

Ecology, distribution and mobilizing community-conservation of “Mwanamphepo”: Focus on *Cissus aristolochiifolia* (VU) and *Ampelocissus africana* var *migeodii* (CR EN) in Mulanje Mountain

The project aims to collect baseline data on habitat ecology, inventory and community perceptions through market surveys and Training of trainers and eventually, advocate for inclusion of the two(2) focal species into the national plant red data list.

For this first part of the project, reconnaissance and community survey were done, although, the first activity of the project was meant to be ‘conducting Forest Inventory’. However, the first two(2) months were dedicated to organizing site and project permits from the Department of Forestry in Mulanje and the University of Malawi Reg Ethics Committee(UNIMAREC), respectively. The reconnaissance and community interviews were conducted from the 18th to 22nd August. With each day dedicated to one village of the four(4) that were surrounding the mountain.

Since the mountain borders between Mulanje and Phalombe districts as the map below shows, four(4) villages that fall within Mulanje Mountain were selected.

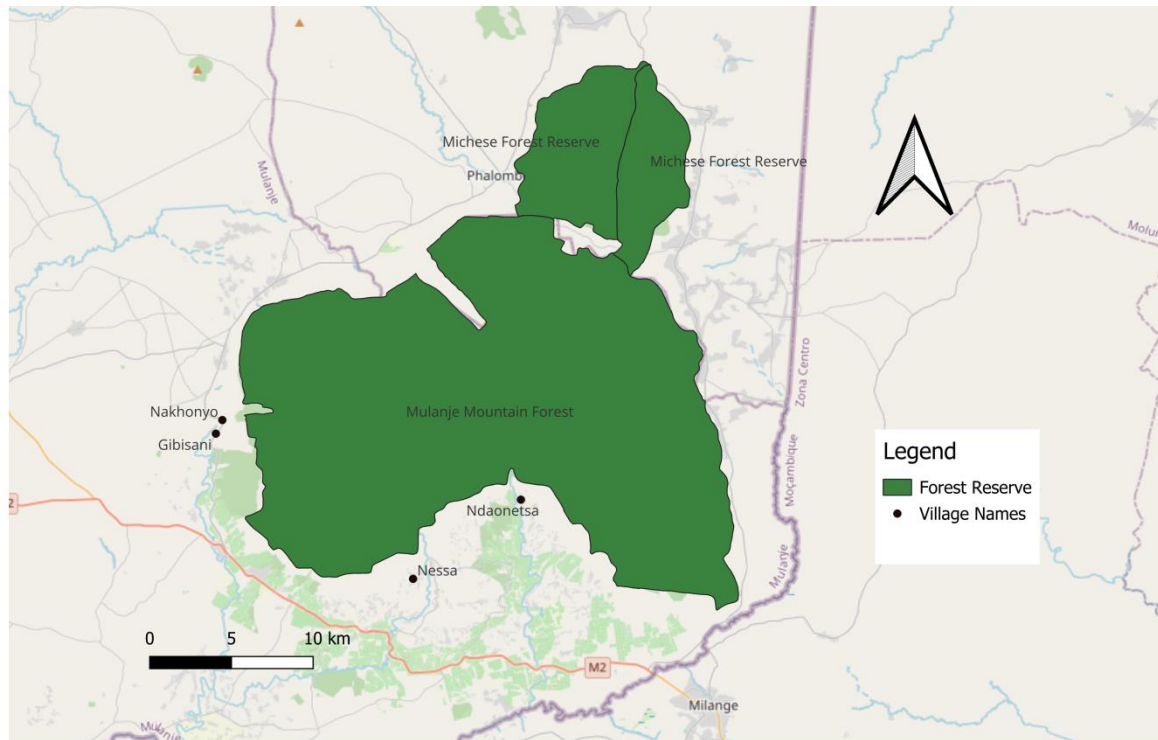


Fig 1: A map showing the selected villages respective of Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve

We were using community leaders as key informants to assess the understanding of the value of “Mwanamphepo” species, harvesting strategies and exploitation levels. The questionnaires were drafted to meet/probe at these areas(the sheet of questionnaires has been provided). Representatives of the Village Natural Resource Committee(VNRC), Traditional Healers(TH), Traditional Birth Attendants(TBA) were selected by members of each the group each from the four(4) villages.



Fig 2: Showing interaction with representatives of the Village Natural Resource Committees(Left) Traditional Healers(Centre) and Traditional Birth Attendants(Right)

From these interviews, the plants flower during the rainy season(November-April). During the time of this field trip, the leaves of these species were all shed hence the reason why the Forest inventory was moved as an adaptive measure to November. All the interviewees highlighted that the “Mwanamphepo” species are harvested by roots this is based on the beliefs that ‘leaves of all these “Mwanamphepo” species can induce labour but roots carry more power than leaves’. The THs mentioned that most of the species are found in lower elevations of the mountain hence they are also be found in land below the mountain(customary land). To the contrary, the VNRCs in these four(4) villages spoke of abundance of these species rather than being aware of the declining numbers. Three(3) of four(4) TBAs mentioned that they deal with atleast five(5) cases/ day on average of pregnant women seeking “Mwanamphepo” species for labour. One of the recommendations for the project by the assessor/evaluators was to also engage with local land managers. Besides, writing to the Forestry officers and members of the; Wildlife Environmental Society of Malawi(WESM), National Herbarium and Botanic Gardens(NHBG), Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust(MMCT) -we reached out to the committee responsible for shortlisting threatened species in Malawi into the National Redlist, the conversation was pleasant and the project has been taken onboard for the processes.



Fig 2: Showing derivatives of the roots being sold by some traditional healers

These interviews were key in mapping the next steps of the project. Therefore, the interviews justified the need for community engagement/awareness campaign. Based on the frequency of the requests for the medicinal plants as testified by the TBAs and THs entails that the demand that these species is high. Therefore, this is also an additional incentive for easier adoption of community. Sustainable harvesting can also be advocated for since it was mentioned that the leaves have a similar properties. Therefore, the next steps will be conducting forest inventories and setting up community gardens and consequently, preparing reports demonstrating engagements with the land managers and the national Red data list committee.