

Finding the bush meat balance in Ghana



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BY **DZIFA AZUMAH**

Wildlife plays a crucial role in the socio-cultural development of Africa, particularly in Ghana, where it features prominently in festivals, the arts, drama and folklore. Apart from serving as totemic symbols for several clans, wildlife provides animal protein in the diets of many peoples. And, many species of wildlife, ranging from insects to reptiles to mammals, are a delicacy and provide a major source of income for some rural communities.

Nicholas Ankude, executive director of the Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission, says research shows that the annual volume of bush meat harvested by hunters in Ghana recently was estimated at about 384 000 tons with a value of US\$350-million. Total annual consumption is estimated at about 225 300 tons, which is worth about US\$205-million, with the remaining either being exported or left to go to waste.

"The figures do not pass through the national accounting system and, therefore, the contribution of wildlife to the national economy may be difficult to appreciate," he said.

Direct earnings from wild animal-based small enterprises such as export of live animals for the pet trade are more tangible. This trade is worth more than \$600 000 annually. In 2000, Ghana earned more than five billion cedis from exporting reptiles, mammals, amphibians, scorpions and spiders. The highest revenue earner was the python at 2.7-billion cedis.

Ernest Lamptey, a senior wildlife officer of the Ghana Wildlife Division, says: "The future of the trade for the export of these reptiles, mammals and amphibians lies in the exporters breeding the animals themselves," he stressed.

He said exporters of pythons, for instance, breed more than 80% of the reptiles. They collect pregnant females from the wild and keep them until they lay their eggs. The young pythons are monitored until they are ready for export.

Lamptey says although the department allows the exportation of almost all animals, including chameleons, lizards, wall geckos, black cobras, tortoises, giant rats, scorpions, millipedes and some insects such as the praying mantis: "all animal species have quotas which exporters are not expected to exceed".

Animals are hunted and collected from all

over the country in sacks and stored that way till they are exported to Europe and the USA where they were used as pets, delicacies and for research work by universities and other institutions.

Wildlife also plays a small but important role in Ghana's tourism industry, providing great potential for future development of eco-tourism. The Kakum National Park in the Central Region attracts visitors interested in watching wildlife from the canopy walkway. Admittedly, Ghana cannot compete with the wildlife attractions of Eastern and Southern Africa. But it can offer a cocktail of attractions such as beaches, forts and castles and a rich variety of cultural displays and festivals.

Okyeame Ampadu-Agyei, country director of Conservation International-Ghana, says: "Our natural forests and timber industry depend on animals such as bats, birds, elephants and monkeys for pollination, seed dispersal and regeneration. We cannot have a natural forest without these animals."

In fact, most of our economic activities based on renewable natural resources depend to some extent on the complex interactions of wild flora and fauna. Though the economic benefits are often obscured and difficult to quantify, it does not make them any less real.

In addition to economic benefits, wildlife plays an important role in Ghana's culture and traditions. Many of the people recognise particular totemic animals, which feature in folklore and receive particular reverence and protection.

The monkeys around Buabeng and Fiema villages, near Nkoranza in the Brong Ahafo Region, which now attract a large number of visitors, have flourished as a result of such protection.

Ankude says wildlife is economically, ecologically and culturally important. Ghana has 222 different species of mammals and 721 birds, about four times as many as in the United Kingdom, a country of similar size. The country also provides sanctuary to many species listed as internationally threatened with extinction.

These include 34 plants, 13 mammals, eight birds and two reptiles as well as some endemic species.

Ghana has a special responsibility as a member of the international community to protect this extraordinary biodiversity. Ghana is signatory to important international conventions, including the Biodiversity Convention, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance and the World Heritage Convention.

Substantial wildlife resources exist outside protected areas, which are subject to various legislative instruments intended to ensure sustainable use. Ankude says, for example, that hunters are by law required to obtain licences to hunt and may do so during a designated hunting season.

Group hunting is outlawed except for cultural purposes (with permits) and different species are given various degrees of legal protection through their inclusion on the appropriate legislative schedules.

But wildlife is being over-hunted to a point where the dwindling number of animals is threatening the food security of both rural and urban communities. This state of affairs, Ankude says, is mainly due to non-observance of the regulations coupled with inadequate support from the law enforcement agencies.

One of the measures to regulate hunting and ensure sustainable use is the institution of a closed season that begins from August to December every year. This is the period when most wild animals, particularly mammals such as the duiker, bush pig, honey badger, pangolins, porcupines and royal antelope, among others, gestate.

It is, therefore, imperative that these animals are given a respite from hunting to wean their young for a successful recruitment into the next generation.

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