

Primate Conservation and Environmental Education: Re-filling the Empty Forests

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“Pana Ebo?” means, “where are the monkeys?” in the local language of Iko. During the summer of 2009, I spent six weeks investigating this question in the Iko Esai Community Forest in the Cross River State in Nigeria. This area is known as the “people’s paradise” because it is home to the remaining 10% of tropical forests found in Nigeria and the people are known for their caring disposition. I worked alongside the Centre for Education, Research, Conservation of Primates and Nature (CERCOPAN), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that has worked in Cross River State for the last fifteen years investigating empty forest syndrome and piloting an environmental education program.

A forest is deemed empty when the fauna has been depleted by hunting to the point where its ecological structure and the actual or potential economic role of the forest has been altered. To assess the forest health I conducted line-transect surveys (focusing on diurnal primates), habitat mapping, and helped with the collection of phenology data. In order to gauge the community’s use of the forest, I collaborated with CERCOPAN researchers to determine the types of non-forest timber products removed each day from the forest and the number of individual hunters entering the forest. I created an overnight tropical forest ecosystem and primate conservation education module that brought twelve students from the local secondary school to experience the sights and sounds of the rainforest first hand using the forest as our classroom.

One of the primary objectives of my visit was to learn about the communities’ views on primate conservation and forest preservation. I conducted informal interviews with the local chiefs, ex-hunters, and women, attended chief council and hunter’s group meetings, and spent time interacting with school children to determine their skill level. My initial



findings show that this forest could be suffering from empty forest syndrome due to unsustainable hunting practices but the community seems committed to learning more about sustainable development. My dissertation work will focus on the behavioral ecology of the endangered red-eared monkey (*Cercopithecus erythrotis*), developing methods to test for empty forest syndrome, working with hunters to implement alternative livelihoods, and developing environmental education programs targeted at hunters and women.

My stay in Nigeria resulted in lifelong friendships, amazing cultural experiences, and unforgettable primate rehabilitation work. I want to dedicate this report to the memory of Chief Patrick, a man who was loved by all who met him and will forever be missed.

Carrie Vath is a doctoral student in the School of Natural Resources and Environment. Her summer 2009 research was supported by a CAS pre-dissertation research award and by the Katherine Ordway Endowment of the Florida Museum of Natural History.