



## CASE STUDY

# Cameroon: Local initiative to protect Lake Ossa



## Summary

The Lake Ossa complex is faced with unsustainable fishing practices, habitat destruction and deteriorated water quality. These trends have severe negative impact on the livelihoods of people, leading to further unsustainable over-exploitation. To combat these developments, a sustainable livelihood approach has been applied to foster collaboration among stakeholders. From this experience, it is evident that active local NGOs can be vehicles for facilitating dialogue and mobilising different stakeholders.

## Background

The Lake Ossa complex contains nine lakes and over twenty islands. It is located in Dizangue, Littoral Region of Cameroon, and situated at the outlet of the Sanaga basin. The Lake Ossa Complex is a designated faunal reserve since 1968 and serves as the major source of livelihood for over 80% of the local population engaged in bivalve harvesting and fishing.

The biodiversity values of the complex are under pressure due to unsustainable fishing, hunting and habitat destruction which affect threatened birds and protected manatees.

Furthermore, the lake's water quality is affected by pesticides and chemicals used by the large agro palm industries (SAFACAM and SOCAPALM) located in the area as well as effluents discharged upstream by these industries.

Another key driver of unsustainable fishing practices is the fluctuation of the Lake complex water levels due to upstream regulation of surface water flows within the Sanaga river basin by the National Electricity Corporation (SONEL). It would appear that SONEL does not respect the period allocated for fishing, during which time its dams are not supposed to be open. When SONEL acts otherwise, the

population engage in over-fishing using unsustainable techniques before the water levels increases to levels unfavorable for fishing.

Additionally, there are emerging issues like soil erosion and land degradation due to subsistence farming along the banks of lake. These factors are jeopardizing the ecological and biodiversity functions of the Lake complex, with negative impacts on the livelihood of the local population, which consequently leads to further unsustainable over-exploitation.

## **Actions taken**

Watershed Task Group (WTG) - a local NGO, has initiated several activities and actions to support and strengthen participatory wetland management approaches that link conservation with human needs. The NGO organized and facilitated education and awareness raising campaigns and workshops in different communities to highlight these problems and their consequences on the livelihood of the

local population. The NGO also held consultations with local government administrators and traditional authorities on the need to foster collaboration in the protection of Lake Ossa Complex.

The NGO has prioritised sustainable livelihood options to address ecological and biodiversity threats related to unsustainable exploitation of wildlife and fisheries resources. Some of the specific actions include:

1. Facilitation of participatory multi-stakeholder dialogue among the community, local administration, traditional authorities, and local industries.
2. Education and awareness campaigns using posters, documentary, seminars, and workshops on the problems of the lake and impacts on biological diversity and source of livelihood of the population.
3. Formation and legalisation of gender specific and sensitive common initiative groups, capacity building, and the provision of technical and financial assistance toward alternative sources of livelihood.
4. Participatory inventory of fishes, birds, and fishermen, as well as diagnosis of the sources of livelihood.
5. Participatory and inclusive (men, women, youths, administration, local authorities, and industries) elaboration and adaptation of annual work plan and 5-year strategic plan

This initiative led to several joint meetings that brought together the local community, WTG, traditional authorities, representatives of the agro industries and government to examine issues, challenges and chart the way forward.

## **Outcomes**

This case study describes the progressive efforts of Watershed Task Group (WTG) to strengthen participatory wetland management using sustainable livelihood approaches in the Lake Ossa Complex. It demonstrates the relevance of raising awareness/ capacity building, stakeholder dialogue and concerted action, and a holistic approach to water management.

Some early successes that have been recorded in the Lake Ossa Complex include initiation of partnership and enhancement of collaboration among key actors, an increasing sense of local ownership and collaboration as demonstrated by acts of community policing of fishing and hunting activities, as well as facilitating access to national and international funding opportunities for the local common initiative groups.

WTG succeeded in mobilising and harnessing the efforts of the different stakeholders. It has facilitated the formation and legalisation of over 12 user (hunters and fishermen) associations known as common initiative groups in Cameroon, developed the capacity of over 40 women associations in fish transformation, and provided training and equipment to engage in alternative sources of livelihood

such as cassava cultivation and cane rat domestication to these stakeholder groups.

Furthermore, in collaboration with the other different stakeholders, participatory action plans have been developed and at least three traditional protected fisheries reproduction zones have been established which have contributed to reduced conflict between fishermen and manatee.

## **Lessons Learned**

Active local NGOs can be vehicles for the mobilisation and enhancement of the skills of different stakeholders, organising and formalising users associations, building capacity and facilitating dialogue and concerted action through participatory action processes.

The empowerment of the local community with the necessary knowledge skills and materials is an important first step to motivate and sustain self-mobilized actions. Actions which engage youths and

women are easily scaled-up and have positive influence within the community.

Engaging all relevant key actors from the onset is very productive to diagnose problems better, critically examine alternative solutions to overcome capacity constraints and reduce conflicts, and harness traditional authority powers in achieving sustainable wetland management and biodiversity conservation.

To sustain local interest in IWRM practices, attention must be given to sources of livelihood, especially those that provide cumulative comparative advantages that outweigh financial and labour advantages offered by traditional sources of livelihood in the short and long term.

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**Related IWRM Tools**

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