authority in the administration of Justice amongst the people. These groups and organizations amongst other things helps to enforce traditional laws that are made to protect the forest and aquatic ecosystems in order to forestall the dissipation and depletion of the natural environment.

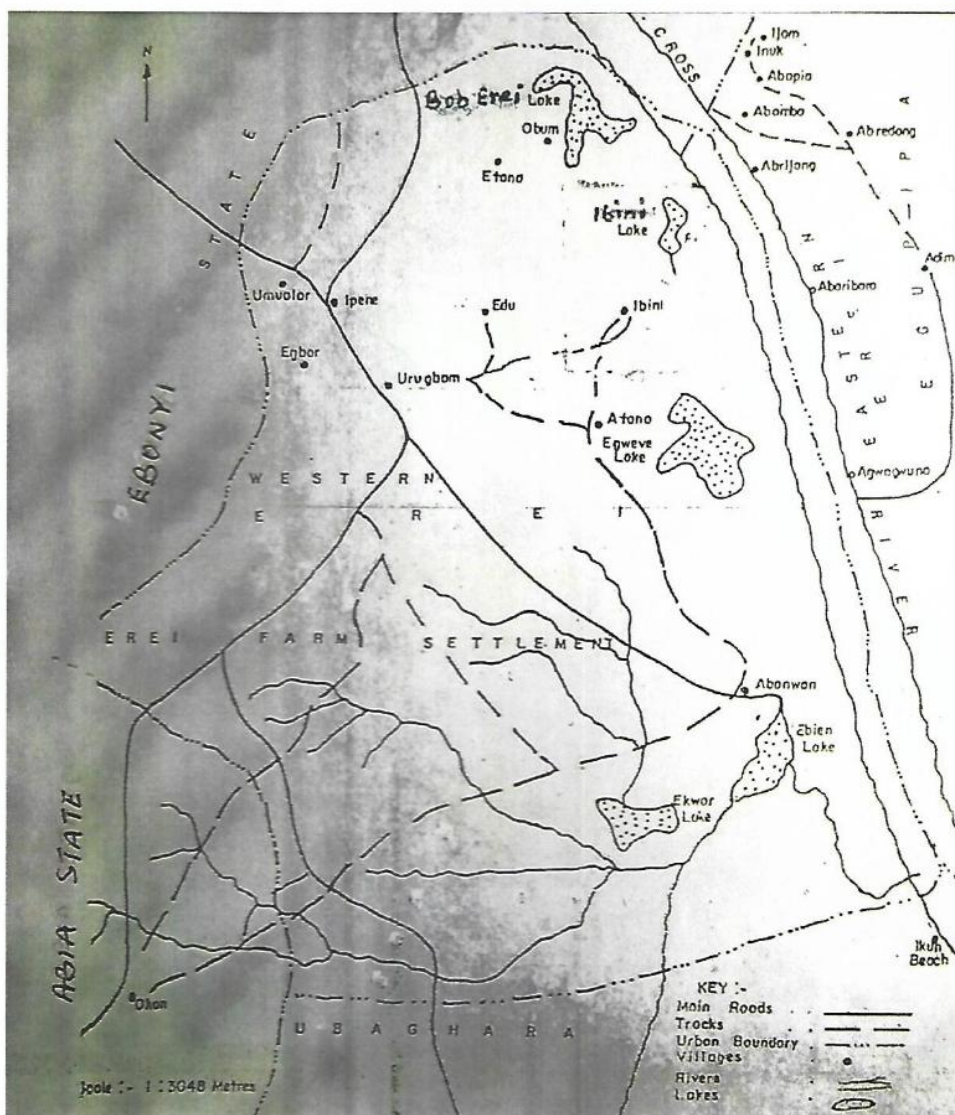


Fig. 1 Map of Erei

Materials/Methods/Discussion of Findings

The research method adopted for this study was survey inferential. The study also used focus group discussion, interviews and participant observation. A total of four hundred respondents were used for the study. When the respondents were asked which of these factors makes them to treat the ecosystem with fears or respects for forestall gradual dissipation of the forest and water. The following were their responses.

Table 1: Factors that prohibits respondents from using the environment carelessly

S/N	FACTORS THAT CONTROLS THE USE OF THE ENVIRONMENT CARELESSLY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1.	Custom	80	20
2.	Religious Practices	60	15
3.	Superstition	75	18.75
4.	Totemic Practices	60	15
5.	Environmental Laws	20	5
6.	Forestry Commission Policies	20	5
7.	All of the above	80	20
8.	None of the above	5	1.25
	Source: Researchers field survey	400	100%

From Table 1: a total of Four Hundred respondents were drawn from all the villages in Erei-Ise-Mise each village. These numbers is made up of prominent men and women who are either Community leaders or chiefs who are custodians of the land.

The analysis shows that if one sums up factors like custom + religious practices + Superstition + Totemic practices (taboos) ($80 + 60 + 75 + 60 = 275$). This means that 275 (68.75%) are controlled by traditional conservation from using the forest or water carelessly, compared to conventional laws represented by Environmental Laws + Forestry policies which represents $20 + 20 = 40$ respondents (10%). Suffice this to mean that the inhabitants of every village respect the customary laws and tradition in dealing carefully with the environment than what the conventional laws and policies can do. This is why “WE THE PEOPLE” – Centre for Social Studies and Development in collaboration with the Rainforest Resource and Development Centre organized a multi-stakeholders meeting to brainstorm on strategies for salvaging what is left of the state’s forest. The essence was to find a solution to the fact that the centre noted with dismay that despite the moratorium of forest activities placed by the Cross River State Government in 2008, the spate of deforestation in the State has rather intensified.

The Observed as follows:

- That at the moment, logging activities has taken more alarming and sinister dimensions in the State.
- In several communities, loggers and timber dealers establish their trading ports close to the forest and form trade unions to regulate the business.
- Logs are openly processed into various sizes, loaded onto trucks and transported to destination within and outside the State, fairly easily.
- To facilitate the theft of forest resources, armed gangs intimidate, terrorize and main forest protection agents and community vigilante groups whom they perceive as threats to their operation.
- On several occasions, community members, volunteer groups and task force members have been attacked and seriously harmed.
- And that the illicit trade in timber has expanded to include foreign interest as well as international dimension.
- Exotic species of wood are illegally extracted from the forests and exported overseas.
- While the forests undergo systematic dissipation, communities who traditionally own those forests and have protected it for generations are not only losing their livelihoods, but also their heritage.
- With the loss of forest cover, the impacts of climate change are becoming more threatening and dire. We the people/Rainforest Resources and Development Centre (2022) .

In view of the realities above, the conference aimed at lightening the escalating threat of deforestation, as well as the gaps and challenges associated with existing government responses. Furthermore, the conference intended to explore frameworks and policy options for addressing deforestation and produce a draft policy alternative. This policy alternative has engineered the authors to explore the options that the traditional people were using to protect their forests and aquatic ecosystems as enshrined in their culture and customs.

These traditional practices which are usually based on cultural norms and religious beliefs are the basis for sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity. This was the views of Tuli S. Msuya and Jafari Kideghyeso (2009) while studying the role of traditional management practices in enhancing sustainable use of conservation of medicinal plants in West Usanbara Mountains, Tanzania. According to Asombang (2017) the preservation of cultural heritage is a thorny problem that has pre-occupied governments and world bodies at the highest level conservation practices in the opinion of Ogwu and Osawara (2022), cultural or indigenous practices refer to long-standing traditions and ways of life of specific communities or locales. These practices are place-based and after location and culture specific suffice this to mean that traditional conservation ethics protect plant diversity and natural resources because local communities consider themselves as the major stakeholders.

The people of Erei have so much attachment to nature to the extent that they give names of bushes or sections of the forest according to the common flora or fauna that subsist in them.

NAMING OF BUSHES ACCORDING TO SPECIES OF BIODIVERSITY

A survey conducted by Ukam (2018) at Ibini, one of the villages in Erei (the study area) shows that names are given to bushes or some sections of forest areas.

1. Eghort – Uvon or Elei Uvon (Raffia Palm Bush)
2. Eghort – Omet (Native Mango Bush)
3. Eghort – Inak (Thorns/Thistle Bush)
4. Eghort-Igbai (Kerosene Wood Bush)
5. Eghort –Opase (Blackberry Bush)
6. Eghort –Edumgba (Buffalo Bush)

7. Eghort –Abu (Abu cult/Sacred Forest)

Source: Ukam, L. E. (2018)

TRADITIONAL CONSERVATION PRACTICES IN THE STUDY AREA

Cultural or indigenous practices use long standing traditions or ways of life of specific communities or locales. There are equally place-based and often location and culture specific (Ogwu and Osawaru, 2022). It is in view of this that the authors decided to identify some of the traditional conservation practices that have sustained the biodiversity in Erei for generations until now, when the rate of depletion of the forest and aquatic ecosystem has become more rampant because of the new knowledge of the economic benefits of biodiversity, unemployment amongst school leavers and fresh graduates from the University, expansion of settlement because of population increase (Ukam, 2021) and to some extent disregard for the traditions and customs of the people because of adherents of Christian religion believers who think that the tradition of the people is restrictive, barbaric, primitive, totemic and superstitions and as such are not in line with the tenets of the holy bible.

Amongst such traditional conservation practices are:-

1. **Custom:** the custom of the people demands that all agricultural activities in any farming season must be done in a designated zone (farm sector). Also nobody was expected to plant before priest of the goddess of yam and fertility had chance to plant. It was also an abomination to harvest and eat new yam until the necessary rituals had been performed. A defaulter will make very costly sacrifice to appease the goddess of yam and fertility. Failure to perform the ritual attracts mysterious death or sudden mental illness.

2. **Bush Fallowing:** this land restoration method was adopted in the study area to ensure that agricultural lands were not used up too soon and also to enable the land to recuperate. Fallow years are as long as seven (7) years. Average farm size is as low as 81.72 by 9.21 metres giving an area of 752.6412 meters; this is an equivalent of 0.07 hectares (Ukam, 2021). The benefit of this is to have control over the wanton exploitation of land.

Some lands are also avoided. No farming means conservation of biodiversity such lands are:

1. Those set aside for religious worship “Abu Forest” and some others for the burial of the wicked people or those who have offended the good. This is called evil forest.

2. To also reduce the pressure on land, access to land was based on maturity, the attainment of 24 years and above. Nevertheless, there is still a pressure on land because since people will be attaining this age every year, the will be yearly increase because of new entrants.

3. Religious practices/ superstition: culturally to ensure that fishes are in constant supply, certain areas are not meant for fishing. In affirmation of this, the father of the lead author, (Late Chief Ukam, Umor Iyam) once told him that those places are meant to be breeding grounds for fishes to other areas.

They were said to be the abode of the goddess of water. To enforce this, customary laws were made to prohibit people from fishing there. Another method used to enforce this practice, was superstitious belief that if a particular person or group persons carried out fishing activities in such prohibited places, they could be affected directly or indirectly (their children or relatives) or they would come in contact with the goddess of water “Amoo-Ogbak” who could only be appeased through certain rituals by the priest. These rituals certainly cost a lot of money, so that if the victim could not afford to pay, they or their children or relatives would die or have mental problems.

Another superstitious way of conservation was to make people believe that fishes caught from these prohibited areas could never get done no matter how long they were cooked.

Furthermore, it is also assumed that fishes brought from such “no go” areas possess certain features that made them look quite different from other fishes caught from the free fishing zones, and as such, those fishes are completely owned by the water spirits (God of water monster-mermaid) the fore defaulters would die.

Another aspect had it that a fisherman or woman caught so many of a particular species of fish in his or her net the fishes should be left to go back to the water because it was a bad omen or sign of evil things to come.

When this unusual happens, the service of a native doctor or soothsayer would be employed to inquire from the water goddess, what that affected person had done to offend the gods.

Other superstitious belief which strengthens conservation of biodiversity includes:

- i. When a fisherman’s net is filled with fishes, if he took home some, he must let others go to avoid annoying the goddess of water. This is in line with selective harvesting of forest and aquatic products as stated in modern environmental laws.
- ii. Certain fishing practices like the use of some poisonous leaves or Gamaline 20 were prohibited.
- iii. The use of explosives for fishing was regarded as an abomination as well and the use of hooks.
- iv. Some sections of the streams and lakes were regarded as sacred (Scenic areas) and such were never tempered with or cleared. It is as a result of this that the researcher’s father once told him that the essence of this

section is to act as breeding grounds for fishes, that why fishing in such area must be avoided is not because fishes caught and eaten from such areas will cause death as the tradition of the ancient people's beliefs speculates.

- v. It was also an abomination to allow feaces or cassava into certain lake and streams. A defaulter was expected to report to the priest of the goddess of water and he is required to perform certain scarifies to the goddess of water, otherwise the water goddess would in annoyance, the water goddess would in annoyance lock up fishes inside some natural tunnels (caves) thereby reducing supply.

Totemic Practices: Crocodiles in some sections of the streams and land were regarded as sacred and so should not be killed. So also were pythons and some other spices of reptiles. Totemic practices as a traditional method of conservation was observed in places like Emeabian Community in Owerri, Imo State, Obodoukwu in Ideato Imerienive Community in Ngor Okpalla, Imo State to mention but a few (Agabi, 1995) and Idemilli in Imo State.

In Ibini Erei, Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, avoidance of the killing of these reptiles is to forestall attracting a curse from the water goddess on the defaulter(s) and his family. Though this tradition and customs of the people may look primitive and unchristian, yet this was relevant and important in management of rural resources. However, with increase in population, most of these customs and traditions are no longer rigidly followed (Ukam, 2021).

II. CONCLUSION

The implication of the above customs, traditions, superstition to biodiversity is that people respect and fear traditional laws when it comes to biodiversity conservation, than the conventional laws. Therefore there is need to strengthen the traditional instruments to protect our forest and aquatic ecosystems. This will help to bring back the forest that was premedical and prestine. The problem of theft of forest woods and aquatic resources will be minimized. This author, though supporting this fetish practices is not in any way an unbeliever. What this means is that since this is what our forefathers have used to protect the forest for generations and handed them over to us, and this is also what illegal loggers are afraid of mysterious death.

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