

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the study

Desertification constitutes one of the international environmental problems whose global importance has been recognized by the international community. This importance is clearly visible in the massive endorsement that states have given to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa adopted in 1994. However, desertification of the arid lands of the world has been proceeding sometimes rapidly, sometimes slowly for more than a thousand years. It has caused untold misery among those most directly affected, yet environmental destruction continues. Until recently, few if any lessons seemed to have been learned from the past, in part because the problem was an insidious one that went unrecognized in its early stages or was seen as a local one affecting only a small population, and in part because new land was always available to start over again. As long as remedial action could be deferred by moving on to new frontiers, land conservation had little appeal. It was not until the 20th century when easy land expansion came to an end that governments and people finally realized that continued careless degradation of natural resources threatened their future.

Nigeria is a large country with a substantial part of its area extending into the Sudano-Sahelian belt, which, together with the neighboring northern Guinea savanna constitutes the dry lands of the country (Figure 1.1). With an estimated population of 140 million (Census, 2006) human pressures on the land particularly in the marginal

areas has continued to take its toll on the environment, resulting in desertification. Desertification is made very severe in the dry lands of the country by increasing human attempts to exploit the resources of the ecological zone in the face of persistent drought. Before now, Nigeria has been tackling the problem of desertification the best way it could, but with little success. It is now obvious that the menace should be addressed in a holistic manner in order to ensure that the dry lands of the country continue to support human and natural resources.



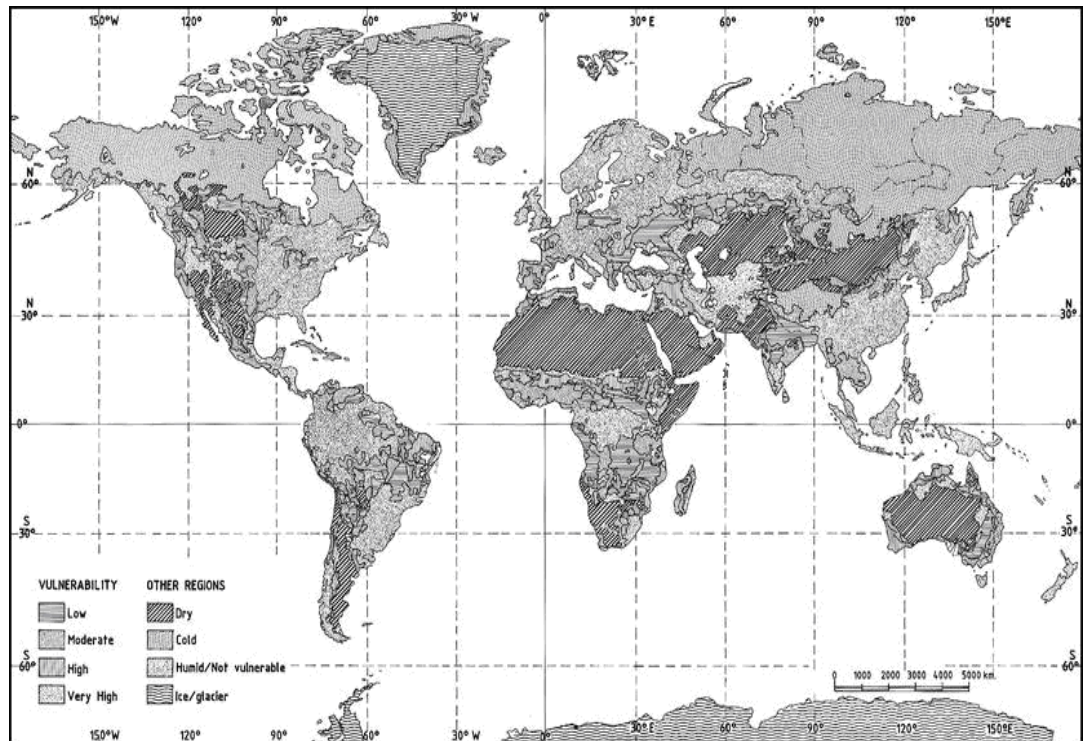
**Source:** Report of NAPCD, FME Abuja 2002

**Figure 1.1:** Areas affected by desertification in Nigeria

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Land degradation caused either by anthropogenic or climatic factor has occurred since time immemorial. In recent time, it became an issue of international significance in the wake of the Sahelian drought of 1968-1973. Since then, there have been several coordinated efforts at the international level to tackle the growing problem of the desertification and land degradation, which have culminated in the adoption of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

Desertification became well known in the 1930's, when parts of the Great Plains in the United States turned into the "Dust Bowl" as a result of drought and poor practices in farming, although the term itself was not used until almost 1950. During the dust bowl period, millions of people were forced to abandon their farms and livelihoods. Greatly improved methods of agriculture and land and water management in the Great Plains have prevented that disaster from recurring, but desertification presently affects about one sixth of the world's population, 70% of all dry lands (amounting to 3.6 billion hectares) and one quarter of the total land area of the world (UN Conference on Environment and Development, 1992) (see Figure 1.2). Desertification places some 1 billion people in 110 countries at risk, mainly in developing regions (Ayoub, 1999). Losses due to desertification have been estimated to be five times the cost of halting desertification (UN Environment Programme, 1992).



**Source:** USDA-NRCS, Soil Survey Division, World Soil Resources, Washington, DC 2001)

**Figure 1.2:** Global desertification vulnerability map showing the dry regions

Desertification and the persistent droughts, constitutes the most serious environmental problem facing the northern part of the Nigeria, with dire economic consequences on the entire nation. The country is presently losing about 350,000 square meters of its land mass to desert condition which is advancing south wards at an estimated rate of 0.6 kilometers a year (NAP 2000). Increased population and livestock pressure on marginal lands has accelerated desertification. In some areas, nomads moving to less arid areas disrupt the local ecosystem and increase the rate of erosion of the land. Nomads are trying to escape the desert, but because of their land-use practices, they are bringing the desert with them. It is a misconception that droughts cause desertification. Droughts are common in arid and semiarid lands. Well-managed lands can recover from drought when the rains return. Continued land abuse during droughts, however, increases land degradation. In the 1970s, the Sahel region of Africa was afflicted by a serious drought which killed thousands of people and millions of animals (UNCD, 1978). This focused world attention on the dangers and causes of desertification and triggered a global call to action.

The issue of desertification has been debated for generations. There is little disagreement that there has been an environmental decline in much of the world's dry lands – particularly in Africa. However, there have been contentious debates about:

- i) How large is the area and population affected;
- ii) What role climate plays in the process of desertification, and
- iii) What might be done to arrest effectively or reverse the environmental and economic impacts of desertification?

While desertification has received tremendous publicity by the political and news media, there are still many things that the general public may not be aware about the degradation of productive lands and the expansion of deserts. In 1988, Ridley Nelson cited in Le Houerou (2002) pointed out in an important scientific paper that the desertification problem and processes are not clearly defined. There is no consensus among researchers as to the specific causes, extent, or degree of desertification. Contrary to many popular reports, desertification is actually a subtle and complex process of deterioration that may often be reversible.

### **1.3 Purposes of the study**

The aim of the study is to evaluate government policies on drought and desertification in Nigeria with a view to making appropriate recommendation for further improvement.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the study**

1. To review the concept of desertification.
2. To critically identify factors contributing to desertification in Nigeria.
3. To evaluate past and present effort of Nigerian government to combat desertification.
4. To examine the existing policies on drought and desertification in Nigeria and;
5. To recommend measures necessary to combat desertification and mitigate the effect of drought in Nigeria.

#### **1.5 Significance of the study**

This research needs to be carried out because according to a report by the Federal Ministry of Environment, the country is currently losing about 351,000 hectares of its landmass to desert conditions annually, and such conditions are estimated to be advancing southwards at the rate of about 0.6km per year (NAP, 2000). Desertification, which is affecting the ten northern States, is considered as the most pressing environmental problem and accounts for about 73% out of the estimated total cost of about US\$5.110 billion per annum the country is losing arising from environmental degradation (UNCCD, 1999).

#### **1.6 Scope of the study**

The research will focus on the planning policies related to drought and desertification and it will be limited to eleven frontline states of northern Nigeria only.