

Center for Community-Based Resource Management (CBRM)

Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba

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Case Study Name:	Traditional knowledge systems and the conservation of Cross River Gorillas: a case study of Bechati, Fossimondi, Besali, Cameroon		
Author:	Etiendem, D.N., Hens, L., & Pereboom, Z.		
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Region:	Africa – South of Sahara		
Country:	Cameroon		
Ecosystem Type:	Forest, ranging from lowland through mid-elevation to savanna to highlands)		
Social Characteristics:	Rural communities, indigenous		
Scale of Study:	Community		
Resource Type:	Wildlife		
Type of Initiative:	Research driven project		

Community Based Work:	Conservation
Keywords:	Cameroon, critically endangered, traditional knowledge, village
Summary:	<p>Traditional beliefs associated with the Cross River gorilla (<i>Gorilla gorilla diehli</i>) in Lebialem Division, Cameroon, were studied to establish the usefulness of incorporating these local belief systems into the conservation strategy for this critically endangered species. A survey was conducted in 2007 in five villages to assess local perceptions of human-gorilla totemic kinship practices and taboos against hunting and against eating of gorillas. Villages were selected based on their proximity to Cross River gorilla (CRG) habitat, with a total of 184 interviewer-administered questionnaires completed during a 4-week period. Eighty-six percent of people agreed that gorillas were totems (personal spiritual helpers or counterparts) of people living in the village. People who believed in human-gorilla totemic kinship practice did not eat or hunt gorillas, and they wanted gorillas to be protected in order to protect the practice. Most (87%), of the interviewees declared their support for gorilla conservation. The main motivation was the belief that when gorillas are killed, the human totemic counterpart will die as a result. Because of these traditions, the hunting of gorillas is taboo in all five villages surveyed. On the other hand, gorilla parts play a direct role in traditional medicine, and gorilla bones are valued as ingredients for traditional medicine. Also, general awareness and adherence to local totemic practices was found to be declining, particularly among young people (18-25 years). Despite the imminent decline in value of belief systems that led to the establishment of the hunting taboo, this taboo is still in place and has discouraged the hunting of gorillas. Where law enforcement is weak or near inexistent, these traditional restrictions could be critical to the continuing survival of a gorilla population. Reviving and promoting beliefs and practices conducive to gorilla conservation could foster positive attitudes and behavior and have the potential to encourage local support and participation in communities. However, care must be taken when selecting practices to promote, as some (for example the use of gorillas in traditional medicine) could encourage the killing of animals.</p>