

## HUNTERS' AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN IJEBU-EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The decline in wildlife has been a great concern in Nigeria and even globally. One of the factors responsible for wildlife loss is the indiscriminate hunting operations of animals in the forest. One may attribute this indiscriminate act to unawareness and negative attitude of hunters towards wildlife conservation and its benefits. This study investigated the awareness and attitudes of hunters from Ijebu-East Local Government Area to wildlife conservation. Survey research design was employed in carrying out this study. Twenty hunters with 20 -40 years of hunting experience were interviewed once at their monthly meeting. Qualitative approach (Narrative Analysis) was used to analyse the information obtained from the respondents. The interview showed that 90% of the hunters had average level of awareness and 75% had favourable disposition towards wildlife conservation. It is, therefore, recommended that more enlightenment programmes on current wildlife conservation management information should be made available to the hunters periodically, by both the federal and state government.*

**Keywords:** Attitude, awareness, conservation, hunters, and wildlife

### INTRODUCTION

The early humans hunted primarily for the purpose of feeding, clothing and obtaining materials from bones and horns for tools. Thus, hunting was a necessity. Various tools such as sticks, spears, stones, blades (made from stones), bows and arrows were used in hunting. Hunting tools also evolved into the use of guns and sophisticated bows and arrows as well as the use of domesticated dogs. Hunting then evolved from a necessity to a social activity as men began hunting as a means of gaining reputation in the local community as specialist hunters (*olode*) as well as for sporting activities.

Hunting by early European explorers and settlers in Africa was uncontrolled and had devastating impacts on some wildlife species (Lindsey, 2008). Increased and unsustainable levels of hunting have been a major cause of biodiversity loss and decline in wildlife populations throughout Africa thereby impacting the effective

size of protected areas (Bitanyi, Nesje, Kusiluka, Chenyambuga and Kaltenborn, 2012). The blue buck (*Hippotragus leucophaeus*) and (*Equus quagga*) for example, went extinct, and other species such as elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) were greatly reduced in number and distribution (Lindsey, 2008). According to Legas and Taye (2019), the human activities with the highest impact on wildlife are namely agricultural expansion and illegal hunting (or poaching), amongst others.

Wildlife conservation is an activity in which conscious efforts are made to protect and preserve the earth's biological diversity. It is very important because wildlife and wilderness play an important role in maintaining the ecological balance which also contributes to quality of human life (Tidball, 2014). It is also involved in balancing the ecosystem and provides sustainability to different natural processes such as rainfall, (transpiration from plant), changing of temperature (heat emission by animals) and fertility of soil (making of manure by earthworm). The goal of wildlife conservation is to ensure that nature will be around for future generations to enjoy and also to recognize the importance of wildlife and wilderness for humans and other species alike (Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement, CARE 2012).

Perceptions and social representations of the environment are reflected in attitudes and behaviours of individuals or groups of people, which will in turn reflect the allocation of certain meanings to things like wildlife conservation. Social changes necessary for the preservation of biodiversity and environment will have a greater chance of success if behaviours and attitude change positively over time (Amador, 2014). Assessment of perceptions and attitudes towards wildlife conservation has become an important aspect in many studies of wildlife conservation because its success depends on the attitude of people towards conservation (Allendorf, Aung and Songer, 2012). It is necessary to seek and obtain the active participation of stakeholders not only in the technical efficiency of a conservation process, but also to the extent of satisfying cultural, social and political consideration in the environment which can help change the attitudes of natives towards wildlife existence and conservation (Newmark, Manyanza and Gamanssa, 1994; Agwafo & Fonkwo, 2011).

There seems to be paucity of literature regarding hunters' awareness of and attitude to wildlife conservation in Nigeria. The available literature reviewed revealed only attitude study to wildlife and forest conservation amongst teachers and members of the local community, and not hunters.

Zaffar Athar, Bilal, and Gopi (2015) studied the attitudes of local people toward wildlife conservation in Kashmir valley, India. Semi structured interview was employed to investigate the attitude of 384 respondents toward wildlife conservation. Results analysed using a generalized linear model approach revealed that the majority of respondents expressed favourable attitudes toward wildlife conservation, with only about 16 per cent expressing a negative attitude towards wildlife conservation because of crop damage or livestock predation by wild animals. The study identified the need to use appropriate mitigation measures to minimize economic damage by wildlife in order to reduce negative local attitudes toward wildlife conservation.

Shivani and Vinod (2012) studied teachers' knowledge and attitude toward wildlife and conservation in Ladakh, India. A survey design was employed to explore Ladakh school teachers' knowledge and attitude toward wildlife and conservation. A questionnaire was used to gather data from the respondents. In all, 277 government school teachers took part in the study. The findings of this study showed that the teachers were aware of local biodiversity and had favourable attitudes toward conservation. However, responses to specific statements on snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*) were found to be unfavourable. Despite a high percentage of respondents agreeing that conservation of snow leopards was important, the animal was considered a threat to the local economy. The study recommended that there was the need for intensive pre-service and in-service environmental education programmes for the teachers to spread conservation awareness to the students.

Ukwetang, Otu and Neji (2014) assessed the influence of gender awareness and attitude to forest resource conservation in Cross River State. The sample for the study consisted (600) inhabitants randomly selected from ten communities in Akamkpa Local Government Area; of which 351 (58.8%) were males and 249 (46.5%) were females. Questionnaires were used to gather data. Findings showed that the indigenous communities' attitude to and awareness of forest conservation was very poor. The male gender's attitude and awareness to forest resource conservation was lower than that of the female gender. It was recommended that adequate measures must be put in place to ensure effective conservation of the forest ecosystem.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It has been observed that the majority of the populace in Nigeria and even in some parts of the world are apparently oblivious of the essence of wildlife

conservation as the primary purpose of hunting has been for consumption. The official scanty enlightenment programme has not been popularised within the local community where the hunters reside.

There is no disputing the seemingly negative attitude of the hunting community towards wildlife conservation; quite disturbing is the money-making competition of the hunters as they display their exploits to consumers on the highways. Apart from the animals kept in zoos/reservations owned by the government or private farmers, the laws to prevent indiscriminate hunting and wildlife loss are not popular and only the few elites understand them. The indiscriminate hunting operations of the animals can be attributed to inadequate awareness of wildlife conservation and its benefits as the hunters may not make efforts to conserve or preserve the animals. This may lead to a seemingly negative attitude to the few unpopular laws enacted thereby causing wildlife loss.

In this regard, it is therefore, important to study the awareness and attitude to wildlife conservation among stakeholders like the hunters.

### **Goal and Objectives of the Study**

The goal of the study was to investigate the awareness and attitude to wildlife conservation among hunters in Ijebu-East Local Government, Ogun state. The objectives were to investigate:

1. hunters' awareness about wildlife conservation
2. hunters' attitude towards wildlife conservation

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in Ijebu-East Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria. It is bordered to the south by Lagos Lagoon in Lagos State. Its headquarters is in the town of Ogbera on the A121 highway at 6°44'N 4°10'E. It has an area of 2,234 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 110,196 at the 2006 census. It is made up of three districts: Fetedo, Ogbera, and Ojowo.

### **Research Questions**

1. Are the hunters aware of wildlife conservation?
2. What is the attitude of hunters to wildlife conservation?

### **Data Collection**

This study employed a survey research design to investigate hunters' awareness and attitude to wildlife conservation in Ijebu-East local Government, Ogun state. The target population consisted of hunters that were members of the National Hunters Association of Nigeria, Ogun State Chapter. Interview was used for data collection from twenty (20) hunters that were available at the meeting. The Researchers employed the aid of an assistant who helped in interpreting the interview questions and responses from the interviewee from English to Ijebu dialect and vice versa. The data were analysed using qualitative approach (Narrative Analysis).

### **RESULTS**

The result of the interview is presented based on the question presented by the researcher:

#### **Years of hunting experience?**

16 (80%) interviewees had 40 years and above experience in hunting while 4 (20%) had between 20 to 35 years of hunting experience.

#### **Have you heard of wildlife conservation?**

100% of the interviewees responded "yes" to this question

#### **Can you tell me about it?**

90% of the respondent responded that wildlife conservation is the prevention of indiscriminate killing of rare animal species, most especially the female animals. While the remainder 10% said it is restriction from killing elephants.

#### **Are you aware of the Nigerian government effort to preserve wildlife?**

100% of the interviewees responded "yes" to this question. The Olori-ode of the National Hunters Association in person of Chief M.O. Ogunkoya in Ijebu dialect had this to say:

He is aware of the efforts and laws by the government to preserve wildlife. Under the law, only elephants must not be killed, unless the person has been permitted by the government. Female elephants are not hunted because they do not reproduce regularly.

100% of the respondents said that elephants are banned from being killed because they do not give birth to many offspring.

A respondent added that elephants could be killed if they stray away from their reservation area or habitats, to the villages because they could be destructive.

One of the respondents added that, he is aware of the governments' effort in conserving wildlife. He added that he represented the association on several occasions at Abuja, the country's capital at meetings on biodiversity conservation to give information and pictures about the animals available in the forest in that region, but was not compensated by the government.

In reaction to this, 60% of the respondents were of the view that those in the offices at the ministry should come to the forest themselves to take status record of Nigeria's available wildlife. However, this has not influenced their attitude towards the need for conservation.

#### **Why did the government restrict the killing of some animals?**

90% of the respondents said that they have received lectures on conservation and mentioned some animals that have been restricted from hunting because of their protective and curative benefits. Animals mentioned were pangolin, vulture, lion, and gorilla.

Animals hunted by the hunters were also mentioned which included antelope, deer, buffalo, boar, and small python depending on the individual hunters' strength and capability.

#### **Any known punishment for killing government banned animals?**

90% of the respondents also reported that their operations are guided by regulations from the Ministry of Forestry and are liable to 7 years imprisonment for killing any government banned animal.

The results show that the hunters have above average awareness about wildlife conservation, and are aware of the need or benefits of conserving wildlife. Their responses also revealed that they are abiding by governments' law on hunting banned animals. Overall, it can be deduced from their reactions that they are favourably disposed to wildlife conservation.

### **DISCUSSION**

The primary question that this study addressed was that of awareness and attitude of hunters towards wildlife conservation. Interestingly, the study has uncovered evidence that the respondents to an extent were considerably aware of wildlife

conservation. Through their responses to the questions on awareness of wildlife conservation, it is evident respondents have a positive attitude towards wildlife conservation.

The findings in the analysis of the respondents view have some degree of agreement with the view of *Zaffar, Athar, Bilal and Gopi* (2015) on the study of the attitudes of local people towards wildlife conservation in Kashmir valley. Their study revealed that the majority of respondents expressed favourable attitudes toward wildlife conservation, with only about 16 per cent expressing a negative attitude towards wildlife conservation because of crop damage or livestock predation by wild animals. Reasons for similarity in findings may be as a result of the nature of the sample and the tool employed in data collection. Both studies made use of interviews in soliciting information as regards the subject matter from members of the local community in which hunters were part of, and were key stakeholders in preserving wildlife. The outcome of this study also aligned with *Shivani and Vinod* (2012) who studied on teachers' knowledge and attitude toward wildlife and conservation in Ladakh, India. The findings of this study revealed that teachers in Ladakh were aware of local biodiversity and had favourable attitudes toward conservation. The reason for similarity in findings may be attributed to the fact that both studies employed a survey research design. On the other hand, the findings of this study were in contrast with the assessment by *Ukwetang et al.*, (2014) on the influence of gender awareness and attitude to forest resource conservation in Cross River State. Their study revealed that indigenous communities' attitude and awareness to forest conservation was very poor. Reasons for disparity in findings could be that their study had male and female genders of 351 (58.8%) and 249 (46.5%) respectively. In this study, all the respondents were males. In addition, the sample size of 600 their study as compared to 20 used in this study could be a possible reason for the disparity. Also, one may attribute the contrast in findings of the two studies to the method of data collection employed. They used questionnaires, while we used interviews.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

On the basis of the foregoing, the study concluded that hunters in Ijebu-east had an appreciable level of awareness and attitude towards wildlife conservation.

This study, therefore, recommended that more enlightenment programmes on current wildlife conservation management information should be made available to the hunters periodically by both the federal and state government. It is insufficient for them to know that sparing the female animals and hunting the

males alone is one way for wildlife conservation. Loss of male species of wildlife will make continuous reproduction difficult which will lead to gradual extinction of such animal species. On the spot enlightenment by the foresters and government officials within the forest would also be an added advantage. The government at the federal and state levels should from time to time offer monetary incentives to hunters to encourage them desist from indiscriminate hunting in order to preserve wildlife.

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