

Rainforest village switches from hunting to farming

“We used to hunt a lot within the national park boundaries even though we knew it wasn't allowed. We know better now and have understood that hunting affects our future as well. We set up our own farming cooperative to breed stock and grow crops.”

Kang Loius (28) is leader of the youth organisation EKAKU in Bangem, a community on the outskirts of Bakossi National Park in Cameroon. The immense rainforest that stretches through the heartlands of Africa contains several exceptionally rich biodiversity hotspots. One is the Bakossi Mountains and rainforest in southwest Cameroon, which boasts the largest contiguous cloud forests in West and Central Africa. This important region is home to forest elephants, the endangered drill monkey and chimpanzees.

The forest also feeds the local people. Bushmeat, as it is called, could be anything from long tailed pangolins to monkeys. For many people, meat from the forest is their only source of protein. There are no shops from which to buy frozen chicken, and they could probably not afford it anyway. Bushmeat can also be sold. So, in order to protect the wildlife in the national park, the people there must find alternative sources of sustenance.

WWF helps groups, youth groups in particular, to set up cooperatives as an alternative to hunting. One group has begun to breed pigs and grow maize, cassava and other crops. One of the members is Epie Solange, 24.

“A great deal has happened since we began. Through our organisation I've even acquired a small loan to buy school material for my children,” she says.

Bangem village also has a youth organisation called AWASE who not only breed stock, but also grow vegetables without the use of pesticides.

“We are aware of the damaging effect that chemical pesticides and fertilisers have on the soil and the water so we only use natural manure,” says Sone Edie.

But getting this far has not been easy by any means. Chickens and pigs pick up diseases easily and die. Fodder is expensive and the nearest market is a long way off.

“The roads are very poor, making it difficult to transport our produce to the towns. This makes us dependent on people who come here to buy our produce. We only grow what we know we can sell, otherwise it just rots away,” explains Epie Nkwelle, chairperson of AWASE.

WWF teaches cooperatives to produce fodder effectively, to negotiate with transport companies and find ways to collectively strengthen the organisations. Ekoute Janet says that things have improved immensely since the project began.

“At the beginning it was difficult for me to pay for the fodder I needed for my chickens. We didn't know much about breeding chickens either. Today, fewer chickens die because we are aware of the importance of cleanliness.”

Janet Molisa Mukoko works for WWF in Cameroon. She says that the project support may have been small in terms of money, but it has enabled people to organise the switchover from illegal hunting to farming.

“The greatest challenge lies in creating a win-win situation together, where the wildlife in the national park is protected at the same as we improve the living conditions of the people living on the outskirts. For it to succeed, people have to organise themselves in order to improve their own lives,” she says.

One sixth of the world's rainforest

The Bakossi region is the westernmost point of the rain forests of Central Africa that border on the Congo Basin. One sixth of the world's rainforests are found here. The region stretches across six countries, has roughly 75 million inhabitants and close on 250 different indigenous groups. The Cameroon project focuses on bolstering local organisations to give the local people more influence over decisions that affect their living conditions. In Bakossi the project has so far helped 6,000 people to improve their incomes in a sustainable way.