

## **COMPLEMENTING LEGISLATION: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE CONSERVATION OF WILDLIFE – EXAMPLES FROM GHANA**

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### **Introduction**

Ghana's wildlife conservation laws, as they pertain to several other African countries, are considered inadequate in the conservation of wildlife. This is either because legislation has been slow in dealing with evolving wildlife challenges, or because the laws are old, obsolete, and incapable of effectively dealing with wildlife issues. In Ghana, an attempt was made in 1995 by the undersigned, and Professor David Favre, to consolidate and modernize all of Ghana's wildlife laws into one homogenous piece of legislation to bring it in line with current practices under CITES and other international legislation. However, this attempt has still not seen the light of day, and Ghana still operates wildlife laws under its main legislation passed as, "*The Wildlife Preservation Act*" in 1960.

Various regulations to the principal Act have been passed, but without an amendment, these regulations have been ineffectual in tackling emerging wildlife issues.

Of prime importance to many wildlife enthusiasts has been the issue of progressing from a state of '*preservation*' to one of '*sustainable use or conservation*', consonant with the aspirations of the many communities that share a home and life with wildlife.

In the light of the obvious inadequacies of legislation as it exists now, there must be some backup plan that either deliberately or inadvertently addresses wildlife issues. In many African countries, there can be found a plethora of cultural values and practices whose consequences, though not always intended, have resulted in tremendous conservation roles for wildlife.

### Cultural Values and Practices

Culture has been defined as '*the way of life of a people*', or '*the systems and beliefs of a people that shape their thoughts, lifestyle and conduct*'

It is impossible to define '*the culture*' of any one country in Africa. The diversity and multiplicity of ethnic groupings makes this impossible. Notwithstanding this, a common trend of '*respect and sanctity of life*' creates near universal practices among the many ethnic groups. It is part of the universal belief of many ethnic groups that many species of animals are sacred, and therefore should not be harmed unnecessarily. Indeed among many groups, fetish groves are created where animals found within them are considered '*sacred*', and protected from hunters. For many of the people who practice these cultural practices, a strong thread of the sacredness of the groves is attached to them. Indeed in some instances, fetish priests guard any entrance to the groves, and elaborate rituals must be performed before entry will be allowed. The country Ghana is divided into ten regions consisting of several ethnic groupings with diverse but often related belief systems. It is estimated that there are over one thousand sacred groves in Ghana and each contain wildlife, water sources and the like.

Despite the advent of modern lifestyles, many indigenes still revere their culture, and by so doing, have come to appreciate a lot of the values that deal with the relationships and sacredness of animals to human beings.

### The Aboakyer or Deer Hunt Festival of the Winneba People

Winneba is a coastal town in Ghana that lies within the Central Region of the country. It is approximately an hour drive from the capital city, Accra. It is a fishing town with a rich cultural heritage. The main festival of the people, the deer hunt festival, takes place in May of each year. During the festival, two tribal war groups are sent out by the chief of the town to enter the otherwise sacred fetish grove and catch live a deer and bring it to the chief. After performing certain rituals, the chief will offer the deer as a sacrifice to the gods. The animal is not to be killed but caught with the bare hands, and the group that first succeeds in catching the deer is deemed the victor for the year. However, in between

festivals, no hunting or very limited hunting of the deer is permitted, as the animal is deemed ‘sacred’ and fit only as a sacrifice to the gods on the festival day. By considering the deer as the god’s yearly sacrifice, the people of Winneba are inadvertently conserving this animal which could otherwise have become extinct due to unbridled hunting for its hide and meat.

### **Nananom Mpow or Ancestors Fetish Grove**

About eighty years ago, a sacred grove was created in the Central region among one of the large ethnic groups in Ghana. The grove, the fantis, was declared outlawed to all people at all times. The purpose for this was that the grove was the abode of the gods, and because of the sacredness attached to the gods, human beings were not to go into the grove because they might disturb them. For the forty or so years that the sacredness of the grove was accepted by the populace, no hunting of wildlife or picking of plant life was allowed. Various species of animals and plants were thus preserved again unwittingly. But sadly, since the advent of so called, “civilized behaviour,” the sacred grove has been heavily compromised and hunting and collecting of wildlife goes on all year, resulting in the possibility that some wildlife may become extinct in the future.

### **The Buabeng – Fiema Monkey Sanctuary**

Somewhere close to the geographical center of the Republic of Ghana lies the Brong Ahafo Region. In this region are the villages of Buabeng, Fiema and Dotobaa. The people of these villages are mostly farmers. Surrounding the villages are vast forests, and there is a 4.5 kilometre sacred grove. Several decades ago, the sanctity of this grove was well respected, but over the years, due to population growth and its consequent pressure on existing land, farmers and hunters have gradually been conducting their farming and hunting activities close to the sacred groves, and some probably inside the groves.

Unlike the other examples above, where the effect of conservation was not necessarily caused by deliberate governmental intervention, for the above sanctuary, a deliberate plan was put in place to create a conservation which will not only protect the

monkeys in their natural habitat but also allow the villagers to pick up plant life (mostly for medicinal purposes and food) and in the process create a hub for tourism.

A teacher by the name of Daniel Kwaku Akowuah was able to get the local assembly to pass a law creating an eighty hectare sanctuary to protect the Mona and black and white Colobus monkeys which abound in the grove and number about three hundred and fifty. The law prohibited the hunting and killing of the monkeys upon pain of arrest, prosecution, and a fine. Though initially resisted, the law has stood the test of time, and this sanctuary is now one of the most popular tourist destinations in Ghana.

It must be added that the success of this conservation effort was achieved because of the involvement of the local population in the exercise, who view the monkeys as part of their spiritual heritage. It is a good omen for the monkeys who deserve protection.

### **The Tavi Adidome Monkey Sanctuary**

This sanctuary lies in the Volta Region of the Republic of Ghana, and is one of the eco-tourism projects supported by the United States government, which in the year 2004, commissioned a visitor's reception center at the sanctuary. As with the other sanctuaries in Ghana, this one has also evolved out of a grove held sacred by the local people in the area. In this grove are the Mona and Patas monkeys, which are regarded as gods, and as such, cannot be hunted and or killed by anyone. The greater protection of the monkeys, therefore, lies not so much in the deliberate conservation efforts made by government, but in the spirituality accorded the monkeys by the local people. The monkeys freely roam the villages, pick food from peoples' homes, and are generally treated as kith and kin. When a monkey dies, elaborate funerals are conducted as for human beings, and the monkeys are buried in their own cemeteries. This is indeed one of the examples where strong traditional practices coupled with governmental intervention has created a strong conservation culture amongst native inhabitants.

### **The Paga Crocodile Pond**

Paga is a village that lies in the northernmost part of Ghana and on the border of the Ghana/Burkina Faso. In this rural setting lies the famous crocodile pond, which is a major tourist attraction. Oral history suggests that a hunter, while being pursued by a lion, became trapped between the lion and the pond. In his anxiety, he made a pact with a crocodile in the pond that if it carried him across the pond, so as to escape from the pursuing lion, he and his descendants will forever abstain from eating crocodile meat. Upon his successful escape, he established a village near the pond which to this day has maintained his sacred promise to the crocodile. Due entirely to this tale, crocodiles abound in the pond, and are neither killed nor eaten. There is a strong belief that every descendant of the hunter has a personal crocodile that crawls to the person's house and dies if the human being dies.

The crocodiles have also become a major tourist attraction. Upon arrival at the pond, a visitor has to buy a chicken which he hands over to a crocodile caller, who in turn calls the crocodiles to come for their meal. The crocodile will usually come up and take the chicken from the caller without harming him. In some instances, the chicken is thrown into the pond whereupon the crocodile will surface to eat it. Anytime a crocodile has come up to the surface onto dry land, it has been possible for total strangers to sit by it, or hold its tail without any harm. Sometimes, children in the village take turns riding on the backs of the crocodiles. Again it can be seen that because of a spiritual connection to the crocodile, it has become, without any legislation, a protected species.

### **Conclusion**

It is obvious that cultural practices, to the degree and extent as elaborated upon above, can be beneficial to both human beings and animals, and can help promote conservation of endangered animal species in an atmosphere of co-existence with human beings. Sadly, however, 'civilization' and a modern way of life seems to be gradually eroding this noble attitude towards conservation. It is hoped that the various animal rights groups scattered all over Ghana and Africa will push towards a preservation of those cultural attitudes that help in this regard.

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*Mr. Arhin, with the assistance of Professor David Favre, conducted extensive research on Ghana's wildlife laws which culminated in the redrafting of Ghana's wildlife laws in 1995. Recently, Mr. Arhin served as vice chair of the American Bar Association's Animal Law Committee, and was a guest-speaker at the Animal Law Conference held in San Diego, California, in April 2004.*