VANISHING HERITAGE

A Policy Brief on Nigeria's Biodiversity Loss and the Path to Community-Led Recovery



Dataphyte Foundation

EARTH JOURNALISM NETWORK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigeria's rich biodiversity, a cornerstone of national development and economic stability, is under severe and escalating threat.

This policy brief synthesises evidence from ten investigative reports to reveal a consistent pattern of biodiversity loss driven by unregulated development, illegal logging and farming, unregulated extractive operations, security-related activities, cultural and market demand for wildlife, and pervasive poverty. A critical governance gap: weak institutional frameworks, poor enforcement of existing laws, and a lack of coordinated action increase these pressures.

Key findings highlight the devastating impacts of specific projects, such as the destruction of Akwa Ibom's Stubbs Creek Forest for a refinery and highway, and the human-wildlife conflict triggered by illegal farming and logging activities in Ogun's Omo Forest. The brief also documents the collapse of aquatic ecosystems in Ogoniland due to oil spills, the local extinction of vultures in Kano from demand for charms, and the rapid decline of donkey populations in Sokoto for illegal trade.

In the absence of strong government protection, communities have emerged as frontline defenders of their environments. Successful models like the community ranger programme in Okomu National Park and the long-standing Ecoguard initiative in the Ekuri Forest demonstrate that locally-led conservation, when supported, can yield significant positive results. However, these efforts are often under-resourced and unsustainable without formal backing.

To reverse these trends, Nigeria must adopt a coordinated, community-centred governance model. This brief recommends: strengthening the enforcement of existing environmental laws; government partnerships with local communities by providing training, legal backing, and funding; investing in monitoring capacity; and ensuring sustained financial and technical support for conservation initiatives.

By closing persistent enforcement gaps and empowering communities as co-custodians, Nigeria can safeguard its natural heritage, support livelihoods, and secure a sustainable future.



01. INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity loss in Nigeria has become a critical issue, especially as climate change rises to the forefront of national policy discussions. The growing recognition that ecosystem degradation and climate change are interlinked calls for coordinated action to preserve habitats, safeguard species, and sustain human livelihoods.

The protection of Nigeria's ecosystems and biodiversity is not merely an environmental concern; it is a cornerstone of national development, social equity, and economic stability. Ensuring sustainable use of natural resources, including decisive action against wildlife crime and overexploitation, is essential for maintaining the ecological services that support livelihoods, drive economic growth, and secure a sustainable future for all citizens.

1.1. Nigeria's Biodiversity Landscape

Nigeria's rich biodiversity spans a remarkable range of ecosystems that mirror the country's diverse geography and climate. Covering an estimated 923,769 square kilometres, Nigeria's landscapes stretch from the arid Sahel savannahs of the north to the lush coastal swamps and mangroves that border the Atlantic Ocean in the south.

The nation is home to an impressive variety of species, including forest and savannah elephants, the critically endangered Cross River gorilla, the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, hippopotamuses, manatees, sea turtles, and an array of terrestrial, freshwater, estuarine, and marine species that make up the country's ecological wealth.[1]

According to data from the Key Biodiversity Area, Nigeria has 29 key biodiversity areas.[2] Notably, the Niger Delta, which hosts the third-largest mangrove ecosystem, is one of Nigeria's major biodiversity hotspots. The country's montane and lowland rainforests, as well as its expansive savannah regions, all support critical habitats that sustain both wildlife and human livelihoods, and share this distinction.

1 Egbe, S. (2025, August 28). Understanding Nigeria's biodiversity & ecosystem crisis [PowerPoint slides]. Nigerian Conservation Foundation.

2 Key Biodiversity Areas. (n.d.). Site search. Retrieved January 5, 2026, from https://www.keybiodiversityareas.org/sites

Currently, Nigeria has an estimated 864 bird species, 117 amphibians, 203 reptiles, over 775 fish species, 285 mammals, and more than 4,715 vascular plant species, with many additional species likely still undocumented. Yet, this remarkable biodiversity is under severe threat. Human activities, particularly land-use change, unsustainable hunting, logging, and fishing, are driving the rapid decline of the country's natural resources, eroding ecosystems and pushing numerous species toward endangerment or extinction.[3]

1.2. Biodiversity Loss

According to the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, over the last decade, 35 bird species, 19 amphibian species, 24 fish species, 37 mammal species, 4 reptiles, and 168 plant species have become critically endangered or completely extinct. The most at risk are the pangolin (*Phataginus spp.*), African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*), Nigeria–Cameroon chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*), leopard (*Panthera pardus*), and African grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*). Other threatened species include Sclater's guenon, drill monkey, red colobus, manatee, dama gazelle, and several endangered vultures, such as the white-backed and hooded vultures. Species such as the African wild dog (*Lycaon pictus*) have become extinct.

The combined pressures of human activity, growing population, weak environmental governance, and climate change have left many of the country's once-thriving habitats increasingly vulnerable. Expanding agriculture, illegal logging, mining, oil exploration, infrastructure development, and wildlife trade are rapidly degrading ecosystems across the country. With a population exceeding 200 million and growing at one of the fastest rates globally, demand for land, water, and other resources is soaring. This surge in consumption intensifies competition for space, fuels deforestation, overexploitation, and habitat conversion at alarming rates. The result is a steady decline in ecological balance, where economic expansion and human survival often come at the expense of environmental sustainability.

A report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) stated that Nigeria has emerged as a central hub for the illicit trade in wildlife products, linking Africa's rich biodiversity to lucrative Asian markets. In 2016 alone, Asian countries imported

3 Egbe, S. (2025, August 28). Understanding Nigeria's biodiversity & ecosystem crisis [PowerPoint slides]. Nigerian Conservation Foundation

4 Ibid

approximately 1.4 million cubic metres of rosewood from West Africa, with 58 per cent originating from Nigeria. The country is also a major exit point for ivory trafficking, with Nigeria-linked seizures escalating sharply over the years: 5,629 kg between 2009–2011, 11,769 kg between 2012–2014, and 12,211 kg between 2015–2017. By 2019, at least 51 tonnes of pangolin scales originating from Nigerian ports were seized globally.

Seizures intensified in 2021, illustrating both the scale and sophistication of the trade. In January, Apapa Port yielded 4,752 kg of elephant tusks, 5,329 kg of pangolin[5] scales, 5 kg of rhino horns, 103 kg of suspected lion and wild cat skulls, and 76 pieces of processed timber. By July, arrests accompanied the confiscation of 7,167 kg of pangolin scales, 4.6 kg of pangolin claws, and 888.5 kg of ivory. In September of that same year, authorities seized an additional 25 kg of ivory, while earlier seizures included over 1 tonne of pangolin scales and pangolin claws.

The ten investigative reports by the fellows have documented further site-specific threats, including oil spillages that emptied fishing waters, highways and refineries that erased swathes of forest, illegal farming that fuelled human–elephant conflict, and a surge in wildlife persecution tied to cultural practices. At the same time, community responses, local rangers and innovative conservation experiments was highlighted, as well as identified recurring drivers of biodiversity decline and assessed institutional failures that sustain these trends.

By treating these journalistic accounts as systematic evidence, the study aims to move from isolated stories to actionable policy insights that can inform conservation, development planning and accountability mechanisms across Nigeria. The other parts of this brief is structured in six sections. The next section contextualise the Nigeria Biodiversity conservative governance framework. The third, fourth, and fifth sections discussed the methodology for data collection and the findings on the drivers, threats, and community-led responses in Nigeria Biodiversity ecosystems respectively. The sixth and seventh sections present the challenges and actionable recommendations to prevent Biodiversity loss and strengthen Biodiversity conservative governance in Nigeria.

5 Federal Department of Forestry & National Stakeholders Forum for Combatting Wildlife and Forest Crime in Nigeria. (2022). National strategy to combat wildlife and forest crime in Nigeria, 2022–2026 [PDF]. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

02. NIGERIA'S BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATIVE FRAMEWORK

Nigeria's biodiversity governance system is built on a complex framework of international treaties, national strategies, federal statutes, state-level regulations, and overlapping institutional mandates.

2.1. International and Regional Instruments

Nigeria is a party to all the major biodiversity conventions, including Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), Ramsar Conventions on Wetland, The Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA), The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), World Heritage, Nagoya, and Cartagena. These commitments give Nigeria both responsibilities (laws, enforcement, reporting) and opportunities (access to international funding, technical help, partnerships) to protect biodiversity.

2.1.1. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

It is the international legal instrument for the conservation of biological diversity - the sustainable use of its components and the equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilisation of genetic resources. The CBD has been ratified by 196 nations.[24]

The CBD covers biodiversity at all levels: ecosystems, species and genetic resources. It also covers biotechnology through the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety[25], the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing[26] and most prominently, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF) is a landmark international agreement adopted in December 2022 at the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15) to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, aiming for a vision of "living in

24 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). "Home." Accessed December 4, 2025. https://www.cbd.int/

harmony with nature" by 2050. It sets ambitious targets, like protecting 30% of land and sea (the "30x30" goal) and restoring degraded ecosystems. It is under the CBD framework.[27]

In line with its obligations under the Convention, Nigeria develops and implements its National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), which serves as the national blueprint for biodiversity management, conservation, and sustainable use.

2.1.2. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

It is a global agreement that regulates international trade in wildlife to ensure it is legal, traceable, and not harmful to species' survival. Adopted in 1973 and enforced since 1975, it requires member countries (184 Parties) to issue permits for trade in specified species, which are categorised in three appendices based on the level of protection they need.[28]

In Nigeria, CITES obligations are domesticated through the Endangered Species (Control of International Trade and Traffic) Act of 1985, which provides the legal basis for regulating and penalising the illegal trade of endangered flora and fauna.

25 The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety establishes international rules to ensure the safe handling and use of living modified organisms (LMOs), protecting biodiversity and human health from potential risks associated with modern biotechnology.

26 The Nagoya Protocol is a global agreement under the Convention on Biological Diversity that regulates access to genetic resources and the fair sharing of benefits that arise from their use.

27 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). Accessed December 15, 2025. https://www.cbd.int/gbf

28 CITES. “What Is CITES?” CITES Secretariat. Accessed December 4, 2025. https://cites.org/eng/node/130914

2.1.3. Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

An intergovernmental treaty adopted in 1971 in Ramsar, Iran, dedicated to the conservation and wise use of all wetlands. It aims to halt the worldwide loss of wetlands through three pillars of action: designating and protecting wetlands of international importance, promoting the "wise use" of all wetlands, and fostering international cooperation on wetland issues. A wide variety of natural and human-made habitats, from swamps and marshes to rivers and coral reefs, are included under its definition of a wetland. [29]

Nigeria has 11 officially designated Ramsar sites, reflecting its commitment to the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands of international importance. These sites include ecologically critical areas such as the Hadejia–Nguru Wetlands, the Mali Lake Chad Wetlands, and the Niger Delta mangrove ecosystems.

2.1.4. The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

It is the first and only legally binding international agreement focused on sustainable land management and combating desertification. Adopted in 1994, the UNCCD aims to create a partnership between affected developed and developing countries to address the physical, biological, and socio-economic aspects of desertification in dry lands. Its work involves creating national action programs and fostering international cooperation to build resilience to climate change, prevent biodiversity loss, and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.[30]

2.1.5. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

An international treaty established to combat climate change by stabilising greenhouse gas concentrations. It provides the basis for international climate negotiations and is the parent treaty to subsequent agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement.

29 UNESCO. “Wetlands and Biodiversity.” Accessed December 4, 2025. https://www.unesco.org/en/biodiversity/wetlands

30 United Nations. “United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and Climate, Peace and Security.” Accessed December 4, 2025. https://www.un.org/climatesecuritymechanism/en/united-nations-convention-combat-desertification-unccd-and-climate-peace-and-security

The convention also organises the annual UN Climate Change Conferences, or COPs, where member states negotiate and decide on climate actions. Nigeria is a member state of this framework.[31]

By committing to global climate goals, Nigeria is required to integrate ecosystem-based adaptation, nature-based solutions, and low-carbon, climate-resilient development into its environmental and sectoral policies. Also, through climate finance mechanisms by the UNFCCC such as the Green Climate Fund[32], Nigeria gains opportunities to mobilise resources for conservation projects that simultaneously mitigate climate impacts and protect species.

2.1.6. The Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA)

It is an intergovernmental treaty under the Convention on Migratory Species that promotes coordinated conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats across Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. Administered by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), AEWA facilitates joint action among member states to ensure sustainable management, protection of flyways, and long-term survival of migratory waterbird species[33].

Nigeria is a key country for Palearctic–African migratory birds, with the Hadejia–Nguru Wetlands serving as a major stopover and wintering site. This globally important ecosystem provides critical floodplain and wetland habitats that support a high diversity of resident, intra-African, and Palearctic migrant bird species.[34]

31 United Nations. “United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Climate, Peace and Security.” Accessed December 4, 2025. https://www.un.org/climatesecuritymechanism/en/united-nations-framework-convention-climate-change-unfccc-and-climate-peace-and-security

32 Green Climate Fund. “Home.” Accessed December 5, 2025. https://www.greenclimate.fund/

33 UNEP. “AEWA – Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds.” Accessed December 4, 2025. https://www.unep-aewa.org/

34 Ringim, A., Magige, F., & Jasson, R. (2018). A Comparative Study of Species Diversity of Migrant Birds Between Protected and Unprotected Areas of the Hadejia-Nguru Wetlands, Nigeria. Tanzania Journal of Science, 43(1), 108–120. https://doi.org/10.4314/tjs.v43i1

Other international/regional biodiversity treaties or policies Nigeria is part of include West Africa Strategy on Combating Wildlife Crime, 2024, the Convergence Plan for the Sustainable Management and Utilisation of the Forest Ecosystems in West Africa, 2013, Convention of Migratory Species, 1979 and West African Regional Strategy for Combating Desertification, 2013.

2.2. National Policies And Strategies

As the country aligns with international conventions and agreements, there is an integration of national biodiversity policies to advance sustainability objectives. In Nigeria, customary and community-based laws often operate alongside, and sometimes beyond, formal regulatory frameworks, serving as critical instruments for local conservation. These traditional governance mechanisms, such as taboos, seasonal restrictions, and community-enforced protection rules, have become strategic pillars of community-led conservation initiatives, safeguarding forests, wetlands, and wildlife.

There are various national strategies and policies, including forestry laws, environmental policies, climate change initiatives, and water resource management, that guide biodiversity conservation in Nigeria.

2.2.1 National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP 2016–2020, extended)

This is the major strategy document that guides all forms of biodiversity conservation in the country. It provides Nigeria with a comprehensive roadmap for conserving biodiversity while aligning national actions with global commitments. It emphasises the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems, species, and genetic resources. Also, integrating biodiversity considerations into sectoral policies such as agriculture, forestry, mining, and infrastructure to strengthen governance and enforcement mechanisms.

There has been a proposal to update the NBSAP (2016 -2020) to NBSAP (2025–2030) to better align Nigeria's biodiversity agenda with the global Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. It contains the 23 national targets designed to halt and reverse

biodiversity loss by 2030, particularly ensuring that all high-biodiversity areas are effectively managed, and loss brought close to zero.

The Federal Ministry of Environment (FMEnv) is the lead agency responsible for the development, coordination, and implementation of Nigeria's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP 2016–2020, extended). The Ministry works in collaboration with relevant federal institutions, state agencies, research bodies, and civil society organisations to ensure the strategy aligns with national priorities and international biodiversity commitments.

2.2.2. Forestry Laws/Policies

Nigeria has forestry laws that govern activities in forested areas, particularly forest management, timber harvesting, and the regulation of forest-based industries. These laws are intended to safeguard forest resources, promote sustainable use, and balance economic development with long-term environmental stability. On paper, the framework is robust: it outlines rules for licensing, forest reserves, wildlife protection, community participation, and sustainable harvesting. However, in practice, these laws have not been fully effective. Weak enforcement, inadequate monitoring capacity, institutional inconsistencies, political interference, poor community engagement, and the growing pressures of illegal logging and land-use conversion all undermine compliance.[35]

Nigeria's forestry laws draw from a wide set of legal provisions at both the federal and state levels. Key constitutional mandates, such as Section 20 on environmental protection, Section 17(1)(d) on safeguarding natural resources, and Section 6(6)(c), which outlines the scope of judicial authority, form the foundational principles for environmental stewardship of the 1999 constitution. These are reinforced by a range of statutory instruments and policy frameworks, including the Forestry Ordinance of 1956, the (now repealed) Forestry Act of 1985, the Land Use Act of 1978 which vests land control in

35 Idehen, S., Bello, J. (2025). A review of forestry laws in Nigeria: How effective? International Journal of Law, Vol. 11 Issue 4. https://www.lawjournals.org/assets/archives/2025/vol11issue4/11077.pdf

state governments, the National Parks Decree of 1991 establishing protected areas, and the National Forest Policy of 2006 updated in 2020 to reflect emerging sustainability priorities. In addition, state-specific laws, such as the Edo State Forestry Law and similar regulations across other states, provide localised governance mechanisms that define forest management, licensing, enforcement, and community participation.[36]

The key Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) responsible for implementing and enforcing these laws and frameworks include:

1. Federal Ministry of Environment (FMEnv) – Overall coordination of environmental policies, National Forest Policy implementation, National Parks oversight, and international obligations related to biodiversity and forest management.
2. Federal Department of Forestry (under FMEnv) – Management, conservation, and regulation of forest resources under the Forestry Ordinance 1956 and related forestry laws.
3. National Park Service (NPS) – Management and protection of federal national parks, established under the National Parks Decree of 1991.
4. State Ministries of Environment / Forestry Departments – Enforcement of state forestry laws, including the Edo State Forestry Law, and management of state forest reserves.
5. Land Use and Allocation Authorities / State Land Registries – Administration of land tenure and allocation under the Land Use Act, 1978, affecting forest and biodiversity management.
6. Law Enforcement Agencies – Police, environmental task forces, and community forest guards support enforcement of forestry laws and anti-illegal logging measures.
7. Judiciary – Ensures legal accountability and adjudicates disputes arising from breaches of forestry and environmental laws, supported by constitutional provisions (Sections 17, 20, 6, 1999 constitution).

Together, these MDAs form a multi-tiered governance structure responsible for implementing, monitoring, and enforcing Nigeria's forest and biodiversity legal framework.

36 Idehen, S., Bello, J. (2025). A review of forestry laws in Nigeria: How effective? International Journal of Law, Vol. 11 Issue 4. https://www.lawjournals.org/assets/archives/2025/vol11issue4/11077.pdf

2.2.3. National Climate Change Policy

Nigeria's climate change policy framework is anchored on the goal of achieving low-carbon, climate-resilient development, with a long-term target of net-zero emissions by 2060. Key strategies include reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 32% by 2030, increasing the share of renewable energy to achieve universal electricity access by 2030, eliminating gas flaring, and promoting reforestation through the planting of 25 million trees.[37]

This climate agenda is supported by four major legal and policy instruments: the Climate Change Act 2021, the National Climate Change Policy and Response Strategy (NCCPRS 2021–2030), and the Energy Transition Plan (ETP), which collectively provide the legal, regulatory, and strategic framework for implementing climate mitigation and adaptation measures across sectors.

In Nigeria, the National Climate Change Policy is implemented and coordinated through a mix of federal, state, and community-level institutions:

1. Federal Ministry of Environment (FMEnv) – Lead agency responsible for overall coordination, policy formulation, integration into national development planning, and international reporting under the UNFCCC.
2. Department of Climate Change (within FMEnv) – Directly oversees climate change mitigation and adaptation programs, including greenhouse gas inventory, policy implementation, and monitoring.
3. Federal Ministry of Power, Works and Housing & Federal Ministry of Petroleum Resources – Collaborate on energy transition, renewable energy promotion, and reduction of gas flaring, aligning sectoral programs with climate policy.
4. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD) – Implements climate-smart agriculture, sustainable land management, and afforestation/reforestation initiatives, including the Great Green Wall.
5. State Ministries of Environment / Climate Change Units – Facilitate policy implementation at the subnational level, including local mitigation, adaptation, and community engagement programs.

37 Federal Republic of Nigeria. "Nigeria National Climate Change Policy 2021–2030." PreventionWeb. Accessed December 5, 2025. https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/nigeria-national-climate-change-policy-2021-2030

6. Community-Level Committees / Local Government Environmental Units – Support grassroots climate action, community-based adaptation, awareness campaigns, and local ecosystem restoration projects.
7. Regulatory and Research Agencies – NESREA enforces environmental standards related to climate change, while institutions like the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NiMet) provide data for climate monitoring and early warning systems.

This multi-level governance structure ensures that climate change policy is integrated across sectors, scales, and communities, supporting both national targets and local adaptation needs.

2.2.4 National Policy on Environment

Nigeria's National Environmental Policy provides the overarching framework for the management of the environment and natural resources, grounded in the constitutional mandate for environmental protection under Section 20 of the 1999 Constitution. Complementing this, the National Action Plan 2020 affirms the right to a healthy environment, reinforcing the country's commitment to sustainable development. Additional legal and policy instruments supporting environmental governance include Nigeria's Agenda 21, the NESREA Revised Code of Conduct (2024), and the National Guidelines for Environmental Audit.[38]

According to some experts and proven by majority of the findings in the reports, Nigeria's constitutional provisions on environmental protection remain largely inadequate, and existing environmental laws, policies, and regulations are fragmented, outdated, or inconsistent. Therefore, there is an urgent need for revision, harmonisation, and updating of the entire legal framework to meet global standards, strengthen enforcement, and ensure coherent, effective environmental governance across federal, state, and community levels.[39]

38 National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA). "Policies & Guidelines – NESREA." Accessed December 5, 2025. https://nesrea.gov.ng/policies-guidelines/

39 Ibid

The National Policy on Environment (NPE) in Nigeria is implemented and overseen through a combination of federal, state, and community institutions:

1. Federal Ministry of Environment (FMEnv) – The lead agency responsible for the formulation, coordination, and supervision of the NPE across all sectors and levels of government. It ensures that national environmental standards are integrated into development planning and policy implementation.
2. National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) – Enforces environmental laws, regulations, and standards, including those outlined in the NPE, across federal, state, and local levels.
3. Federal Ministry of Water Resources & Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD) – Collaborate on ecosystem management, pollution control, and sustainable land and water use, in line with the NPE objectives.
4. State Ministries of Environment / Environmental Protection Agencies – Implement and monitor compliance with the NPE at the state level, adapting policies to local environmental challenges.
5. Research and Regulatory Institutions – Agencies like the National Biosafety Management Agency (NBMA) and the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NiMet) provide data, technical expertise, and regulatory oversight to support policy implementation.

2.2.5. National Drought and Desertification Policy

The National Drought and Desertification Policy provides a structured framework for addressing water scarcity and land degradation, emphasising both prevention and long-term resilience. These policies promote early warning systems, sustainable land management practices such as agroforestry and shelterbelts, and multi-sectoral, integrated approaches that involve community engagement and participation. Initiatives under this policy are the Great Green Wall and the National Drought Plan.[40]

40 National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA). National Environmental (Desertification Control and Drought Mitigation) Regulations, 2011. Accessed December 5, 2025. https://www.nesrea.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Desertification_Control_and_Drought_Mitigation-Regulation-2011.pdf

The National Drought and Desertification Policy is implemented and overseen through a combination of federal, state, and community institutions:

1. Federal Ministry of Environment (FMEnv) - The Lead institution responsible for coordinating national actions on drought and desertification. It houses the Department of Drought & Desertification Control, coordinates national reporting to UNCCD and oversees implementation of the Great Green Wall and national mitigation programmes.
2. National Agency for the Great Green Wall (NAGGW) - It Implements afforestation, land restoration, water harvesting, and livelihood interventions in frontline states and leads Nigeria's contribution to the Pan-African Great Green Wall initiative.
3. National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) - it enforces regulations related to land degradation, vegetation protection, and sustainable land use.
4. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (FMAFS) - it leads sustainable land management (SLM), rangeland restoration, irrigation development, and climate-smart agriculture linked to drought resilience.
5. Federal Ministry of Water Resources - It manages water supply, drought early warning, watershed protection, and desertification mitigation through dams and irrigation systems.
6. National Meteorological Agency (NiMet) It provides early warning systems, seasonal climate predictions, and drought monitoring data.
7. National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA) - It uses satellite data for land degradation, vegetation cover monitoring, and dryland mapping.
8. National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) - It coordinates disaster management responses during severe drought events.
9. State Ministries of Environment & State Environmental Protection Agencies - It adapts national policy to state-level desertification challenges and implements afforestation, land restoration projects, and enforcement of environmental laws.
10. State Ministries of Agriculture & Water Resources - It drives state-level sustainable land management and drought adaptation programmes.

03. METHODOLOGY

This study draws on ten investigative reports, which focus on biodiversity, environmental degradation, and conservation in Nigeria. It captures key threats to biodiversity across regions. The reports, covering cases from Sokoto, Ogun, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Kano, Abuja and the Niger Delta, provide rich qualitative insights into habitat loss, pollution, human–wildlife conflict, and community-led conservation initiatives. The reports analysed are:

- How the Military's Counter-Insurgency and Flooding Endanger African Locust Trees in Sokoto State
- Illegal Farming and Logging Drive Human-Elephant Conflict in Omo Forest, Ogun State
- How Volunteer Community Rangers Lead the Fight for the Ekuri Forest, Cross River State
- Endangered Donkeys of Sokoto: Exploring the Hidden Drivers of Decline
- Fortune Charms Craze Threatens Vulture Population in Kano
- Okomu National Park: Inside Nigeria's Bold Community Conservation Experiment
- Cost of Development: How a Refinery and Highway Project Wiped Out Akwa Ibom's Stubbs Creek Forest
- Oil and Oblivion: How Spills Emptied Ogales Waters
- How Unregulated, Unchallenged Logging Depletes Valuable Trees in the Forest in Abuja
- How Youth Unemployment Drives Deforestation in Odual and Okolomade Communities in Rivers State

3.1. Data Collection

The data were gathered through a combination of direct field observation and community engagement. Fellows conducted on-the-ground visits to 10 communities across 7 states, collecting first-hand evidence on biodiversity loss, its impacts, and the community-driven responses emerging in these areas. They engaged directly with residents, farmers, hunters, traditional leaders, youth groups, and conservation volunteers to understand lived experiences and local knowledge. This methodology was intentionally designed to capture ground-level realities, document context-specific drivers of biodiversity loss, and assess how communities are responding in the absence of strong formal policy action.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The analysis of the collected data was organised using a structured framework that examined three interconnected dimensions: key threats, underlying drivers, and community-led responses.

This approach made it possible to systematically identify the specific pressures undermining biodiversity conservation, such as habitat loss, overexploitation, climate stressors, and weak governance, while also tracing the socio-economic, political, and cultural factors that fuel these pressures. In addition, the framework highlighted the innovative strategies employed by communities to safeguard their environments, offering valuable insights into locally-driven conservation practices. Together, these three pillars provided a comprehensive lens for understanding both the challenges and the solutions emerging across the study sites.

3.3. Limitations

This methodology has several limitations:

1. Access to underlying data: Investigative reports rely on journalistic methods rather than primary scientific surveys, so quantitative data on species populations or habitat extent may be limited.
2. Journalistic focus: Reports emphasise specific stories or regions, which may introduce narrative bias toward dramatic or high-profile cases.
3. Geographic concentration: Some areas, like Cross River and the Niger Delta, are better documented than others, potentially skewing national representation.

Despite these limitations, the reports provide rich, qualitative insights that allow for systematic analysis of patterns, drivers, and responses in Nigerian biodiversity management.

04. FINDINGS:
DRIVERS, THREATS OF BIODIVERSITY LOSS AND COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSES IN NIGERIA

The analysis of the ten investigative reports, guided by the framework of threats, drivers, and community-led responses, reveals clear and recurring patterns in how biodiversity is being degraded across Nigeria. Across diverse ecosystems and states, the reports consistently point to similar pressures, the underlying forces that sustain them, and the ways communities are responding in the absence of strong institutional protection.

4.1. Drivers and Threats of Biodiversity Loss

Biodiversity loss in Nigeria is driven by a combination of unregulated development projects, poorly monitored extractive activities, cultural and market-driven demand for wildlife products, poverty, illegal logging and farming, and security-related operations that unintentionally damage ecosystems. Together, these pressures create a complex web of ecological stressors that accelerate the degradation of species and habitats.

The analysis of the investigative reports reveals that these threats do not occur in isolation but operate through mutually reinforcing pathways: habitat destruction opens up previously inaccessible landscapes, enabling further illegal exploitation; market and cultural demands intensify pressure on already vulnerable species; and persistent governance gaps, such as weak enforcement, inadequate monitoring, and overlapping institutional mandates, allow these harmful practices to continue unchecked.

4.1.1. Unregulated Development Projects

The Stubbs Creek Forest Reserve in Akwa Ibom exemplifies the risks of unregulated development on biodiversity. Once a rich ecosystem and home to high-value timber species and threatened primates, including the Sclater's guenon and red-capped mangabey, the forest has been heavily degraded by infrastructure and industrial projects.

The abandoned 55 km superhighway project and the ongoing construction of the 200,000-barrel-per-day BUA petrochemical complex have resulted in extensive forest

clearing, destroying large portions of the forest. These projects have destroyed what was once a continuous and biologically rich forest landscape, eliminating critical wildlife habitats, disrupting species movement, and accelerating the loss of rare and endangered flora and fauna.[6]



Superhighway project. Photo credit: Ekemini Simon

Sarah Victor, a mother of five, once depended on the rich resources of the Stubbs Creek Forest Reserve in Akwa Ibom State for her livelihood. The forest supplied the herbs she used to treat ailments such as stroke, hypertension, arthritis, diabetes, and epilepsy, her main source of income and healing practice.

"I used to find those rare herbs only within Stubbs Creek, around the area now cleared for the refinery. Since I can't find them anymore, I no longer treat people. They now go to hospitals where treatment costs more than they can afford. It is very unfair that those who have a better and more sustainable livelihood are now using their business to destroy the little that we depend on." Ms. Sarah Victor

6 Simon, E. (2025, November 26). How refinery and highway project wiped out Akwa Ibom's Stubbs Creek Forest. Dataphyte. https://dataphyte.com/topic/environment/cost-of-development-how-a-refinery-and-highway-project-wiped-out-akwa-iboms-stubbs-creek-forest

Such development-driven habitat destruction shows a national challenge: economic expansion in Nigeria is too often pursued at the direct expense of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity. Large-scale infrastructure and industrial projects, when implemented without rigorous environmental safeguards, erode the ecological foundations that support livelihoods, climate resilience, and long-term economic stability. This pattern shows the urgent need for development planning that balances growth with environmental stewardship, ensuring that progress does not irreversibly compromise the country's natural capital.

4.1.2. Illegal Logging and Farming

In the Omo Forest Reserve, located near Itasin Community in Ogun State, the drivers of biodiversity loss are different. Illegal logging and farming have severely degraded the reserve, forcing a herd of approximately 15 elephants to leave their natural habitat and move into nearby communities. This displacement has created significant human–wildlife safety risks, including the destruction of farms and heightened tension between residents and wildlife.



A faulty lorry loaded with wood on a slippery road inside the Omo Forest Reserve. Photo Credit: Sodeeq Atanda

Once designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Omo Forest was one of Nigeria's most valuable rainforest ecosystems. It supported an estimated 100 African forest elephants, populations of white-throated guenons, 125 bird species, over 200 tree species, and rich assemblages of butterflies and other forest fauna. The degradation of this forest not only threatens these species that depend on it as their natural habitat, but also undermines the region's ecological stability and economic potential. [7]

"I could not work on my farm this morning because of elephants. I ran away and was watching them from afar. I waited for about an hour, hoping that they would leave so I could do my day's work. They did not leave. Instead, they were busy destroying it and eating my crops." Mr Neye Afolabi, resident of Itasin Community.

The situation in the Omo Forest Reserve demonstrates how illegal logging and unregulated farming are not isolated environmental infractions; they not only cause habitat loss but also food insecurity and community-level instability in the long run. As forests shrink and wildlife is displaced, both biodiversity and human wellbeing come under threat. Without decisive action, the degradation of critical reserves like Omo Forest Reserve will continue to erode Nigeria's natural heritage and deepen the vulnerabilities of the people who depend on these ecosystems for survival.

4.1.3. Security Related Operations

In Gwadoddi village in Rabbah Local Government Area of Sokoto State, the African Locust Bean tree, known locally as *dawadawa*, is slowly becoming out of reach for its residents. The ongoing counter-insurgency operations by the military force, which involve the burning of forested areas used as hideouts by armed bandits, have led to the slow disappearance of these important trees.

7 Atanda, S. (2025, November 12). Illegal farming and logging drive human-elephant conflict in Omo Forest, Ogun's Itasin community. Dataphyte. https://dataphyte.com/topic/biodiversity/illegal-farming-and-logging-drive-human-elephant-conflict-in-omo-forest-ogun-state-itasin-community



Some locals cutting an African Locust Tree as part of a forest clearance campaign against armed bandits' attack in Gwadoddi community, Sokoto, Nigeria. Photo Credit: Tunde Omolehin

The decline of locust bean trees has had direct consequences for local diets. With fewer trees available, households face a growing scarcity of fresh locust beans and have been forced to substitute them with manufactured seasoning cubes and powdered flavourings, which are often less nutritious. Investigations show that the shortage has also driven up the price of dried locust beans, placing them beyond the reach of many low-income households.

Forest areas targeted for burning contain numerous high-value species, including African locust trees and baobabs. Many of these areas are now inaccessible to farmers, while others have been permanently lost due to the bush-burning tactics deployed during security operations.[8]

8 Omolehin, T. (2025, November 23). How the military's counter-insurgency, flooding endanger African locust trees in Sokoto [News article]. Dataphyte. https://dataphyte.com/topic/biodiversity/how-the-militarys-counter-insurgency-and-flooding-endanger-african-locust-trees-in-sokoto-state

"These criminals operate in the forest and establish their camps. On the other hand, the security agencies set such identified forests ablaze, and that automatically affects the economic trees in the areas." Professor Abubakar Gwaram Bello, Agroforestry and Forest Management at Usmanu Danfodiyo University in Sokoto.

Professor Abubakar Gwaram Bello focuses his research on the African locust tree and warns that unless the ongoing insecurity is addressed promptly with military collaboration with communities and forestry researchers, many local tree species will remain at risk of endangerment.[9]

Security operations, when carried out without consideration for environmental safeguards, can unintentionally drive ecosystem degradation, especially habitat loss. Measures intended to protect communities, such as counter-insurgency tactics, can fragment habitats, disrupt ecological systems, and accelerate biodiversity loss. This brings to light the urgent need for security planning to be integrated with environmental management, ensuring that interventions aimed at safeguarding human populations do not inadvertently compromise the ecosystems on which those communities depend.

4.1.4. Unregulated Extractive Operations

Decades of intensive unregulated oil exploration and production in Ogoniland have transformed the Ogale community's once-productive freshwater systems into some of the most contaminated in the Niger Delta. What used to be a thriving aquatic ecosystem, supporting fish, crustaceans, birds, reptiles, and small mammals, has been degraded to the point where the local fish population has completely disappeared.

According to United Nations estimates, more than 1.5 million tons of crude oil have been spilt across the Niger Delta since 1958 in over 7,000 documented incidents, with Ogoniland, comprising 261 communities across nearly 1,000 square kilometres, at the

9 Omolehin, T. (2025, November 23). How the military's counter-insurgency, flooding endanger African locust trees in Sokoto [News article]. Dataphyte. https://dataphyte.com/topic/biodiversity/how-the-militarys-counter-insurgency-and-flooding-endanger-african-locust-trees-in-sokoto-state

centre of this crisis. Company records further show that an average of two oil spills occur every year, including at least 55 spills in Ogale alone since 2011.[10]



Contaminated stream in the Ogale community. Photo Credit: Chijioke Arinze

Residents recall that the Nsisioken Stream, once surrounded by lush mangrove forests, served as a critical breeding and feeding habitat for diverse aquatic and terrestrial species. Today, that ecosystem has been erased. With the stream contaminated and wildlife disappearing, households now rely on purchased fish, often at prohibitive prices, and buy drinking water from vendors because local sources are unsafe.[11]

Community leaders confirm the severity of the ecological loss. As the President of the Agbi Improvement Union, Mr Osaronwaji, notes, “Back then, it was common to see porcupines, grasscutters, and other animals near the streams. Now, they’re gone.”

10 Deutsche Welle. (2025, July 29). United Nations (UN). DW. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://www.dw.com/en/united-nations-un/t-17440154

11 Chijioke, A. (2025, October 31). *Oil and Oblivion: How spills emptied Ogale’s waters*. Dataphyte. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://dataphyte.com/topic/environment/oil-and-oblivion-how-spills-emptied-ogales-waters

“Apart from fishing, families planted vegetables, peppers, and water yams around the swampy areas,” she recalled. “The harvests were always bountiful. Today, we can no longer farm near Nsisioken Stream.” Eunice Osaronwaji, resident of Ogale community.

Experts warn that the impacts are far-reaching and long-lasting. An environmental scientist at the University of Port Harcourt, Dr Lebari Sibe, explains that oil pollution destroys fish both directly and indirectly. Crude oil coats water surfaces, blocks sunlight, and reduces oxygen exchange, suffocating aquatic life. Toxic substances such as benzene and heavy metals infiltrate the water and sediments, poisoning fish, impairing reproduction, and preventing natural ecosystem recovery. Over time, these impacts drove the local extinction of species from the once thriving stream.[12]



Crude oil visible on farmlands in Ogale. Photo Credit: Chijioke Arinze

12 Chijioke, A. (2025, October 31). Oil and Oblivion: How spills emptied Ogale’s waters. Dataphyte. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://dataphyte.com/topic/environment/oil-and-oblivion-how-spills-emptied-ogales-waters

In communities such as Ogale, where oil exploration and refinery activities have been poorly regulated, the absence of adequate safeguards has led to severe environmental consequences, such as pollution and habitat loss. The repeated oil spills contaminate local waters, decimate aquatic life, threaten manatees, and undermine local fisheries that sustain community livelihoods. Beyond aquatic impacts, industrial pollutants compromise soil health and disrupt terrestrial ecosystems, creating cascading ecological effects that reduce biodiversity, weaken ecosystem resilience, and threaten long-term human well-being.

4.1.5. Cultural and Market Demand for Wildlife

The cultural and market demand for wildlife has led to the slow disappearance of vultures in Kano and Donkeys in Sokoto state.

Deeply rooted cultural beliefs in Kano State that vultures possess supernatural powers to influence fortune are driving the species toward local extinction. Vultures are deliberately Deeply rooted cultural beliefs in Kano State that vultures possess supernatural powers to influence fortune are driving the species toward local extinction. Vultures are deliberately targeted, with their body parts harvested to produce charms believed to bring luck, power, or protection. This demand, rooted in traditional practices, has created a high-value market for vultures, intensifying hunting pressure and decimating populations.[13]

Survey data shows the severity of the decline. National Conservation Foundation (NCF) surveys in 2017 and 2018 found no vultures remaining in the wild in Kano, suggesting possible local extinction.[14] A 2025 Mongabay report corroborates this trend, noting that hooded vultures have disappeared from traditional urban food sources such as slaughterhouses and dumps.[15] Ethno-ornithological surveys in Kano and Ekiti indicate

13 Annagu, F. (2025, November 26). Fortune charms craze threatens vulture population in Kano. Dataphyte. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://dataphyte.com/topic/environment/fortune-charms-craze-threatens-vulture-population-in-kano

14 Vanguard News. (2018, April 3). Vulture decline hazardous to human health, economy — NCF boss. Vanguard. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/04/vulture-decline-hazardous-human-health-economy-ncf-boss/

15 Truscott, R. (2025, April 24). In West Africa, hooded vultures vanish as abattoirs modernize. Mongabay. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://news.mongabay.com/2025/04/in-west-africa-hooded-vultures-vanish-as-abattoirs-modernize/

that vultures are being driven to extinction in areas closely associated with human activity. Local birdwatchers confirm to one of the fellows that vultures have not been observed in the city for nearly a decade.



A caged vulture "owned" by Naziru Usama at Rimi market. Photo Credit: Francis Annagu

Historical records from Audu Bako Zoo, one of Nigeria's oldest and most frequented wildlife parks, further illustrate the decline. Birdwatchers informed one of the fellows that the last sightings of vultures were in 2014 near the Challawa industrial area, where they scavenged in open dumps. By 2015, vultures had vanished from these areas, replaced by perching birds. They attributed this disappearance to urban expansion, pollution, and escalating trafficking of vulture parts.[16]

"We know vultures have always had a place in Hausa healing," he explains. "People come looking for protection from poison, from business failure, from spiritual attack. They believe the bird's strength comes from surviving on the dead without falling ill." Dr Garba Gaye Sulaiman, a herb seller at Kunmi Market, Kano state

16 Annagu, F. (2025, November 26). Fortune charms craze threatens vulture population in Kano. Dataphyte. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://dataphyte.com/topic/environment/fortune-charms-craze-threatens-vulture-population-in-kano

“I know killing vultures is illegal. They are disappearing. I tell my colleagues to use substitutes. The power lies in the prayer and ritual, not just the animal. But still, some insist, they believe the real power is in the bird.” Dr. Sulaiman

A similar wildlife protection failure is evident in Sokoto State, where the donkey population has sharply declined over the past decade. Despite national restrictions on the export of donkeys and their derivatives, donkey hides, meat, and internal organs continue to be traded illegally, with much of the demand driven by markets in China for traditional medicinal products and speciality foods. Weak enforcement, porous borders, and inadequate monitoring have enabled this trade to flourish, accelerating the depletion of an already vulnerable species.[17]

“The decline threatens more than just the animals. Relying too much on imported donkeys has consequences. It stifles local breeding and harms communities’ lasting livelihoods. Unchecked trade and shrinking habitats could cause trouble. Native species and the local ecosystem balance are at risk, ” said Conservation Advocate Abubakar Siddiq.



At the Illela border market, donkeys await their fate, soon to be herded into waiting vehicles for the next leg of their journey. Photo Credit: Rakiya Muhammad

17 Muhammad, R. (2025, November 27). Endangered donkeys of Sokoto: Exploring the hidden drivers of decline. Premium Times. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://www.premiumtimesng.com/features-and-interviews/838988-endangered-donkeys-of-sokoto-exploring-hidden-drivers-of-decline.html

The near-extinction of vultures in Kano and donkeys in Sokoto illustrates how poaching driven by cultural or traditional demands poses a critical threat to biodiversity. When species are hunted for charms, trophies, or other high-value products, entire populations can collapse, disrupting ecosystem functions and diminishing the resilience of natural systems. This case shows the urgent need for strengthened wildlife protection, enforcement of anti-poaching laws, and community engagement to curb demand-driven exploitation and safeguard Nigeria's biodiversity for both ecological and human well-being.

4.1.6. Poverty

Poverty emerges as a key driver of biodiversity loss in Nigeria, a pattern highlighted in most of the investigative reports, especially in the case of illegal logging and farming in Omo Forest, and the poaching of vultures in Kano. Economic hardship compels communities to exploit natural resources unsustainably, turning fragile ecosystems into immediate sources of income.

This dynamic is particularly evident among youth in the Odual and Okolomade communities in Rivers State, where high unemployment has made illegal logging the primary livelihood for many young people. The dependence on forest resources for income shows the intersection of socio-economic vulnerability and environmental degradation. Community leaders in Odual and Okolomade say they feel powerless, insisting that logging and tree felling remain the only source of livelihood for many young people.[18]

18 Onukwugha, O. (2025, November 25). How youth unemployment drives deforestation in Rivers community. Dataphyte. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://dataphyte.com/topic/biodiversity/how-youth-unemployment-drives-deforestation-in-odual-and-okolomade-communities-in-rivers-state



Planks in the community awaiting transportation. Photo credit by Obiabin Onukwugha

“The community is helpless because stopping young men from cutting down trees may lead to crime and criminality. In this community, there is no other means of livelihood. The only means of living here is timber.” Mr Osebhenaan Micah, a former youth leader in Okolomade community

Originally, trees were felled only for timber. But in recent years, commercial sawing has become common, leading to the abandonment of local regulations. As a result, the planks now being produced are much smaller, typically measuring two by eight inches in thickness and width, and cut to lengths of ten, twelve, thirteen, or fourteen feet, a reflection of the decline in the availability of mature trees. [19]

19 Onukwugha, O. (2025, November 25). How youth unemployment drives deforestation in Rivers community. Dataphyte. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://dataphyte.com/topic/biodiversity/how-youth-unemployment-drives-deforestation-in-odual-and-okolomade-communities-in-rivers-state

When one of the fellows visited the Okolomade community, the forest floor was strewn with felled and sawn trees cut down by young people. Many of these trees once provided shelter for various animal species, but with ongoing deforestation, those animals are now disappearing.



Cubics waiting to be sold off. Photo Credit by Obiabin Onukwugha

“I have been doing this work for one year and three months now,” he said. “My parents are poor farmers. I’ve written WAEC and passed, but there’s no money to continue school. This is the only work I have for now.” Mr Enaanasebhaami Mark, 22 years old, resident of Okolomade Community

Without interventions that provide alternative livelihoods, skills development, and community-based conservation incentives, poverty will continue to drive ecosystem destruction, threatening both biodiversity and long-term community resilience.

05. COMMUNITY-LED SOLUTIONS FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

In many of the affected regions, government agencies responsible for protecting forests, wildlife, and critical ecosystems are absent, under funded, or unable to enforce existing laws. This governance gap has left communities exposed to unchecked environmental degradation and, in several cases, forced them to assume responsibility for safeguarding their own natural reserves, often forming volunteer ranger groups or informal monitoring networks.

There are two notable community-led models that emerged from the fellows' findings on this project. These models show how locally driven governance structures are increasingly shaping conservation outcomes at the grassroots level.

5.1. The Okomu National Park Model

The African Nature Investors Foundation–led initiative, in collaboration with the National Park Service, for the preservation of Okomu National Park, is a strong example of a community-driven approach to biodiversity conservation. The Okomu community is a community based in Edo State. The initiative shifts the model of conservation from enforcement to collaboration, transforming community members, once seen as threats to the forest, into its most committed protectors.

The programme currently employs 38 community-based forest rangers, most of whom are young men. These rangers conduct daily patrols using GPS-enabled Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tools (SMART) to track wildlife movements, monitor illegal activities, and collect real-time ecological data.[20]

"Before, we used to hear chainsaws almost every week," he said. "Now, two or three months can pass without hearing a single one. Patrol coverage has reached over 80 per cent of the park; it's a major turnaround." Peter Abanyam, Project Manager for Okomu at the Africa Nature Investors (ANI) Foundation

20 Usman, A. (2025, November 12). Okomu National Park: Inside Nigeria's bold community-conservation experiment. Dataphyte. https://dataphyte.com/topic/environment/okomu-national-park-inside-nigerias-bold-community-conservation-experiment



Rangers at the Okomu National Park are preparing for a patrol. Photo Credit: Usman Aliyu

Beyond enforcement, the conservation model introduced by the ANI and NPS partnership also recognises the close link between conservation and community livelihoods. To reduce local dependence on illegal forest activities, six Savings and Loan Groups (SLGs) were established across surrounding settlements, including Udo, Iguewan, Okomu AT&P, and Ugolo.

Each group comprises about 20 members, mostly women and young people, who pool their savings, access small loans, and receive training in entrepreneurship and sustainable farming practices.[21]

Since its inception in 2022, the initiative has contributed to the gradual return of species that once inhabited the forest, and the broader ecosystem is slowly being restored.

"Camera traps deployed by the foundation have recorded more than 32 forest elephants, including calves, clear evidence that the population is not only stable but breeding. The forest is regenerating. Areas that were once logged are now lush again." Mr Abanyam

21 Usman, A. (2025, November 12). Okomu National Park: Inside Nigeria's bold community-conservation experiment. Dataphyte. https://dataphyte.com/topic/environment/okomu-national-park-inside-nigerias-bold-community-conservation-experiment

5.2. The Ekuri Rangers

The Ekuri community's conservation journey began more than 33 years ago, in 1992, driven by a shared determination to protect their 33,600-hectare forest. The community understood early that unchecked exploitation would not only destroy the forest but also jeopardise their cultural heritage, livelihoods, and long-term well-being. Preserving the forest, rather than watching it disappear, became a collective mandate for securing their future.

As part of this effort, young men in the community, often referred to as the Ekuri boys, are recruited into the Ecoguard squad. They volunteer their time to safeguard the forest, balancing this service with their primary work as farmers cultivating crops such as cocoa, vegetables, and plantain.[22]



Ekuri Rangers. Photo Credit: Feyishola Jaiyesimi

22 Simire, M. (2025, November 24). How volunteer community rangers lead the fight for Ekuri Forest, Cross River survival. EnviroNews Nigeria. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://www.environewsnigeria.com/how-volunteer-community-rangers-lead-the-fight-for-ekuri-forest-cross-river-survival/

It received international recognition in 2004 with the United Nations Equator Initiative Award and was subsequently selected as a pilot site for the UN's Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programme, an acknowledgement of its success in preserving critical forest ecosystems.[23]

However, in recent years, inadequate funding and limited institutional support have severely weakened its capacity to protect the forest. With too few personnel and insufficient equipment, enforcement has dwindled, and the forest is gradually slipping into a state of neglect and ecological decline.

While these community-led efforts demonstrate local commitment and resilience, they also highlight a critical policy gap: without strong institutional frameworks, coordinated enforcement, and sustained state support, biodiversity conservation remains fragmented and heavily dependent on local capacity, while lacking all the necessary support.

23 Ibid

06. CHALLENGES OF BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN NIGERIA

6.1 Weak Institutional Framework

A recurring challenge across all investigative reports is the weak institutional presence and limited government engagement in biodiversity conservation. In many of the affected areas, formal agencies responsible for environmental protection are either absent, under-resourced, or inconsistently involved. For instance, in Kano State, there is no record of arrests or seizures involving vultures in the past five years. The Head of Conservation Monitoring, National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) office, Mr Gbenga Joshua Kolawole, said, "There is no data on any case involving vultures. The Endangered Species Act lists the species under Schedule II, and CITES lists it under Appendix II. This means hunting or selling vultures without a permit is illegal. The law provides for fines or imprisonment for offenders."[41]

The case of the Stubbs Creek Forest Reserve clearly illustrates this enforcement gap, as a strong legal framework exists there but is not implemented. Although the Akwa Ibom State Government enacted a forest preservation and control law in 2000, its provisions were effectively bypassed. Section 21 of the law establishes strict procedures that must be followed before any portion of a forest reserve can be cleared, including environmental assessments and formal approvals. However, according to a spokesperson from the Federal Ministry of Environment, they did not follow these mandatory steps during the construction of the now-abandoned 55 km highway project.[42]

This pattern is also evident in the unregulated logging and large-scale deforestation of the Yangokuchi Forest in Abuja, as well as in several other cases documented in the reports, where regulatory oversight or enforcement of biodiversity conservation laws is either absent or extremely weak. These governance gaps leave communities without the institutional support, monitoring systems, or enforcement capacity required to protect their ecosystems, allowing environmental degradation to continue unchecked.

41 National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency. (n.d.). NESREA. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://www.nesrea.gov.ng/

42 Simon, E. (2025, November 26). How refinery and highway project wiped out Akwa Ibom's Stubbs Creek Forest. Dataphyte. https://dataphyte.com/topic/environment/cost-of-development-how-a-refinery-and-highway-project-wiped-out-akwa-iboms-stubbs-creek-forest

6.2. Structural Poverty

Structural poverty is not just a driver of biodiversity loss, but also a challenge to biodiversity conservation particularly in rural and resource-dependent communities as seen in the majority of the investigative reports.

Limited access to sustainable livelihoods, education, and basic social services continues to drive high dependence on forests, wildlife, and wetlands for survival, particularly in communities such as Okolomade and Odual in Rivers State. In the absence of viable economic alternatives, practices including illegal logging, wildlife harvesting, overgrazing, and unsustainable farming often emerge as coping mechanisms rather than intentional acts of environmental degradation. These pressures are further exacerbated by weak and insecure land tenure arrangements, which marginalise local communities and disincentivise long-term investment in resource stewardship and conservation.

Structural poverty also constrains communities' ability to comply with conservation regulations and to participate meaningfully in governance processes, as evidenced by the experience of the Ekuri rangers, where limited financial support, livelihood insecurity, and inadequate institutional backing have increasingly undermined effective protection of the Ekuri Forest Reserve.

As ecosystems degrade, livelihoods are further undermined, reinforcing a cycle of poverty and environmental decline. Addressing biodiversity loss therefore requires tackling structural poverty through inclusive development, livelihood diversification, and social protection alongside conservation interventions.

6.3. Other Challenges

Other challenges include:

- Conflicting land use decisions, which is the case of the Stubbs Creek Forest Reserve in Akwa Ibom where a land reserved for conservation was designated by the government for the building of a highway and the establishment of the BUA refinery.

- Most of Nigeria's legal frameworks for biodiversity conservation are outdated and no longer aligned with contemporary realities or global best practices. Updating and harmonising these laws is essential to address emerging threats, strengthen enforcement, and ensure that national biodiversity governance reflects current scientific, ecological, and socio-economic conditions.

- Some institutional mandates overlap significantly, creating ambiguity in roles and responsibilities and resulting in weak enforcement. This fragmentation, where multiple agencies claim partial authority over the same environmental mandates, creates institutional confusion, dilutes accountability, and ultimately undermines effective regulation and biodiversity protection.

- Many of the agencies responsible for biodiversity conservation suffer from underfunding, which severely limits their capacity to enforce regulations, monitor ecosystems, and implement conservation programs such as the Ekuri community led project.

07. RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the systemic weaknesses identified across multiple investigative reports, including inadequate institutional commitment to biodiversity conservation, weak enforcement, and the increasing reliance on communities to self-organise protection efforts, Nigeria must adopt a more coordinated, community-centred governance model.

7.1. Strengthen the Enforcement of Existing Environmental and Forestry Laws

The federal and state governments should strengthen the enforcement of existing environmental and forestry laws, ensuring that statutory requirements, such as those outlined in the Akwa Ibom forest protection law, are consistently applied. This includes establishing clear accountability mechanisms when legal procedures are bypassed, as observed in the Akwa Ibom's Stubb Creek Forest Reserve case.

7.2. Government Partnership with Local Communities

Given the success of community-led models such as the Okomu National Park initiative and the Ekuri community's long-standing stewardship, government agencies should formalise partnerships with local communities by providing training, legal backing, and dedicated operational funding. Community rangers, such as those using SMART tools in Okomu or the Ecoguard volunteers in Ekuri, should be integrated into state or federal conservation frameworks with standardised training, equipment, and compensation.

7.3. Investment in Monitoring Capacity

To address the widespread absence of regulation and the governance gaps enabling unregulated logging, wildlife decline, and cross-border trade of endangered species, as seen in Sokoto's donkey population decline and deforestation in the Yangokuchi forest in Abuja, government institutions must reinvest in monitoring capacity by deploying modern surveillance technologies and supporting local enforcement structures capable of rapid response.

7.4. Sustained Financial and Technical Support

Conservation initiatives suffering from resource constraints, including previously recognised global models such as the Ekuri REDD+ site, should receive sustained financial and technical support to prevent further degradation. Long-term funding mechanisms, through budgetary allocation, climate finance, public–private partnerships, and community benefit-sharing schemes, should be prioritised to ensure continuity and resilience.

7.5. Educating on Biodiversity Conservation

Educating people on biodiversity conservation is essential for achieving long-term environmental sustainability in Nigeria. Public awareness efforts should clearly explain the value of biodiversity, the ecosystem services it provides, and the consequences of habitat loss, poaching, and pollution. When communities understand how biodiversity supports livelihoods, food security, and climate resilience, they are more likely to engage in conservation. Biodiversity education should be integrated into school curricula, vocational training, and community outreach programs. Communication strategies must be culturally relevant, locally grounded, and delivered in accessible languages. Capacity-building for policymakers and enforcement agencies is also necessary to mainstream biodiversity into development decisions. An informed public strengthens compliance, accountability, and collective responsibility for conservation.

7.6. Updating outdated Laws and Regulations

Many existing legal frameworks no longer reflect present-day environmental pressures, scientific knowledge, or international best practices. Legal reforms should align national and state laws with global commitments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Harmonising overlapping mandates and clarifying institutional roles will improve enforcement and accountability. Updated regulations should incorporate community rights, ecosystem-based management, and safeguards for development and security operations. Strengthening penalties and compliance mechanisms will deter illegal exploitation. Overall, modernised laws are essential for effective, coordinated, and resilient biodiversity governance.

Collectively, these actions will reinforce biodiversity governance, close persistent enforcement gaps, and strengthen the role of communities as co-custodians of Nigeria's natural ecosystems.

08. CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this brief paints a clear and urgent picture: Nigeria's biodiversity is in a state of crisis, but not yet beyond redemption. The interconnected drivers of habitat destruction, overexploitation, and pollution are systematically eroding the country's ecological wealth, with direct consequences for human health, food security, and economic resilience. The recurring theme across all case studies is the failure of governance, where strong laws exist on paper but are rendered ineffective by weak enforcement, institutional neglect, and a lack of political will.

Yet, within this challenging landscape, a powerful narrative of resilience and local agency emerges. Communities from Cross River to Edo are stepping into the void, proving themselves to be the most effective and committed stewards of their natural environments. The successes of the Okomu and Ekuri models provide a blueprint for a new, collaborative approach to conservation, one that moves from top-down enforcement to a partnership that values local knowledge and invests in community well-being.

The path forward requires a fundamental shift. Nigeria must recognise that environmental sustainability is not a separate concern but a prerequisite for lasting development and national security. By heeding the recommendations outlined, strengthening enforcement, formalising community partnerships, investing in monitoring, and ensuring sustainable funding, the government can transform this crisis into an opportunity. Protecting Nigeria's biodiversity is not merely an ecological imperative; it is an investment in the nation’s health, stability, and prosperity for generations to come. The time for decisive, coordinated action is now.

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Appendix I

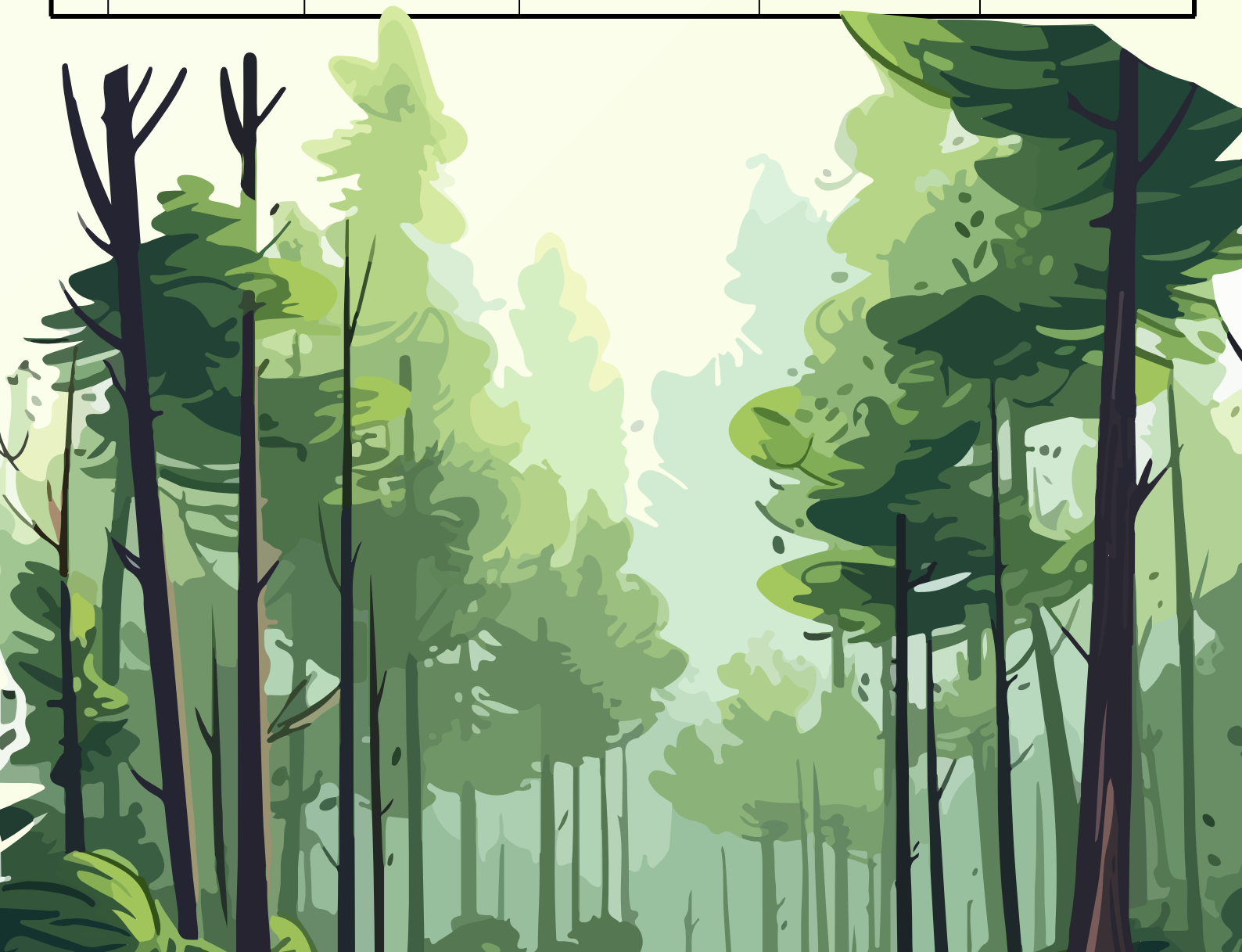
S/N	Story Title	Key Biodiversity Issue	Relevant Laws / Policies / Treaties	Responsible MDAs/ Institutions	Implementation Gaps Identified
1	How Unregulated, Unchallenged Logging Depletes Valuable Trees in Forest in Abuja	Illegal logging, ancestral forest loss and weak oversight	National Forest Policy (2006) FCT Urban & Regional Planning Act Environmental Impact Assessment Act (EIA Act) National Park Service Act	FCT Department of Parks & Recreation Federal Ministry of Environment (FME) - NESREA Forestry Research Institute of Nigeria (FRIN)	Poor enforcement of logging laws No community forest rights recognition Weak monitoring by FCT authorities
2	How Youth Unemployment Drives Deforestation in Odual and Okolomade, Rivers State	Youth-driven forest clearing, livelihood pressure and unsustainable extraction	National Forest Policy Rivers State Forestry Law National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP)	Rivers State Ministry of Environment Local Government Councils - FRIN	No alternative livelihood programmes Forest governance collapse at LGA level No enforcement presence
3	Illegal Farming & Logging Drive Human–Elephant Conflict in Omo Forest, Ogun State's Itasin Community	Wildlife habitat loss, elephant migration disruption and encroachment	Endangered Species Act (2016) National Parks Service Act Ogun State Forestry Law CITES (international treaty)	Ogun State Forestry Commission National Parks Service NESREA Elephant Conservation Unit (ECU)	Weak wildlife protection Illegal farming inside reserves ignored No buffer zones or human–wildlife conflict frameworks
4	How Volunteer Community Rangers Lead the Fight for Ekuri Forest, Cross River State Survival	Illegal logging, community forestry and state neglect	Cross River State Forestry Act NBSAP - REDD+ Framework National Forest Policy	Cross River Forestry Commission REDD+ Secretariat FME	Government failure to protect community forests Politically-enabled logging No recognition of community forest governance

Appendix I

S/N	Story Title	Key Biodiversity Issue	Relevant Laws / Policies / Treaties	Responsible MDAs/ Institutions	Implementation Gaps Identified
5	Endangered Donkeys of Sokoto: Exploring the Hidden Drivers of Decline	Decline of wildlife (donkeys) and illegal trade	Endangered Species Act (protection of threatened animals) CITES	NESREA Sokoto State Ministry of Animal Health & Environment Customs Service	No enforcement of donkey export/ slaughter rules Lack of monitoring of markets & transport routes
6	How the Military's Counter-Insurgency & Flooding Endanger African Locust Trees in Sokoto State	Deforestation caused by insecurity, and displacement	National Forest Policy Great Green Wall Framework African Union's GGW Initiative	National Agency for the Great Green Wall (NAGGW) Sokoto State Ministry of Environment Nigerian Army (environmental safeguards)	Tree protection not integrated into military operations Great Green Wall programmes not reaching conflict zones
7	Oil and Oblivion: How Spills Emptied Ogale's Waters	Water pollution, oil spills, biodiversity collapse	NOSDRA Act (2006) EIA Act UNEP Ogoniland Report Framework	NOSDRA NUPRC Ministry of Petroleum Resources Rivers State Ministry of Environment	Weak enforcement of spill response laws Failure of cleanup mandates from UNEP report
8	Cost of Development: How a Refinery & Highway Project Wiped out Akwa Ibom's Stubbs Creek Forest	Development-driven forest destruction, habitat loss	EIA Act - Akwa Ibom State Forestry Law Land Use Act Ramsar Convention (if wetland areas involved)	Federal Ministry of Environment Akwa Ibom Ministry of Environment NESREA	EIA not properly enforced Political override of conservation rules No cumulative impact assessments

Appendix I

S/N	Story Title	Key Biodiversity Issue	Relevant Laws / Policies / Treaties	Responsible MDAs/ Institutions	Implementation Gaps Identified
9	Okomu National Park: Inside Nigeria's Bold Community-Conservation Experiment	Co-management, conflicts with nearby communities, poaching	National Park Service Act Land Use Act Endangered Species Act	National Park Service Edo State Ministry of Environment Local community forest committees	Encroachment due to weak park protection Insufficient funding for forest guards Conflicts between park authorities and communities
10	Fortune Charms Craze Threatens Vulture Population in Kano	Wildlife killing for traditional medicine, species decline	Endangered Species Act CITES Wildlife trafficking regulations	NESREA Kano State Ministry of Environment Customs (if cross-border trade)	No crackdown on wildlife markets Lack of awareness among traders No local wildlife crime units



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