

Project Update: May 2017

Introduction

The project is scaling up the study and conservation of forest elephants in southwestern Nigeria with particular emphasis on elephants of Omo forest reserve. The project seeks to establish patterns of utilization of both cultivated and non-cultivated plant species by elephants, taking into account seasonal variation in the project site. The implication of the feeding patterns for crop raiding activities by elephants in surrounding farmlands will be examined. The project also aims at promoting public understanding of the precarious situation of the forest elephants through community education and support. In addition, conservation facilities in the project area are to be rehabilitated for enhanced research and ecotourism activities bordering on the forest elephants.

Activities and Achievements

The project activities begin with a review of project objectives, identifying possible challenges/constraints, and delimitations to successful project implementation. Thereafter, sensitisation and planning meetings were held with community stakeholders in forest enclaves. We recognised the need for us to step up sensitivity and awareness on elephant conservation in communities within the project area. There are indications that a few people within some of the communities still have a negative attitude towards elephant conservation in the area. There is an emerging relationship in people's attitudes towards elephant conservation and land use for farming, especially in core elephant habitats. Against this backdrop, the need to promote public understanding of the precarious situation of the forest elephants through community education and support in the project area was top on our agenda. Inevitably, people are part of the problem of species conservation and public education and outreach will be part of the solution.

We organised community-based conservation education/outreach programmes, which were aimed at generating and promoting environmental awareness as well as creating capacity at local level for responsible behaviour towards the elephants and other wildlife species in the area. The outreach programmes were also designed to increase understanding of elephant conservation issues, exchange opinions and experiences, and establish a dialogue among sectors of the community. It entails education and extension programmes. We have covered three important communities in the last few months including Aba-Bridge, Tamitami and Sojukorodo.

There were two sessions of the programme held in each community. The first session involved a display of wildlife diversity of Omo forest reserve. Community members were asked to identify the animals in local language (Yoruba) with a reward for each correct answer. The reward was in form of gift items including t-shirts, key holders, writing pens and bottle openers, all carrying important conservation messages. The animals displayed were porcupine (Oore in Yoruba), bushbuck (Igala in Yoruba), duiker (Etu in Yoruba), buffalo (Efon in Yoruba), bushpig (Elede igbo in Yoruba), mangabey (Owe in Yoruba), mona monkey (Edun pupa in Yoruba), pangolin (Aika in Yoruba), civet cat (Eta in Yoruba), and elephant (Erin in Yoruba).

The second session was a documentary show entitled “The Queen” by the National Geographic Wild. The documentary revealed the challenges faced by a herd of elephants traversing the Kalahari Desert in Botswana. At the end of the show, community members were again asked a number of questions in relation to the documentary with reward of gift items. Thereafter, there were interactive sessions that afforded community members opportunities to ask different questions on the natural history of elephants while the project team proffered satisfactory answers. It was a revelation that allowed some myths and misconception about elephants and elephant conservation to be dispelled. It also helped increased the people’s knowledge of the forest, its biodiversity, and issues in elephant’s conservation.

Apart from the community-based conservation education, the project team has also commenced the administration of questionnaire with farmers to elicit information on elephant food plants in the area. This is a form of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) technique for data gathering, since locals who share their landscape with the natural frontier of biodiversity often possess some knowledge about the subject of interest. Another aspect of the questionnaire contains questions relating to crop-raiding activities by elephants in the project area.

The Nigeria Conservation Foundation has also begun the process of rehabilitating conservation facilities at Erin Camp within the project area in order to enhance research and ecotourism activities bordering on the forest elephants.

Overall, the community-based conservation education has a huge potential towards contributing to the conservation of elephants and other endangered species. The reception in all communities visited were homely and community members were generally enthusiastic. The benefit in the short run may not be visible, but in the long run it surely will. It is an investment for the future. If communities are knowledgeable and understand the importance of conservation, only then would they change their behaviour to support conservation initiatives. In the coming months, we plan to continue the community-based conservation education/outreach programme in more communities along with data collection on elephant feeding pattern.

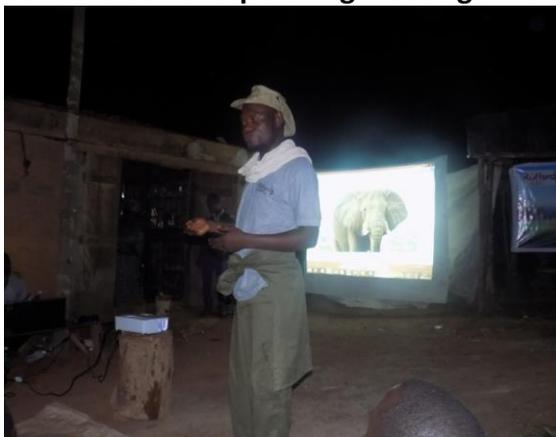
PHOTO'S



Meeting to review project objectives by team members



Sensitization and planning meetings with community stakeholders



Display of wildlife diversity of Omo forest reserve



Identifying the animals in local language (Yoruba)



Documentary show entitled "The Queen" by the National Geographic Wild



Interactive sessions on programme contents



Administration of questionnaire with farmers



Conservation facilities at Erin Camp by Nigeria Conservation Foundation