

# Changing Perspectives on Forests, People and ‘Development’:

## *Reflections on the Case of the Korup Forest*

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### 1 Introduction

The Korup Project (KP) was one of the first integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) established in the West African tropical rainforest zone. On paper, it represented a radical shift away from traditional park management practices, involving policing and protective measures, to a greater emphasis on linking forest conservation with sustainable development by focusing on the social and economic needs of people living in and around the c.125,000 ha park. In this sense, the KP represented an early point in the ‘new’ conservation learning curve. Nevertheless, as the historical case study of the KP later will illustrate, the project’s practices have failed to live up to these claims, and indeed show much in common with earlier ‘fortress conservation’ approaches. Furthermore, the project has faced a series of problems and conflicts which have led some observers to question the overall ICDP approach, which it is supposed to exemplify.

This article argues that the project’s poor progress from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s reflects more fundamental problems of conceptualisation and design, as well as implementation. In particular, many of the original assumptions on which the KP was based are questioned by research in several disciplines that transforms understandings of forest ecology and throws new light on the historical, socio-political and economic realities of West Africa. Yet, such changed understandings have not led to reassessment of the KP’s approach. The article explores several reasons for this, rooted in the science/policy processes in which the project is embedded. These range from the established perspectives of conservation biologists and the nature of their interactions with social scientists, project administrators and local people, to project practices linked to pressures of time and funding.

### 2 A short history of the Korup Project

The idea of creating Korup National Park (KNP) was conceived in the early 1970s by two western primatologists who were studying forest primates in south-west Cameroon at the time. They were drawn to this area because they had been told that the rare Preuss’s red colobus monkey was present in the reserve (Oates 1999: 139). They saw red

colobus in the Korup Forest Reserve and both agreed that Korup deserved greater attention. They made a proposal to the Cameroon Government to make Korup a national park, but the Cameroon government gave no immediate reaction to their proposal (Oates 1999: 139).

By 1980, the Korup Forest Reserve had been adopted as an official project of IUCN and WWF. A proposal was drawn up by western conservation biologists to create three rainforest national parks in Cameroon: Korup, Dja (in southern Cameroon) and Pangar-Djerem (in central Cameroon) (Gartlan and Agland 1981). This proposal was presented to the Cameroon Government in 1981. It emphasised the importance of an integrated conservation and development approach, which had by that time become the formal policy of WWF. The proposal was accepted in principle by the Cameroon Government and a decision was made to start with Korup.

The 'Korup Regional Management Plan' (Gartlan 1984) was one of the first attempts to use the concept of linking conservation with sustainable development to draw up plans for an 'integrated conservation and development' field project. The main goal of the project was to combine 'the conservation and protection of the Korup forest ecosystem with the economic and social development of Ndiain Division' (Gartlan 1984: 91).

The basic tenets of the project were summarised as follows. The long-term conservation of the planned KNP would only be achieved through the co-operation and support of local people. This in turn would only be possible if the living standards of the people were improved and if tangible benefits were created which were directly linked with the conservation of the park (Devitt 1988b: 3). Another underlying tenet of the KP was that the successful conservation of KNP would only be achieved by eliminating the land-use conflicts within the park. It was assumed that this, in turn, could only be achieved through the resettlement of villages inside the park, and within its immediate vicinity, to areas outside it (Gartlan 1984: 111). The main reason given by project planners for the need for resettlement was that once the park was created, most of the economic activities of the people living within the park would be prohibited by law.

Resettlement was also justified, it was argued, because if the villages inside the park remained where they were, economic development would be constrained by the physical limitations of poor soils and remoteness. Social and economic conditions in the areas around the proposed park would be improved through the construction of roads, public amenities, agricultural interventions and the development of tourism and plant pharmaceuticals (Gartlan 1984). Resettlement of villages inside the proposed park into these areas would then enable the inhabitants of these villages to benefit from the project's planned 'development' initiatives. So the idea of resettling these villages in areas outside the park and assisting them to improve their socio-economic status became a key part of the project's strategy.

One of the main development strategies of the Korup regional management plan was thus to create 'support zones' in the areas surrounding the park. A range of conservation and development activities would be implemented in these zones to protect the proposed park and to increase the living standards of the villagers who, it was proposed, would be resettled there.

On 30 October 1986, KNP was established by Decree No. 86/123. At the same time, the charity Earthlife signed an agreement with the Cameroon Government to provide technical assistance for agricultural development in the area around KNP. For this work the then ODA (Overseas Development Administration, now DFID – the Department for International Development) provided Earthlife with a grant of £444,300 under their Joint Funding Scheme over a three-year period. As part of this agreement, the Cameroon Government had accepted obligations to implement park protection, resettlement of the inhabitants of villages inside the park and road construction. ODA was concerned about the project's proposal to resettle villages. It therefore provided funds to employ a socio-economic consultant to look at the social aspects of resettlement and rural development throughout their funding period.

November 1986 marked the start of visits by expatriate consultants working with the project to collect data for planning and implementation

purposes in the fields of land-use planning (soils and roads), forestry, agro-forestry, livestock, fisheries and socio-economics. The KP's socio-economic component (with which I was working at the time) aimed to collect relevant socio-economic data for the implementation of the project and to provide the Cameroon Government with information about the inhabitants of the settlements located within and around the KNP, particularly in relation to the project's impact on these settlements. In early 1988, the charity Earthlife went into liquidation and the project was taken over entirely by WWF. ODA continued to provide financial assistance.

By 1988, the project's socio-economic component had come up with some results. One of the recommendations was the development of controlled hunting in the support zone around the park (Infield 1988: iii). An important finding was that non-timber forest products (NTFPs) provided a significant source of income for many households in the Korup forest area.

Socio-economic staff also raised some highly pertinent questions relating to the project's philosophy and implementation plans. One report called for 'a thorough reappraisal of what the project was trying to accomplish and where' (Devitt 1988a: 14). This report reflected the concerns of some of the people working on the KP at that time (including myself) and others connected with or affected by it. The majority of these concerns centred on the issue of resettlement. Despite the project's firm official line that resettlement must take place, many people had doubts about its necessity. Strong legal, political, economic and scientific reasons were raised for allowing people to continue to live within the park (Devitt 1988a, Ruitenbeek 1988). But despite these arguments against resettlement, project planners continued to argue that it must go ahead. Two separate attempts were made to resettle different park villages during the early 1990s, one of which is briefly described later. First, however, it is important to consider some of the more fundamental assumptions, which were driving the KP's planning and implementation processes, and the extent to which these were challenged by other research on West African forests.

### **3 Divergent perspectives in the rainforests of West Africa**

The design and implementation of the KP and other ICDPs in West Africa (see, e.g. Burnham in press; Fairhead and Leach 1995; Longley 1992; Sharpe 1998) were based on a number of strong assumptions about the status of the forest and its inhabitants. First, the Korup forest was viewed by project management as a 'pristine', isolated island of natural forest that had survived through millennia, untouched by human hand. However, this perspective overlooked other evidence – dating from as far back as external knowledge of the region's history began – that the forest's resources have long been widely used and managed.

Ardener and Ardener (1973: 570) suggest that the present coastal populations of the Rio-del-Rey and south-west Cameroon were already established by 1500 and that they had slowly migrated there from the interior. Historical evidence suggests that substantial trade between Europeans and the people of the Rio-del-Rey estuary was taking place by the 1660s, before the establishment of Old Calabar as a trading centre, and that this continued through the next century (Ardener 1996: 3).

By the eighteenth century, Calabar had become a trading centre for slaves (Simmons 1956: 4). Slave raids were made from the Calabar area further inland, via the Rio-del-Rey and its tributaries. Two recordings are made in the diary of Antera Duke, during 1785, of successful slave raids on the Orroup people (Forde 1956: 30; Gartlan 1984: 55), who are probably the same group now known as the Korup people. The search for slaves in the surrounding areas, ethnic conflict and the search for new hunting grounds led to the migration of the Oroko and Korup people into the forested areas further inland (Elangwe 1988: 16). The Oroko-speaking people are one of the main cultural-linguistic groups of the Korup forest area.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, German traders established a trading port near Ndian Town which, at that time, lay at the end of the navigable stretch of the Ndian River, on the southern edge of what is now KNP. Here, people from the hinterland exchanged bananas and forest products such as wild rubber, ebony, palm oil, ivory, kola nuts and bushmeat for cloth, tobacco,

salt and other European goods from the German traders. The trade in forest products must have been quite substantial, even at this time. During his visit to the hinterland area, Carr (1923) wrote that: 'Ebony existed in large quantities prior to German occupation, but so much was cut to sell to German factories that but few villages have any left'.

Project management also failed to acknowledge that the Korup forest had been more densely populated in the past but that the population had declined because of warfare, slavery, disease and rural exodus. They overlooked the fact that descendants of these extinct settlements still lay claim to abandoned village territories within the park. They also glossed over the history of conflict over land tenure and resource use in the Korup forest, which had occurred during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Traditional village territories of the more populated settlements on the periphery of the park occupy areas that are now inside the park. The inhabitants of villages within and around the park continue to maintain their tenurial claims to land in and around KNP, and no 'no man's land' exists.

A second set of perceptions related to the livelihood activities of villagers living in and around the park and their supposed impacts on the forest. A strong view – perpetuated especially by the conservation biologists involved with and advising the project – was that the 'pristine' forest is now under threat from deforestation due to shifting cultivation and rapid population growth. During the 1980s and early 1990s, conservation biologists used this 'crisis narrative' to justify protectionist and exclusionist approaches to conservation. Project management made little attempt to engage constructively with the inhabitants of the area and the existing economy, despite the recommendations made by the project's socio-economic component, and the rhetoric in project implementation plans that spoke of the importance of community participation.

Furthermore, the atmosphere of crisis management combined with short-term project funding cycles pressurised conservation biologists into thinking that they needed to develop 'quick-fixes' and tangible results within relatively short time frames. In this context, and combined with assumptions about the destructive effects of current livelihood

practices, the idea that new technologies would provide the key to linking conservation with development prevailed. As a result of these views, little attempt was made to understand, engage with and build on existing forest management and livelihood strategies.

KP rural development advisers did attempt to work with local government extension workers from the departments of agriculture, forestry, community development, health and social affairs and communities in around the KNP to identify and build on existing sustainable livelihood opportunities. However, these attempts were effectively blocked by the project management, in favour of costly attempts to introduce entirely new 'miracle' technologies such as the captive rearing of butterflies, mushroom farming and bee-keeping. Such interventions failed, largely because they were proposed without any appreciation of the existing social and economic context of the area or the likely demand for the items produced.

In line with their broadly negative view of local livelihood activities, conservation biologists also claimed that wildlife populations within the KNP were declining dramatically due to hunting and trapping. This is despite the fact that there was little substantive evidence to support such claims. In 1989, Wildlife Conservation International (WCI), now known as the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), signed an agreement with the Cameroon Government and WWF UK to carry out biological inventory research on the fauna of Korup. The WCI project established a research camp within the park near the three northern Bakoko villages of Ikenge, Bera and Esukutan. Their research focused on forest elephants. But WCI researchers' work was being disrupted and hampered by the sounds of gunfire from hunters in the areas surrounding their research camp. WCI staff found that hunters were using their research transects as hunting trails and that a hunting camp had been built along one of them. As a result of their activities, they found that they had actually opened up a new area for hunters by providing easier access (Powell *et al.* 1994: 15).

A third assumption held by conservation biologists working on the KP was that most of the settlements in the Korup forest area were socially homogenous,

with similar aspirations and unified under the village chief. The assumption that Korup forest communities were socially homogenous led project planners to also assume that the majority of negotiations over resettlement and other matters could be successfully carried out largely in consultation with village chiefs and elders and no-one else. But this assumption overlooked evidence that most Korup forest settlements are, in reality, socially diverse. 'Communities' consist of a very complex mesh of different types of institutions, households and individuals whose rights of access to land and forest resources are differentiated along the lines of political power, wealth, ethnicity, gender and marital status. Conflicts and disputes over land, resources and other issues between different social groups are common both within and between villages. Furthermore, project management largely overlooked the fact that the population of the Korup forest is highly mobile and that many of the people who were born in settlements in the area now live outside it but continue to maintain strong political influence and socio-economic interest in their home areas.

#### **4 An attempt at resettlement**

It was amidst this set of conflicting perspectives and interactions between scientists, administrators and villagers that attempts to resettle villages from inside the KNP were made. In the case now to be described, the WCI team commenced negotiations with the three Bakoko villages to identify possible resettlement sites and to stop hunting around the WCI research camp. These negotiations were started despite the fact they lay outside WCI's remit; that WCI had little experience of resettlement, and that the KP had already made a failed attempt to resettle one of the other park villages the year before.

By 1990, a resettlement site for the Bakoko villages was identified, largely by WCI staff, some 8 km from the KNP boundary. This resettlement site became known as Babong. WCI argued that the Babong site was favourable because it was situated on relatively fertile land, as identified by the project's soil survey; on a road linking it to nearby markets, and close to an all-season water supply. A site board commission consisting of chiefs and councillors of the Bakoko, neighbouring villages on whose land settlement

might take place, and representatives of the local government administration was appointed by the Cameroon Government to select a suitable resettlement site. Notably, there was no attempt to involve other social groups in the resettlement issue. In February 1991, members of the site board commission inspected the Babong site. They raised doubts over its suitability of the site. It was said to be unsuitable because of poor soils, water shortages and because it lay within the land of Mbo-speaking people of Nguti Sub-Division rather than within the land of the Oroko-speaking people to which the Bakoko people belong and which lay within Ndian Division. Despite these doubts, however, WCI employed nine men from the Bakoko villages to trace the boundaries of the Babong resettlement site and to establish a plantain plantation there. The idea was that the plantains produced would be sold and the proceeds used to continue to employ the people.

In April 1991, a petition, signed by local members of parliament, elites and chiefs was sent to the President of Cameroon. This petition rejected the proposed Babong resettlement site, largely on the grounds that it was unacceptable for the Bakoko villages to move out of Ndian Division. Instead, they pointed out that some of the Bakoko people had expressed a wish to be resettled at a site called Macha, within the lands of the Bima ethnic group, who are Oroko-speaking people, and within Ndian Division.

By mid-1991, relations between WCI and the Bakoko villages had markedly deteriorated. Inhabitants were showing increasing signs of stress, which led to attacks against game guards and excessive consumption of alcohol amongst male youths (Moorehead and Hammond 1992). A WCI inventory team was attacked and the people of one of the villages stopped WCI staff from moving through their village to work on the establishment of another inventory transect, because they thought that hunters would yet again be asked to stop hunting in the newly demarcated area. By the end of April 1991, WCI ceased to employ the Bakoko men working at the Babong resettlement site. They claimed this was due to lack of funds but it was undoubtedly also linked to the impasse over the Bakoko resettlement issue, from which WCI now sought to distance themselves. These workers were left in limbo because the KP management

refused to take over their employment from WCI. Around this time, WCI established a new research site in the Banyang-Mbo Forest Reserve, east of the KNP. By 1993, WCI had completely withdrawn from the KP and transferred all its research to the new site at Banyang-Mbo (Oates 1999).

## 5 Other park developments and responses

In contrast to the very limited achievements of the KP's rural development component in the late 1980s and early 1990s, much progress was made on park infrastructure development during the same period. The KNP headquarters and sub-headquarters were built at Mundemba and Baro respectively. Park boundaries were cleared and demarcated. Two footbridges, providing access to the park, were built over the Mana river, near Mundemba, and at Baro. A series of nature trails within the KNP had also been cleared, and two tourist camps and a research camp had been constructed within the southern section of the park. However, no attempt was made to involve the inhabitants of park settlements within whose forests these camps were established. Instead, in one instance, park management staff blocked off the path to Ekundu Kundu village which led off one of the nature trails, supposedly to prevent tourists from straying down it. During the same period, anti-poaching activities escalated and 16 game guards (11 of them newly recruited) were trained and equipped. Game guards confiscated bushmeat and guns, destroyed traps and burnt hunting camps within KNP.

Anti-poaching and park development activities generally had a negative impact on the inhabitants of settlements in and around KNP. This, in turn, caused much ill-feeling about the project and the KNP amongst local people. Local resentment towards the KP manifested itself in several ways. There were several incidents where game guards were threatened or attacked by local people, after the seizure of bushmeat or arrests of hunters. Tourist trails within the park were spoiled, 'sometimes maliciously' as one project report put it. At least two villages within the 'support zone' refused, for several months, to allow project staff to work in or pass through their settlements. Boundary demarcation by the project sparked off

anger and protest amongst local farmers, particularly along the southern boundary of the KNP. Inhabitants of this area had continuously cultivated areas within the KNP since the 1960s. After re-clearing the boundaries, project staff and game guards had warned people that they must no longer farm within the park. About a year later, game guards destroyed bananas, plantains and other food crops that had been planted within the park. Most of the farmers affected were women. They protested to the local administration about the destruction of their crops, but nothing was done to alleviate the situation.

Far more money was spent by the project on park development and anti-poaching compared with rural development and education during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Between July 1989 and June 1990 a total budget of 99,017,000 CFA was spent by the KP. Only 3,705,000 CFA (about 4 per cent) of this was spent on conservation education and rural development components, while most of the rest was spent on park development activities.

## 6 Conclusion

The conflicts and poor progress, which beset the KP during the 1980s and early 1990s, stemmed from more than just 'poor implementation'. Rather, to a large degree they reflected deeper assumptions held by conservation biologists and planners concerning the status and history of the Korup forest area, the impacts of livelihood activities, and the nature of local 'communities'. The failure of these assumptions to match the ecological and socio-economic dynamics of the area hindered the appropriate and coherent conceptualisation and implementation of the project.

Linked to their assumptions, many of the conservation biologists involved in the KP did not believe that the ICDP approach would succeed. Because of these beliefs, they failed to move their agendas away from a policy of exclusion, to one that embraced the principles and practice of participation, engaged with existing socio-political and economic realities, and addressed local needs and interests (Brown 1999: 3). A change in the perspectives and personal attitudes of the biological conservationists who manage ICDPs would be required to bring this move about.

Alternatively, it might be aided if the relative power of such scientists in setting agendas were to reduce vis-à-vis that of others, including social scientists and representatives of diverse local interests, who adhere to different views.

The views of some conservation biologists involved in the KP have recently come to light as part of a broader backlash against integrated conservation and development and community forest management projects. In his review of ICDPs in the humid forest zone of West Africa, Oates (1999) argues that most of these projects have failed to conserve endangered species in protected areas, partly because they have laid too great an emphasis on socio-economic development, whilst neglecting park protection and biological investigations (see also Gartlan 1998). In this context Oates (1999: 143) and Blom (1998: 213) argue that the reason why the KP has made poor progress is because too much money is being spent on rural development, which draws people into the area, as compared with policing. But in practice, as I have indicated above, relatively little money was spent on linking conservation with economic development in the early phases of the KP, compared with that spent on park infrastructure development and resettlement. More recently, even greater sums of money have been poured into resettlement. It seems that it is not the basic ICDP concept that has caused so

many problems for the KP. Rather it is the lack of willingness amongst conservation biologists to support the devolution of the control of forest resources to communities and their failure to accept that difficult trade-offs have to be made between the interests of forest users, other key actors and the global concerns of conservation biologists; trade-offs whose balance appears rather different in the light of West Africa's dynamic ecological and social history.

In the last few years, there have been signs of more productive relationships developing between forest users and other key actors in the field of sustainable forest management in West Africa. Progress is being made through, for example, new forest legislation which potentially offers local communities significant control of their forest resources, and projects that are exploring the potential to build on the production, processing and marketing of economically important NTFPs. Other useful approaches address policy processes and ways to improve them. This includes research, which reflects on the difficulties encountered by existing forest management projects and ways to improve them, and research, which reflects on the existing institutional mechanisms and which bring together diverse forest actors and considers how these might be rendered more effective and inclusive.

## Notes

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