

Deforestation in Obubra Local Government Area: The Challenges before the Cross River State Anti-Deforestation Commission

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying the fact that our environment is facing the greatest challenge ever in its long history; and many are forced to believe that human activities are a major cause of the climate change and global warming, which may have catastrophic consequences for the climate and the environment. For instance, rising temperatures could intensify storms, floods and droughts. Rising temperatures may also foster the spread of diseases by enabling mosquitoes, ticks and other disease-carrying organisms, including fungi, to spread. According to the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist, “the dangers posed by climate change are nearly as dire as those posed by nuclear weapons; and the effects may be less dramatic now, but over the next three to four decades, climate change could cause irremediable harm to the habitats upon which human societies depend for survival”. What do all these portend for our local environment? What benefits could be derived from the recently formed anti-deforestation commission and the planned House of Assembly Bill on Deforestation in Cross River State? This paper seeks to assess the effect of deforestation in Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River State taking into consideration the state policy on deforestation. It is hoped that the outcome of this presentation will assist stakeholders and government alike in fashioning out a sustainable policy for curbing the effects of deforestation and the rate at which our natural forests are being deforested.

Key Words: Deforestation; Obubra; Challenges; Forestry Commission; Cross River State; Nigeria

1. Introduction

“... we did not inherit the environment from our fathers, but we have borrowed it from our children ...”

There is considerable economic and political interest today in how the tropical rain forests are used. While some would preserve them in their current state, others would use the trees and other forest resources for economic gain, (Enger and Smith, 2002). And since tropical rain forests are located in countries in which there are large numbers of **poor** people, there are strong pressures to exploit forests for economic benefits. For instance, it is estimated that more than 80% of the inhabitants of Africa generally use wood for cooking. No wonder fire wood is such a lucrative business in so many African countries including Nigeria. It is also on record that Africa has the highest population growth rate; as a result, the territory around most African villages and towns have been stripped of trees and other vegetation, since a majority of the citizens depend on their environment simply for survival. And most of the economic uses of the rain forest results in its destruction or reduction in forest biodiversity.

About two hundred years ago, tropical rain forest was known to cover about 1,500 million hectares (3,700 million acres) of the earth surface; but today only 90 million hectares (2,200 million acres) remain. Although exactly how much rainforest is disappearing is not known, it seems likely that over 20 million hectares (50 million acres) are destroyed each year. At this rate, it is estimated that there will be no rain forest remaining 50 years from now. What does this portend for our environment and us? The slash and burn method of farming in Obubra Local Government Area in Cross River State, Nigeria will be used to address this very important issue.

2. Consequences of Environmental Mismanagement

“... it is poverty that is responsible for the destruction of natural resources, not the poor ...” (Bruce, 1986)

Despite the acknowledged and important role the environment plays in production and productivity in the agricultural sectors of the economy, adequate attention still needs to be given to the proper use of the environment in order to realize maximum benefits. This view stems from the contention that several activities inimical to the efficient use and exploitation of the environment are often embarked upon. (Titilola, 2000) For instance, inappropriate fallow system of farming is currently proving inadequate for food and industrial raw materials production as a result of overpopulation. A shortened fallow period leads to overgrazing and over cropping resulting in **erosion**, degradation and impaired quality; and where deforestation is unaccompanied by reforestation, desertification and reduced quality of usable land results. With over-population, the traditional fallow period required for the regeneration of the indestructible properties of the soil is shortened because of pressure on the land. Furthermore, government policies have adversely affected the Nigerian rural environment.

In Cross River State for example, the absence of a policy compelling exploring and extracting industries to reinvest and repair the soil appears to be one area calling for attention.

In essence, mismanagement of the environment leads to a fall in production and productivity, a fall in income generating capacity of the people and impaired ability of the economy to generate increased employment, inadequate industrial materials and lowered ability for investment in the economy. All these translate into lack of growth.

In a study on the economic effects of soil erosion in Obubra Local Government Area, it was found out that the major factors thought to be responsible for erosion in the area include ecosystem disequilibrium, rising population pressure on land and fragile and permeable soil. This phenomenon is further aggravated by factors such as the farming system, soil management practices and poverty. The impact of resource management on farm size, farm output and value of output are deemed serious for the community and implication for the agricultural societies. Erosion in Obubra has thus:

- a) reduced the areas farmed to about one third of the original size,
- b) reduced physical output to about two third, and
- c) reduced monetary value in and around the communities.

The implication of all these is that farmers and other rural resource users are most important actors in the prevention and management of erosion. They can therefore be motivated in soil conservation effort and erosion control when they see erosion to be the threat to their livelihood. It is therefore our opinion that the measures that will adequately encourage resource management must satisfy the following conditions:

- a) it must be profitable in the short-run
- b) it must include some aspects of existing farming system practice, and
- c) it must not require farmers to donate their most limiting resources.

3. Slash and Burn Farming Methods in Obubra Local Government Area, Cross River State

When soil is stripped of vegetation, the bare topsoil soon dies out and is blown away by wind or washed away by water. This process is called erosion. When erosion occurs naturally, it may or may not cause any serious problem – unless man accelerates the process through poor land management. In Cross River State for instance, factors such as deforestation and overgrazing have accelerated the expansion of erosion in most localities. It is estimated that after a plot of land has been cleared of bush, within three years it loses up to 50% of its fertility (Awake, 2005).

So by clearing forest to plant cereal crops, farmers in this part of the state have irretrievably destabilized the thin fertile soil. Thus millions of hectares are already beyond recovery and millions more are heading that way as agricultural yields in some areas decline year by year.

Without doubt, many of man's actions have been well intended. But as is often the case, we (especially the locals) simply do not know enough about the environment to predict the consequences of our actions accurately. The results have been devastating. We have so upset the balance of life here that we threaten the very land that supports us and, through that, our own survival. The slash and burn method of farming currently practiced in Obubra Local Government Area is one means through which this phenomenon is striving.

4. Cross River State Forestry Commission and the Community

The tropical rain forest in Cross River State is currently subject to rapid and irreversible depletion due to a complex variety of social, economic and institutional factors. The sustainable management and utilization of the enormous resources of this rain forest has therefore become a critical necessity if the quality of our total environment is to be preserved. This requires that both the philosophy and economics of the rain forest resources and utilization be redirected at seeking ways to optimally appropriate natural, human and cultural resources in the interest of national and grassroots development (Tah, 2001). To this end, the Cross River State Community Forestry Project (CRSCFP) was established with the following mission statement:

“... work with the Forestry Commission and the Forest Management Committees of Cross River State to improve the quality of life of community members by deriving maximum benefit from sustainable use of forest resources ...”

Forests in Nigeria are generally divided into three categories, namely, the National Parks, Forest Reserves and Community Forests. Although these three categories are represented in Cross River State, the National Parks and the Forest Reserves are managed and controlled by the Federal and State governments respectively through their various agencies. The community forest on the other hand is left in the hands of the local people who have exhibited various levels of traditional management practices.

The Cross River State Forestry Commission (FC) operates on the following adage – we cannot use only one hand to clap – we need both hands, that is, government and the communities coming together for better management of the forests. Such cooperation can only be successful once the government provides the technological knowledge or know-how and the communities the local knowledge for successful management of the forest.

In setting up the Forestry Commission therefore, the aim is to transfer scientific forestry knowledge to the communities so that they will be in a better position to manage their forest. Thus through a process of developing land use plans, forest management plans, nurseries and plantations, the Forestry Commission advises local communities on how to get the most from their forests.

5. Cross River State Forest Management Committees and the Community

The Cross River State Forest Management Committees (FMCS) are community based forest management committees which have been formed to look after the forest on behalf of the community. Having realized that the most wonderful thing that they have is the forest, some communities have realized that the correct use of the forest can bring the community many benefits, like attracting development such as bore holes for fresh water, schools, good roads, health centres, bridges and culverts, boats and many others.

In more specific terms, the primary aim of the Cross River State Forest Management Committees is “... to improve the quality of life of community members by deriving maximum benefit from sustainable management of the forest resources ...”

It is further hoped that this aim will be achieved through the following objectives:

- to achieve the sustainable use, management and development of the forest estate in the interests of all stakeholders.
- to improve resource stocks and annual outputs
- to achieve the equitable distribution and judicious use of forest benefits and responsibilities which help to unify the interest of stakeholders in sustainably managing the forest estate.
- to ensure that the responsibilities and benefits of forest management are shared between all stakeholders.
- to place landlord communities in a controlling position to care, protect and promote wealth in partnership with Forest Commission.

6. Importance of Community-Based Forest Management

In Cross River State, the new Forestry Commission is focused on improving rural livelihoods through better management of the remaining forest in the state. Community based management of the forest therefore means that the people who live in and near the forest take control of that forest and care for it so that the forest resources provide for them and for their children and for their children's children. This is sustainable use of forest resources.

For a very long time, forestry in Cross River State has been seen as the responsibility of government alone. Government has now realized that it cannot manage all the forests in the state (outside the National Park) without the help of the people who live in or near the forests. It is on record that Cross River State is very rich in natural resources and the most important of these is the forest. So if the people of Cross River State are to improve their lives they must use the forest more wisely and sustainably. Why so? Proper management of forest resources by the communities could result in the following benefits:

- * forest resources including timber and non-timber forest products are often given in exchange for short term benefits to greedy and sometimes inexperienced loggers (Otu, 2001). This will cease.
- * local communities are often cheated as they derive little or nothing for the extensive exploitation of their forest resources. These benefits will start accruing to them since they will now be involved in the management of the forest resources.
- * participation of communities could serve as a means of checking connivance between some dubious forestry officials and illegal resource extractors.
- * community involvement could create a far reaching impact in influencing the attitude, perception and activities of the rural people towards the forest and its management.
- * it renews and sustains the rapport built between the Forestry Commission and the communities.
- * it avails the communities the opportunity of discussing with logging companies from a position of strength and understanding of the value of their forest resources.

7. Forest Facts

- a) Nearly 500 million people around the world are dependent on forests for their livelihoods
- b) Cross River State contains the largest amount of Tropical High forest in Nigeria: 850,000 Hectares. 30% of Cross River State is forested.
- c) 20,000 people are employed in timber extraction, processing and marketing in Cross River State.
- d) There are 45 local Forest Management Communities in Cross River State.
- e) Some areas in Cross River State forest contain up to 1000 species from over 500 genera of higher plants.

- f) Over 434 useful plants and animals exist in the forests of Cross River State generating over 700 non-timber forest products.
- g) The most important non-timber forest products (NTFP) are bush meat (including cutting grass, porcupine and small deer), chewing sticks, bush mango, cane rope and leafy vegetables like afang.
- h) Cross River State loses well over 7,000 Hectares of virgin tropical forest per year.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The main thrust of this paper was to assess the challenges before the Cross River State anti-deforestation commission vis-à-vis the traditional farming methods in Obubra Local Government Area. Our study has shown that in Obubra LGA, there has been an alarming rate of deforestation for subsistence farming and other reasons mentioned earlier. This trend has given rise to different policies and management strategies (the most recent being the Cross River State Forestry Commission and the Forestry Management Committees) all aimed at curbing the rate of deforestation currently plaguing the state.

We further learnt that issues relating to forest in Cross River State had been gazetted as far back as the 1940's, an indication that concerns for the forest and the advantages inherent therein have been a matter of concern even to the Colonial administrators. The paper has also shown that governments take the lead in this threat to our environment, not withstanding the fact that governments also take the lead in making laws, legislatures, policies and strategies on forest matters. This is not surprising because the fact remains that the problem and solution to the destruction of the forest is economic and economic.

Nevertheless, efforts to stop or slow deforestation have been attempted for many centuries (**without success**) because it has long been known that deforestation can cause environmental damage sufficient in some cases to cause societies to collapse. In Cross River State for instance the state Forestry Commission and the Forestry Management Committees are some of such bodies set up in an attempt by government to forestall the illegal deforestation of the state forest and to encourage the sustainable sourcing of forest resources.

Our submission is that although these policies are well intended and have great potential for success, there should be proper surveillance of the state's forest by the agencies concerned. Government should put in place proper enforcement parameters so that these laws could be enforced. The local communities should be properly educated on the dangers of poor farming methods and the harm it is causing them and the environment. New farming methods should be developed and intensified by using high-yield hybrid crops, greenhouse building gardens, etc.

Finally, government should create greater awareness and sensitize the local communities through radio and television jingles; to drive home the point that if forest is destroyed, those who live there will lose the context of their culture as their habitat disappears. Let the farmers who cut the forest for croplands know that they will ultimately face economic ruin because most of the rain forest soils cannot sustain their farming for more than two years. They should also be aware that denuded and exhausted farmlands are often used for live stoke pasture, but this too is limited to only a few years. So as forests are lost, humanity will lose many potential food crops and medical products. We will also suffer a terrific aesthetic lose because Forestry is not all about trees, it is about people; and it is about trees only in so far as trees serve the needs of people.

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Fig. 1: Illegal Logging & Transportation

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