

BUSHMEAT BUSINESS IN NIGERIA AND THE DANGER OF WILD LIFE EXTINCTION IN ITS FORESTS

Obinta Remijius Friday

*Senior Lecturer, Department of History,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria*

Abstract

The paper argued that bushmeat, a Nigerian term for wild animals, had been a widely desired delicacy since way back in the colonial times. However, the current rate of its procurements and sales from the forests is unsustainable. The paper consulted the literature on the Nigerian wildlife management. It found that whereas wildlife hunting was strictly controlled and regulated under the colonial forest management; it is no longer so under the present dispensation. It also found that wildlife poaching is thriving and profitable business at the moment. It further found that while other nations are regulating access to the wildlife resources in their forests, Nigeria's forests, and the wildlife therein, are open to, and at the mercy of forest marauders and poachers who plunder them unsustainably. It equally uncovered that successive Nigerian governments had made pronouncements prohibiting animal poaching, in principle, from its forests. However, concrete steps were not taken to guarantee the enforcement of compliance with its non-poaching policies. The paper concluded that unless, and until the Nigerian government stands up to put and end to the unchecked access to the wildlife forests, the Country stands the risk of wildlife extinction in the near future.

Keywords: Bushmeat, poaching, unchecked success, wildlife extinction.

Introduction

Even though the cuisine of assorted wildlife delicacies were not new in Nigeria, it has recently taken on a new incremental dimension that is inimical to the safety of the wildlife species and sustainable environment. The social media platforms and news dailies, are regularly awash with an array of advertorials by many Nigerians in the bushmeat business. They often displayed their wares, consisting of different types of freshly-killed wild animals such as antelopes, gazelles, wild pigs, pangolins and others (Green Growth Africa). They often promised their potential customers constant availability of these bushmeats. They often went as far as promising home delivery of these bushmeat delicacies to interested customers anywhere in Nigeria.

While this might look like a harmless and

lucrative business for smart Nigerians, it is a cause of serious concern to the scholars and stakeholders interested in sustainable environment. It should even be of more concern to government and policy makers alike, who have primary duties of ensuring sustainability in the management of environmental resources. This was more so because the different wildlife species have their roles to play in their forest ecosystems. A number of these wild animals are already extinct while a larger number, still, are approaching extinction unless drastic measures are taken by government to put a stop to wildlife poaching across Nigerian forests.

Hunting wild Animals as an Old Practice

The practice of hunting wild animals as protein sources was as old as humans. Hunting of animals and gathering of wild fruits, it was agreed

in social studies and history, were the earliest economic activities of the early humans in the Early Stone Age civilization. It only got modified from the moment that arable farming and animal husbandry were discovered and humans stopped their nomadic lifestyles and started living together as social groups. The origin of human societies was traceable to this period. However, even this animal husbandry or domestication was still supplemented with wild animals hunted from their neighbouring forests. For this reason, different human settlements had clearly demarcated boundaries indicating the farms and hunting territories belonging specifically to each of them. Trespassing such boundaries was often the cause of wars and armed conflicts among these early human settlements.

In addition to killing animals for meat, they were also, in some societies, killed for social prestige and honour. Any average hunter could kill the lower categories of animals for meat such as squirrels, rabbits, antelopes, gazelles, and so on. On the other hand, it took a lot of courage and hunting skills to confront and kill the more dangerous and big wild animals like tiger, leopard, elephant, lions, buffalo, python, crocodiles and gorilla, among others. Because of this, in some Nigerian societies like the Igbo and Yoruba, honorific titles were conferred on any hunter that that successfully killed any of the above wild animals. A Yoruba hunter that successfully killed an elephant was conferred with the title: *Ode Aperin* (The Hunter that killed Elephant). An Igbo hunter that was able to kill a leopard got garlanded with the title of *Ogbuagu* (Killer of a Leopard). Elephant, in Yoruba is called *erin* while leopard, in Igbo, is called *agu*. The

conferment of these honours on these hunters were meant to emphasise the risks to their personal safeties which they overcame to be able to kill the animals and not getting killed themselves instead. The above descriptions did properly capture the wild animal hunting scenarios in the pre-colonial Nigeria.

Hunting Regulation in Nigeria for Sustainable Forest Management

Even though the different parts of the present-day Nigeria had come under colonial rule in the past, it was on January 1st 1900 that the Country was formally brought under colonial rule. This did not happen peacefully without series of resistance from the various Nigerian peoples. However, with superior military capabilities, the British colonial armies had demonstrated to the local peoples that they were here for business and not to be disobeyed without dire consequences (M. Siollun). With Nigeria subjected to colonial rule, a lot of drastic reforms were introduced that the colonial subjects had no options other than to comply. One of such was constituting large numbers of farmlands and forested areas into government forest reserves. Once a reserve was so constituted, it was out of bound to be entered without permits obtained from the forestry departments after the payment of prescribed fees.

The creation of forest reserves did not totally close the access that hunters had to the forests. However, it greatly curtailed or controlled the amount of access they could have (R.F Obinta). Very many categories of permits were created. There were two broad categories of forest permits

namely, the timber permits and the non-timber forest permits. The non-timber forest permit was based on the specific forest resources the applicant was intending to obtain. Hunters could obtain permit to kill animals but special permits were needed for hunting the bigger and more dangerous animals like the ones mentioned above. By introducing the forest harvesting permits, the colonial forestry departments were able to achieve two objectives simultaneously. In the first place, they were able to generate revenues from the citizens harvesting resources from the forest reserves. Additionally, they were able to check the rate of harvest of the respective forest resources to ensure sustainability.

More importantly, the colonial forest management also installed two layers of security cover and policing systems over the respective forest beats across Nigeria. The first were the forest guards charged with the duty of securing the resources in each reserve. The second were the boundary guards whose duty was to watch over the external boundary perimeters of the respective forest reserve to keep away trespassers of any kind from encroaching thereupon. With these two categories of security outfits watching over the colonial forest reserves, it was difficult for any poachers or hunters without permits to enter the reserves and tamper with the wildlife. However, the dual security maintained over the colonial forest reserves began to decline immediately safter Nigeria's political independence.

A number of factors collectively exposed the forest reserves, and their resources, to all kinds of marauders and poachers in the post-independence Nigeria. The first had to do with the gradual shift of

attention of the, by the successive Nigerian governments, away from agricultural and forest resources, to the petroleum industry. This trend became more apparent in the early 1970s when petroleum resources dominated Nigeria's foreign revenue. The direct impact of this other sectoral neglect was very far-reaching on the forest reserves and the environment generally. The forestry departments were the first to suffer this systematic abandonment by the government. The initial goal of the colonial forest managers was to bring, at least, twenty per cent of Nigeria' total land areas under reservation for environmental sustainability. However, at independence, only about ten per cent of Nigeria's landmass came under reservation. While it was easier for the forest guards and boundary guards to effectively police the colonial forest reserves, the post-independence forest guards could not deliver same services for a number of reasons.

A number of factors were collectively responsible for the poor forest policing in the post-independence Nigeria. The first was the gradual reduction in the number of forest guards employed to man the respective forest beats across Nigeria. Apart from the forest guards reducing in number, the boundary guards soon totally disappeared and made a way for forest encroachment by farmers and other illegal users of the forest estate. The dwindling numbers of forest guards were even severely beset with logistical obstacles that seriously constrained their capacity to perform their duties effectively. This had to do with their challenges of commuting from their forestry

departments in town to their respective forest beats in the often distant and isolated rural areas. They were mostly dependent on their meagre salaries to transport themselves to and from work in their beats. This absence of the government-provided transport facilities was enough a handicapping condition in the way of efficient forest policing.

As if the above setback was not enough, an even more dangerous logistical challenge still stood in the way of effective forest policing in Nigeria. This had to do with the upsurge or proliferation of illegal firearms among the general public, especially immediately after the Nigerian Civil War in 1970. This situation was accounted for by the fact that the fighters in that War, on both sides, were not properly demobilised. A lot of weapons ended up in the hands of both civilians and ex-servicemen alike. This situation posed serious threats to the lives and properties generally and to that of the forest resources in particular. Forest guards, usually unarmed, began to encounter forest poachers armed with dangerous firearms. The forest guards, under this situation, became very helpless as they could neither engage these armed poachers with bare hands nor stop them from plundering the forest resources. They even had to be careful about their own personal safeties by standing out of the ways of the forest marauders who were daily killing as many wild animals as they could find.

Ceaseless Hunting without Consideration for Sustainability

Lack of effective security outfit serving as barriers to stop the forest poachers meant that the forests, and their resources, were completely at the

mercy of the illegal hunters. The hunters were usually aggressive and combative in their psychology towards the forest guards and the forests had been exposed to non-stop plundering that threatened sustainability in respect of wildlife. In spite of the repeated warnings by the wildlife conservationists that some fauna species stood the danger of extinction, the poaching did not, in any way, abate. While a large number of these animals were killed, a few of them were hunted for the export of their desired body parts. The two species mostly affected in this regard; were elephant and pangolin. Elephant was desired for its tusks while pangolin was hunted for its body scales. As for the meat consumption, the list is endless. Special bushmeat joints all across the rural areas and urban centres in Nigeria. It has become an lucrative business and a thriving industry. While some of these bush animals, like the grass cutters, guinea fowls, quails and others were sourced from domestic wildlife farms, the bulk of the supplies were directly from the forests.

They have even made a guild out of these poaching activities from the forest reserves. They have formed themselves into the Hunters' Guild Association without seeing anything wrong or harmful to sustainable environment in what they do for a living. This animal poaching from the forests to sustain bushmeat business is, at the long run, very harmful to sustainable environment and threatens the extinction of the affected species (T. Umar et al). Even with the rate of deforestation going on in Nigeria, the hunters themselves now have to go deeper and deeper into the bush or

forests after the few wild animals remaining in their disturbed and threatened environment. Species like the buffalo and elephant are very rare to come by. Two factors, among others, were responsible for this. The first had to do with ceaseless habitat destruction in form of bush burning and agricultural encroachments into the forest reserves. The second was the increasing exposure of the forests to mining activities by the expatriate solid minerals prospecting firms, which often left the mined places totally degraded thereafter. Forest denudation and destruction for mining purposes have posed a new threat to sustainable environment in Nigeria and has further endangered the few remaining wildlife in the forests.

Existing opportunities for Government Control

The very reckless approach of the Nigerian wildlife hunters was built on the government's failure to protect its forests from unauthorized access as was obtainable under the colonial forest management. It was a major forest service loophole capitalized upon by the hunters to plunder the forests. The practice, before Nigeria's independence, had been that whoever wanted to enter the forest for games must first apply to the forestry department for the requisite permit to do so. The applicant must specifically indicate the types and categories of animals he intended to hunt. This was meant to enable the department to determine whether or not to approve such applications. This primary intendment of that policy was to ensure the safety and sustainability of the forest wildlife species.

It was relatively easier to achieve this under the colonial forest service for two main reasons. The first was the presence of the forest police outfits

which comprised the forest guards and the boundary guards who secured the forest resources and the perimeter boundaries of the forest respectively. With these two sets of forest security personnel constantly patrolling their assigned forest beats, it was really difficult for all unauthorized users to have access therein. Their constant reconnaissance around the forest also helped them to detect intending forest poachers and chase them away before they gained access. The second reason had to do with the nature and state of security threats to the forests under colonial period compared with the present setting. Before Nigeria's independence, the dangers of armed bandits and crimes were relatively not this prevalent. That was also because the number of firearms available to the general public was severely curtailed.

However, with the proliferation of illegal firearms in the public spaces, coupled with the drastic reduction in the number forest guards remaining to police the forests, it became more difficult to protect the forests and their resources. Added to this was the complete disappearance of the boundary guards from the picture. This paper noted that the present Nigeria's government now the opportunity to cure this anomaly of poor forest policing with the newly introduced armed forest security outfit named the Nigerian Forest Security Service (NFSS) (This Day). Even though the primary purpose of creating the Service was to rid Nigerian forests of armed bandits, kidnappers and terrorists hibernating therein, they can be deployed to do more than that.

A very functional synergy can be fostered between the new armed forest security personnel and the traditional forest guards to secure the forests and manage its resources. This suggested collaboration is essential considering the fact that the newly recruited armed security personnel have only one service objective, namely ridding Nigerian forests of armed criminal groups. Their recruitments and deployment were strategic responses to the armed security challenges of the moment. Almost all the recruited personnel armed to police the forests were not professionally trained to handle the forests. Their service brief was specific and it was to clear Nigerian forest of armed criminals and to permanently keep them from re-entering the places thereafter. In so much as the Nigerian Forest Security Service is able to rid the forests of criminals, they have discharged, or are discharging their core service mandate.

However, the same cannot be said about the traditional forest guards and boundary guards. These were solely graduates of the various colleges of Forestry in Nigeria. They were trained, in great details for years, in the science, management and protection of the forest resources. They are about the most junior personnel in the forestry department saddled with the duty overseeing forest resources and reporting back to the department. The entire forest estate was divided into beats and allocated to each forest guard man. They were to ensure that each permit holder did not exceed the permit limit or obtain forest resources other than the one specified in the permit. They took stock of the timber and non-timber resources in each forest beat and many other functions. They served as the ears and eyes of the forestry department in the

rural areas where the forests were located. Therefore, considering the pivotal roles the forest guards played in the sustainable forest management, their drastic reduction in number is counter-strategic to sustainable forest and environmental management.

A creative synergy between the newly created Nigerian Forest Security Service and the Forest Guards can help restore forest resources management in sustainable ways. The NFSS performs presently the duties previously carried out by the Boundary Guards, that of protecting the perimeter boundaries of the forest from external intrusions or encroachments. The Forest Guards, on the other hands, manage the resources, both flora and fauna, contained in each forest reserve. The combination of the two of them will cure the lapses noted above as they will collaborate to bring about effective forest management where unauthorized persons will no longer gain illegal access to the forest estate. In that case, the Forest Guards need not bear arms but come under the protective security cover of their armed counterparts, the NFSS. To make this happen, the severe reduction in the existing numbers of the Forest Guards must need be cured by recruiting more graduates of the schools of forestry across Nigeria. With their security guaranteed, it is this newly hired foresters that that will start afresh to assess the rate of damage over the years to forest resources and implement the blueprints of the forest departments towards regeneration and reforestation of the denuded forest spaces.

Wildlife Domestication as a Sustainable

Alternative

With the improvements in animal husbandry and domestication of wild animals, it is presently possible to maintain, and even expand, the current bushmeat business in Nigeria without having to depend on the forests exclusively for the supplies (Imran et al). Many Nigerians are already exploring the opportunity of domesticating wild animals and building lucrative businesses thereon. Among the animals already domesticated in commercial scales are grasscutters, snails, quails, rabbits among others. The above scope can still be further expanded to include other wild animals except the big and dangerous wild cats such as the lion, leopard, tiger, cheetah which are better housed in protected zoos and safaris. Other dangerous animals that might not be included for domestication as bushmeats include the elephant, buffalo and python.

The scale to which Nigerians can domesticate wild animals is limitless. Domestication of many species was already ongoing in parts of Nigeria (Ojo et al). Nigeria has the expertise in terms of animal science experts and scholars in wildlife management that can lead the way in this venture. The Country equally has graduates from forestry schools and animal science and forestry departments across Nigerian universities to drive the project of domesticating wild animals for bushmeat purposes. Some African countries had successfully domesticated certain wild animals that still wild animals in Nigeria. A good example that comes to mind here is Kenya. Kenya is known to have recorded great success in wildlife management and species retention in their forests. It has also been able to domesticate, in large

numbers. Some animals that are still wild in other African countries. The warthog or wild pig is a wild animal that is very dangerous to be confronted by the hunters because the animal was always combat-ready to attack its hunters by the knee in self-defense.

Nigeria can stop the dangerous trends of hunting its wildlife into extinction and growing what is left of endangered fauna species through domestication and breeding of what is left. The structure for this change is already in place. In the little wildlife domestication already in existence, breeders are helping intending wildlife farmers to set up new farms with new breeds. For instance, many grasscutter farmers advertise online for whoever wanted a start-up farm to contact them for help. They often promise to assist with setting up such farms by supplying a colony of male and female grasscutters. They do this by building a semblance of their natural habitats in the wilds in the new farm locations. In this way, given the prolific nature of the grasscutter's reproductive capacity, the new farm was soon able to produce grasscutters in commercial quantities in a short period of time. As this practice expands across Nigeria, it is now possible for the grasscutter business to thrive sustainably without exclusive reliance on the forests. There teachers willing to train intending grasscutter farmers across Nigeria

Consequently, the same method can be applied to breed other wild animals like the antelopes, gazelles, wild pigs or warthogs, pangolin, porcupines and so many others. Nigeria has sufficient manpower and land resources to

make this happen. If done successfully, the Country stands to gain a lot from it. It will remove the danger of extinction presently hanging on the wildlife now hunted day and night by making them available in many private commercial breeding centres. It will foster increment in ecotourism in Nigeria as many foreigners will desire to visit Nigeria for its Safaris as is obtainable in Kenya. It will cause the bushmeat business in Nigeria to grow without posing danger to the sustainability of the animals in the wilds.

Reviving and strengthening the Forest Guards and Boundary Guards

As noted earlier, the Boundary Guards and Forest Guards that drove the success of Nigeria's Colonial Forest Service can be revived and strengthened. The present Nigerian government had actually started doing so, albeit by default. By creating the Nigerian Forest Security Service, it has, indirectly, produced the personnel that performed similar functions as did the defunct or abandoned Boundary Guards. The NFSS were sent to clear the forests of criminal bandits and terrorists as well as prevent unauthorized entries into the forests thereafter. That was the exact role played by the Colonial Boundary Guards. They watched over the forest perimeter boundaries to prevent illegal entries from any quarters. It can, therefore, be taken that the challenge of Nigeria's forest exposure to poachers have been solved or is in the process of being solved in the near future.

As for the Forest Guards, the same cannot be said and this is where the major challenge lies. The number had dwindled over the years that the forests have been inadequately manned and managed. With

the bandits and criminals taking over the forests for some years now, even the few forest guards remaining performed their jobs in fear as their safety could not be guaranteed in the isolated forests deep in the rural areas. They had to operate under the precautionary policy of "personal safety first". Since they were not armed, like their NFSS counterparts, they were not empowered to check the illegal forest poachers like hunters, timber loggers and those harvesting non-timber forest resources who were usually bearing firearms. This situation had already compromised the capacity of the Forest Guards to effectively manage the forest beats allocated to them. They numbered very few vis a vis the vast expanse of forests they were meant to oversee and manage.

However, with the newly created NFSS, the coast is clear to revive and expand the traditional forest guards to start over the management of what is left of the forest estate. Nigeria has an array of graduates from its colleges of forestry as well as universities having the department of forest resources management. These graduates, with the requisite knowledge, are capable to revive and manage the forest resources for sustainability, if properly deployed. The NFSS would provide the needed security cover to enable for proper forest resources management. Wildlife, referred to in this paper as bushmeat, are part of the resources to be managed in the forests. Under the colonial forest management, the forest guards, supported by the forest rangers and other senior personnels in the forestry departments, did take annual stock of the number of wild animals,

especially the big ones like elephants, gorillas, tigers, lions and so on. They could also tell the number of merchantable indigenous timbers in each forest beat. It has been several decades now since Nigeria's forests had seen detailed and comprehensive resources management. This can be started over in the interest of sustainable forestry and safe environment if only the government will demonstrate the political will to make it happen.

Conclusion

This paper had argued that the current rate of excessive extraction of wildlife from Nigerian forests to service the bushmeat business is unsustainable. It has found a number of factors to have been collectively responsible for opening up the forests and making them accessible to wildlife poachers. This included the continuous failure of government to effectively protect its forest from illegal access by unauthorised persons. This they did by allowing the boundary guards that protected the colonial forests to disappear altogether as well as allowing the forest guards to dwindle in numbers. The paper made reference to Kenya, an African Country that had prominently excelled in its wildlife management and is thriving well in ecotourism.

It also observed that Nigeria has both manpower and facilities to drive both private wildlife domestication by its citizens as well as recruiting more forest guards to manage and preserve what is left of its wildlife. It finally found that the recent creation of the NFSS is a game changer as it is capable of

References

providing the needed security cover to make forest resources and wildlife regeneration possible. The paper concluded that unless the government will take drastic steps to stop wildlife poaching from its forests and encourage natural regeneration in the wilds as well as private wildlife domestication by its citizens; Nigeria stands the danger of wildlife extinction in its forests.

Recommendation

This paper opined that the following recommendations might foster the attainment of sustainable regeneration of endangered wildlife species in Nigerian forests, if adopted and implemented.

1. Nigerian Government consider enacting laws criminalizing the poaching of wild animals with stiff sanctions for the apprehended offenders.
2. Traditional forest guards, from the forestry departments, should be strengthened to manage the forest resources while the Nigerian forest Security Service secure the perimeter boundaries of the forest reserves.
3. That forestry graduates and those experienced in wild animal domestication be empowered by Government to go into it.
4. The forest permit system should be strengthened and the most endangered animal species be placed under outright ban from hunting.

1. Business Day, August (2025), "As Bushmeat Consumption Grows, Nigerian Doctors Fear Outbreak". <https://businessday.ng/news/article/as-bushmeat-consumption-grows-nigerian-doctors-fear-outbreaks/>.
2. Green Growth Africa, March (2026), Nigeria's Pangolin Poaching Crisis: Poverty and the Fight for Survival. <https://thegreengrowth.org/2026/03/04/nigerias-pangolin-poaching-crisis-hunger-poverty-and-the-fight-for-survival/>.
3. M. Siollun, (2021), *A Short History of Conquest and Rule: What Britain Did to Nigeria*. United Kingdom: C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd. pp182-183.
4. R.F. Obinta (2016), *A Historical Study of Forestry and Forest Resources Management in the South-west Nigeria, 1886-1994*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife Nigeria. pp 151-154.
5. This Day September, (2026) Insecurity Game Changer: Tinubu Launches Forest Guards, 7,000 Deployed. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/2025/12/28/in-security-game-changer-tinubu-launches-forest-guards-7000-deployed/>.
6. G.T. Imran, A.A. Alarape and N.J. Ogundun, (2013) "Wildlife Domestication as a Panacea to Forest Conservation in Nigeria", in *The Green Economy: Balancing Environmental Sustainability and Livelihoods in an Emerging Economy* Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference of the Forestry Association of Nigeria held in Uyo, Aqua-Ibom State, Nigeria. 04-09, November. pp 51-56.
7. T. Umar, I.A. Salau and A.D. Isah (2013), A Survey of Threatened and Endangered Flora and Fauna Species in Sokoto Forest Ecosystem, Nigeria, in *Forest Industry in a Dynamic Global Environment*. Proceedings of the 35th Annual Conference of the Forestry Association of Nigeria held in Sokoto, Sokoto State. 11th - 16th February.
8. V.A. Ojo, Y.P. Mbaya., H.M. Ijeoma and A.O. Kehinde, (2011), "A Survey of Consumption and Captive Breeding of Wild Animal Species Used as Bushmeat in Maiduguri". In *Forestry in the Context of the Millenium Development Goals*. Proceedings of the 34th Annual Conference of the Forestry Association of Nigeria held in Osogbo, Osun State 5th – 10th. pp189-193.