

**INDIGENOUS WILDLIFE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS: A
STUDY OF THE ISUKHA COMMUNITY OF WESTERN KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted around the Kakamega Forest National Reserve (KFNR) in Kenya. The main objective of the study was to evaluate the role of the Isukha community and its indigenous wildlife resource management systems (IWRMS) in wildlife conservation. This was necessary in view of the evolving policy that there is need to integrate local communities and IWRMS in wildlife conservation. The study utilised the human adaptational theory as its theoretical framework.

A sample of 500 respondents was interviewed. Of these 450 were randomly selected from households around the Reserve and 50 were key informants selected from community-based organisations (CBOs), KWS, Forest Department, village elders and administrators. Data was collected using questionnaires, focused group discussions, in-depth interviews, field observations, informal conversations, case studies and life histories. Data collected was subjected to both descriptive and statistical analysis. Statistical analysis, which was done by computer using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) was used to calculate the chi-square (χ^2) on selected variables. Data is presented through qualitative descriptions and discussions, Tables and bar graphs.

Findings revealed that socio-economic characteristics of respondents particularly age, sex, education, occupation and distance of residence from the Reserve boundary affected respondent's knowledge and awareness about wildlife conservation and the role of IWRMS as conservation tools. Findings also revealed that the pre-colonial Isukha were actively involved in wildlife conservation. Using various components of their IWRMS such as cultural practises, traditional ecological knowledge, folkmedia, taboos and beliefs and traditional institutions such as clans and councils of elders, they were able to conserve wildlife species of socio-cultural, economic and ecological importance or enhance wildlife conservation in general. Through these components, wildlife conservation information was also transmitted to community members thus sensitising them on the importance of conserving wildlife.

Findings further revealed that historical trends in wildlife conservation manifested through radical land and wildlife conservation laws, policies and institutional frameworks have had negative consequences on the roles of the Isukha and their IWRMS in wildlife conservation. In addition, these changes have over the years also disoriented, modified and re-defined traditional sex roles in wildlife conservation. Furthermore, lack of a well established education and extension programme coupled with lack of access to socio-economic benefits have further engendered negative attitudes and perceptions as well as resentment, hostility and poor relationships between the Isukha and KWS personnel thus culminating in accelerated human-wildlife conflicts and the illegal use of the National Reserve's resources. Despite this, the adaptability of the Isukha and some of her IWRMS has enabled the community to conserve some species like herbal plants amidst changes brought by an interplay of socio-economic and ecological dynamics.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that KWS, Forest Department and other stakeholders should take cognisance of the invaluable roles played by the Isukha and other local communities living around protected areas and integrate them in

contemporary approaches to wildlife conservation. Similarly, resilient components of IWRMS should be integrated in wildlife conservation in order to enhance the conservation of wildlife of socio-cultural economic and ecological importance. In both instances, the integration process can be achieved through the formation of partnerships or collaborative management. Secondly, a well established conservation education and extension programme that blends traditional channels of communication such as folkmedia and modern channels such as public rallies and workshops should be established with a view to sensitising people, arousing their awareness, and transmitting both cultural and western based conservation values to the locals.

Thirdly, if the status quo of the National Reserve is maintained, the Isukha and other local communities should be allowed access to some of the Reserve's resources like herbal medicine, fruits, berries and thatch grass on a controlled and regulated basis. It is envisaged that access to these resources as well as other socio-economic benefits will engender positive attitudes thereby enhancing good relationships between KWS and other stakeholders who live in the environs of protected areas. Fourthly, conservation packages and programmes that recognise the sex dichotomy in the roles of men and women as well as the complementarity factor should be introduced. Such packages will ensure that the differential needs and roles of men and women are taken into consideration in order to enhance their full participation in wildlife conservation.