

# ECO-EMPOWER PROJECT

## Overview

The ECO-EMPOWER Project is a groundbreaking conservation initiative launched in the Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (BFMS) in Ghana, a site globally recognized for its unique blend of biodiversity and indigenous cultural protection of primates. Spearheaded by Wild Fauna Foundation with funding from the Rufford Small Grants Foundation, this project has aimed to conserve the IUCN Critically Endangered Black and White Colobus Monkey through the integration of scientific ecological research, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), and women-led community engagement.

## Project Goal

Eco-empower aims to enhance the conservation of *Colobus vellerosus* and promote sustainable biodiversity protection by empowering indigenous women as agents of ecological stewardship and cultural custodianship.

## Key Actions

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**Traditional Knowledge Documentation:** Indigenous women shared rich insights into spiritual taboos, forest-use customs, and local species ecology. This documentation helps bridge traditional conservation with modern ecological science.

**Habitat Assessment and Ecological Surveys:** Baseline data were successfully collected to identify conservation threats and extinction risks facing the White-thighed Colobus (*Colobus vellerosus*) and propose mitigation strategies.

**Conservation Education & School Outreach:** Over 1000 students from four local schools were engaged through interactive conservation education and an art and sports competition, fostering youth involvement in wildlife protection.

**Empowering Indigenous Women:** Three intensive training sessions built capacity in participatory research, leadership, and sustainable conservation practices for 35 women leaders. Women were empowered to take frontline roles in sustainable conservation and community advocacy.

**Community Engagement:** Workshops and community dialogues were held with local chiefs, elders, and youth to address conservation threats and develop a shared vision for safeguarding BFMS. The creation of community action plans and local conservation bylaws were key outputs.

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## Notable Outcome

**Empowerment and Leadership of Indigenous Women in Conservation:** The project trained 35 indigenous women in conservation, with two nominated for sanctuary leadership roles. This milestone challenged traditional gender roles and established women as credible conservation actors, fostering inclusive environmental governance and long-term sustainability through greater female participation in sanctuary management and local biodiversity decision-making.

**Documentation and Preservation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK):** The project recorded and archived indigenous women's ecological knowledge on wildlife, sacred groves, and biodiversity practices using interviews and storytelling. This preserved cultural wisdom threatened by modernization and created a valuable resource for integrating TEK into future scientific conservation planning and environmental education across generations.

**Identification of Conservation Threats and Community-Driven Mitigation Plans:** Participatory assessments revealed threats like habitat loss and reduced enforcement of traditional norms. In response, the community co-created solutions including firebreaks, patrols, and awareness campaigns. These culturally rooted, locally led interventions offer a sustainable model for safeguarding the ecosystems through shared responsibility and proactive co-management.

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## Women & Community Involvement

The ECO-EMPOWER Project actively empowered indigenous women through hands-on training in biodiversity conservation, leadership, and participatory sanctuary management. This initiative provided women with a voice in local environmental governance, including nominating two for roles on the BFMS management committee.

The project promoted intergenerational knowledge-sharing, encouraging women to preserve and apply their traditional ecological knowledge in modern conservation efforts. This fostered pride, cultural identity, and environmental stewardship.

Community involvement was further enhanced through outreach, school programs, and joint conservation activities, deepening local commitment to protecting the sanctuary.

By challenging gender norms and uniting the community around a shared conservation vision, ECO-EMPOWER has built a strong foundation for sustainable, inclusive conservation in Boabeng-Fiema.

## Looking Ahead

Building on these achievements, the ECO-EMPOWER team plans to expand its reach by developing a community- and women-led conservation action plan, scaling activities into neighbouring communities and schools, and strengthening collaborations with government agencies and NGOs.

## Acknowledgement

The ECO-EMPOWER Project was made possible by the Rufford Foundation, and supported by local partners such as the Wild Fauna Foundation and the Ghana Wildlife Division, and the dedicated communities of Boabeng and Fiema. Special appreciation goes to the women leaders, traditional authorities, and young conservation champions who inspired a new era of inclusive, community-led conservation.

