Violence, corruption, and false promises: Conservation and the Baka in Cameroon
In Cameroon, the hunter-gatherers and the Mbororo constitute the biggest groups of indigenous peoples. Cameroon adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007.

By Simon Hoyte and Catherine Clarke*

Iwgia, July 1, 2020.- Spending time with the Baka, as we have both done over several years, is a humbling experience. This group of over 40,000 spread between the forests of Cameroon, the Republic of Congo and Gabon, practice hunting and foraging as a traditional livelihood. Through their long history in the Congo Basin they have accumulated and passed on extensive ecological knowledge and sophisticated cultural mechanisms of egalitarianism, sharing and human-nature conviviality.

Despite (or because of) this rich cultural heritage, the Baka, and hunter-gatherers around the world, have consistently been forced into categories of ‘primitive’ and ‘uncultured’ by neighbouring agriculturalist communities, national governments and some international actors. In Africa, as a result of skills that enable them to thrive solely on wild foods, hunter-gatherers are often said “to live like wild animals and not human beings” (Woodburn 1997:353). For a myriad times we have witnessed first-hand the racism and physical abuse suffered by the Baka in Cameroon, oftentimes described as ‘weak’ and ‘like chimpanzees’ by government officials and neighbouring villagers.

Forests for wildlife, not people

Forced from their forests by the outgoing French colonial government in the 1960s, as well as the incoming independent government and later pressure from the World Bank to make way for logging concessions and national parks, the Baka have experienced ongoing violence including forced labour by new sedentary neighbours. In Cameroon, Indigenous Peoples’ land rights are not recognised under national law, despite the fact that the majority of the national territory has been occupied and managed by local and Indigenous communities for centuries. Access to justice and political
representation is effectively zero (Perram & Clarke 2018).

In this context, the influence of wildlife conservation has played a profound role. Driven by both neoliberal aspirations and a determination to rescue the characteristic megafauna of the forest through the use of ‘elite’ Western scientific knowledge, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) funded by animal-loving citizens, institutions and governments have claimed vast swathes of Cameroon’s rainforest as protected areas for wildlife, effectively “locking out the very people who have preserved these forests over thousands of years” (Clarke 2019). This style of fortress-conservation, which is deeply woven into neo-colonialism, has created ‘conservation refugees’ through forced eviction across the Congo Basin, in violation of international human rights law obligations.

The world’s last major stronghold of hunter-gatherers exist in the Central African forests (Hewlett 2014), and, because their identities, social structures and the majority of their subsistence needs rely on the forest, they have experienced the most severe ramifications from conservation restrictions. There is often no difference in outcome for them between those attempting to protect the forest and those cutting it down (Lewis 2003).

**Soft targets: eco-guards and the Baka**

To protect wildlife reserves from poachers and other threats, armed guards are employed. Concerns over such militarisation of conservation are neither fringe nor few; many academics have been documenting its detrimental effects for years, some describing the situation as nothing less than “war, by conservation” (Duffy 2016). Most disturbingly, these eco-guards, often ill-equipped and pressured to get results, target the Baka with extreme abuse in the name of conservation. As anthropologist Jerome Lewis puts it: “Unable to act against the powerful perpetrators of the illegal wildlife trade, eco-guards began to attack softer targets: the hunter-gatherers and villagers” (Lewis 2020). Wildlife conservation, carrying the air of a noble and apolitical practise, has clearly got some dark secrets.
In the forests of the Baka and their cousins the Mbendjele, this direct violence by eco-guards has been ongoing for at least 19 years (Nguiffo 2003), with some harrowing testimonies: “They have ruined our world”, said Asimba, a 35-year-old Mbendjele woman. “If we try to hunt in the forest they beat us so badly. They even kill us if they see us in the forest” (quoted in Lewis 2016).

The Baka have expressed similarly distressing accounts: “If the guards find you, even with just one antelope, they beat you and make you take your clothes off” (quoted in Warren & Baker 2019). As hunter-gatherers, Baka families do not hunt, fish and forage (just) for fun. It is their means of survival. The confiscation of meat hunted under droit d’usage (user rights) is nothing but criminal. Some eco-guards push this brutality further, confiscating the Baka’s most treasured gift of the forest – wild honey – for seemingly no reason other than to assert their power (Duda 2017).

This complex series of events is still unfolding today; yet increasing evidence shows that the creation of strict reserves in Central Africa is not only violating human rights, but also failing to protect threatened biodiversity (Pyhälä 2016).

The case of WWF

In 2016, these allegations of human rights abuses reached a global audience. Armed with dozens of first-hand testimonies and in-depth work by NGOs such as Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) and by anthropologists, the British Indigenous rights organisation Survival International lodged a formal complaint against the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation (OECD). The parks in Cameroon which are connected to violent abuse against the Baka are managed by WWF, who, through financial and technical support, fund and train the controversial eco-guards. Survival later withdrew from OECD mediation and abandoned [1] their complaint in 2017.

Since then, an onslaught of allegations against WWF have emerged in mainstream media, this time centring on the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo, with Rainforest Foundation UK and Survival International detailing forced eviction of the Baka and other hunter-gatherer groups, and terrorising by eco-guards. In apparent breach of its own policy, WWF continues to support the creation of conservation areas on Indigenous Peoples’ lands without their genuine free, prior and informed consent, such as the proposed Messok Dja area in the Republic of Congo recently assessed [2] by FPP.

The pressure on WWF is growing remarkably. Most recently, a UN Development Programme investigation gathered credible evidence of violence against Baka in the Congo (Vidal 2020), IWGIA, FPP and others have written directly to the Director General of WWF International, and the global activist group Extinction Rebellion have amplified the cause.

As for Cameroon, a scathing investigation by BuzzFeed News in 2019 confirmed that the situation has not changed (Warren & Baker 2019). Internationally there has been shock and anger. Celebrity ambassadors to the charity have stood down, important funders have withdrawn support and members of the public have expressed outrage, demanding answers. “Only if WWF recognises that if it doesn’t change its strategy on conservation it will lose a lot of financial support, will it eventually think about really doing something” threatens a German MP (McVeigh 2019).

At the international level, WWF is undeniably aware of the issues, and has, in principle, shown willingness to discuss them. However, concrete action is urgently needed.

At the national level in Cameroon, the government and WWF have celebrated [3] access agreements (MOUs) with Baka communities, enabling them to once again carry out traditional activities within the parks. However, research by FPP [4] has exposed several serious flaws, as well as documenting how eco-guard abuse has additionally left communities fearful of entering the forest outside of protected areas to carry out their traditional livelihoods and important cultural practices (Clarke 2019). Ironically, elitist conservation has also created perverse incentives for communities to use resources unsustainably.
Baka-led conservation

Until the ‘powerful perpetrators’ themselves are stopped, including corrupt officials, the scapegoating of the Baka will continue. This cannot realistically happen until the conservation paradigm itself has been radically transformed [5], enabling Indigenous and local communities to lead in a genuine way. Where this has been achieved around the world, Indigenous Peoples are demonstrating they are equally or more effective than conservationists, and at the same time have their rights protected (Fa 2020).

The concept of excluding local knowledge and ruthlessly protecting islands of ‘nature’ in a country ridden with corruption was doomed from the start. Baka conceptions of sharing must now take the lead: “When everyone benefits well from the forest, that will be good for us all.”

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[land rights](https://www.servindi.org/etiqueta/iwgia) [12]

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Links

[1] [https://theecologist.org/2017/sep/05/survival-international-abandons-complaint-against-wwf-violating-indigenous-rights](https://theecologist.org/2017/sep/05/survival-international-abandons-complaint-against-wwf-violating-indigenous-rights)
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