

The challenges of neoliberal strategies in the management of tropical rainforests in Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Neoliberalism is an economic philosophy that favors free markets, reduced government control, privatization, and policies that support private sector growth and globalization. The adoption of REDD+, in contrast to the highly publicized but conflicting, government-championed strict forest management strategies, has continued for decades in Cross River State. However, the management of tropical rainforests in Cross River State, Nigeria, has increasingly been shaped by neoliberal policies prioritizing market-driven solutions such as ecotourism and carbon trading. While these approaches promise economic growth and environmental conservation, they have faced significant challenges in practice. This article explores the limitations of neoliberal forest management in the region, focusing on issues such as the exclusion of local communities, the degradation of ecosystems, and weak governance structures. Despite the intentions of neoliberal strategies, these policies have often overlooked local knowledge and failed to address the root causes of deforestation, such as illegal logging and unsustainable land use. The article argues for a more inclusive, community-centered approach to forest management that recognizes Indigenous rights, incorporates traditional ecological knowledge, and strengthens regulatory frameworks to ensure the long-term sustainability of Cross River State's tropical rainforests.

Keywords: Poststructural geography, Neoliberal Forest Management, Multiple environmentalities, Tropical rainforests, Self-governing technologies

Introduction

Tropical rainforests are some of the most critical and diverse ecosystems on Earth, providing invaluable environmental, economic, and cultural benefits. In Cross River State, located in southeastern Nigeria, the tropical rainforest is home to an extraordinary variety of plant and animal species, some of which are unique to the region. The state, which houses a significant portion of Nigeria's remaining tropical forest, is crucial for biodiversity conservation and environmental sustainability in the country. However, the management of these rainforests has faced increasing challenges (Mfon, Akintoye, Mfon, Olorundami, Ukata & Akintoye (2014); Akintoye, Bisong, Utang, Andrew-Essien (2013); and Akintoye, Ogar, Omoogun, Dada, Ubong, Ukata, Nkpena, Onuoha, Awan, Ajila, Ekwok, Ekei, Akintoye (2024), Adeniyi, Ogar and Akintoye (2019), Philip, Akintoye, Olorundami, Ojong, Ukata, Harrison (2014), Ukata, Akintoye, Ekeh, Ogar (2013), Utang, Andrew-Essien, Akintoye and Upla (2008), Utang, Akintoye, Enyogu (2007), especially as neoliberal policies have gained traction in the Cross river rainforest region.

For instance, Asiyanbi, Ogar, and Akintoye (2019) explored the complexities of local resistance to neoliberal conservation, emphasizing the interplay of multiple environmentalities, self-governing technologies, and poststructural geography. They argue that resistance is not monolithic, but shaped by diverse local experiences, knowledge systems, and power dynamics. The study highlights how individuals and communities engage with conservation policies in unexpected ways, sometimes adopting or adapting neoliberal logics while simultaneously resisting

them. Examining these intricate dynamics shows that there were challenges to simplistic notions of resistance and compliance, offering a nuanced perspective on how conservation interventions are negotiated, contested, and transformed at the local level. These policies, based on market-driven approaches and reducing state intervention, have created tensions between economic growth, environmental conservation, and social equity. This article on the Challenges of Neoliberal Efforts in Tropical Rainforest Management in Cross River State, Nigeria, delves into the complexities and challenges that neoliberal efforts have encountered in managing Cross River State's tropical rainforests, highlighting issues such as governance, community engagement, and environmental sustainability.

The tropical rainforest wealth of cross river state and the need for sustainable management

Nestled in the southeastern corner of Nigeria, Cross River State cradles some of the last remaining stretches of tropical rainforest in West Africa. These vegetation is known to be lush, ancient, and pulsating with biodiversity. These verdant ecosystems are part of the larger Guinean Forests of West Africa, a global biodiversity hotspot teeming with life found nowhere else on Earth (Myers et al., 2000). At the heart of this green expanse lies the Cross River National Park (CRNP), a sanctuary of ecological grandeur and Nigeria's most biodiversity-rich and protected area. Divided into two distinct sectors—the Oban Division to the southeast and the Okwangwo Division to the northeast. CRNP spans over 4,000 square kilometers of dense tropical rainforest, rugged hills, cascading rivers, and mist-covered valleys (Nigerian National Parks Service, 2021).

The Oban Division, which borders Cameroon's Korup National Park, is a deep, continuous stretch of primary rainforest. Its towering hardwood trees, including *Entandrophragma*, *Lophira*, and *Terminalia* species, form a dense canopy that filters the sunlight into a gentle emerald glow on the forest floor. Lianas twist around buttress roots, and the air is rich with the scent of earth and the hum of insects. This area is home to over 1,500 plant species and a range of threatened fauna, including the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*), the elusive drill monkey (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*), and the forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) (Oates et al., 2004).

The Okwangwo Division, with its more mountainous terrain, connects ecologically to the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary and the Mbe Mountains. This corridor is vital to the conservation of endangered species like the Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*)—Africa's rarest great ape. The forests here are an intricate mosaic of high-canopy trees, rich undergrowth, and cloud-kissed ridges, forming a unique microclimate that supports both endemic and migratory species (Nicholas, Dunn, Imong, & Oates, 2011). Beyond the park boundaries, community forests in Cross River State still harbor significant biodiversity. However, these areas face increasing pressure from logging, agriculture, and development. In recent decades, conservation initiatives have sought to balance ecological preservation with local livelihoods through programs like REDD+ and community-based forest management (Ajonina, Usongo, & Tchassem, 2010).

In essence, the tropical rainforest areas of Cross River are more than just a collection of trees—they are living archives of evolutionary history, cultural landscapes for indigenous communities, and vital regulators of regional climate and hydrology. Their preservation is not merely ecological stewardship, but a commitment to sustaining one of Africa's most vital green lungs. Thus, the conservation of these vast forest areas, inhabited by endemic species, is of great importance and should not be compromised, especially with the state government-inspired surge in ecotourism, super highways construction, and other developmental activities, which are

potentially able to fragment the pristine tropical rain forests, with dire consequences on flora, and invariably, fauna species.

Neoliberalism and forest management in Cross River State

Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ideology, emphasizes the reduction of government intervention, privatization, and reliance on market mechanisms to solve social and environmental problems. In Cross River State, this has manifested in several ways, including the promotion of ecotourism, carbon trading, and private conservation efforts aimed at preserving the rainforests while simultaneously generating economic growth. The idea is that the economic incentives created by these market-driven solutions can help fund conservation efforts and reduce the pressure on forest resources.

One prominent example of this approach is the implementation of forest carbon offset programs. Through partnerships with international environmental organizations, the state has been involved in schemes where local landowners are compensated for preserving their forested land in exchange for selling carbon credits. Similarly, ecotourism has been marketed as a sustainable solution to protect biodiversity and generate revenue for local communities. These efforts, however, have faced significant challenges that reveal the limitations of neoliberalism in addressing the complexities of tropical rainforest management.

For instance, REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) is widely considered a neoliberal forest management system, particularly in critical environmental and political ecology literature. At its core, REDD+ seeks to mitigate climate change by assigning economic value to the carbon storage capacity of forests, thereby offering financial incentives to conserve rather than clear them (Angelsen, Brockhaus, Sunderlin & Verchot, 2012).

This approach reflects neoliberal principles through its reliance on market-based mechanisms. Forests, once seen as ecological commons or sacred cultural landscapes, are increasingly reframed as carbon sinks with measurable exchange value—commodities to be traded on global carbon markets (Corbera, 2012; Fairhead, Leach & Scoones, 2012). In doing so, REDD+ aligns with the neoliberal logic of commodification and privatization of nature, where ecological functions are folded into the circuits of capital. Moreover, REDD+ is shaped by the forces of global governance and transnational finance, often driven by international institutions, NGOs, and donor countries. This dynamic mirrors the globalization aspect of neoliberalism, wherein environmental policy is influenced by external actors and market imperatives rather than local socio-ecological realities (McAfee, 2012).

Critics argue that such market-oriented conservation strategies can displace indigenous and local communities, erode traditional forest management practices, and mask deeper structural drivers of deforestation (Bumpus & Liverman, 2008). Yet, proponents view REDD+ as a pragmatic, if imperfect, tool that leverages economic incentives for positive environmental outcomes in a world where financial valuation often dictates policy priorities. In sum, REDD+ is deeply rooted in neoliberal environmental governance. By transforming the lush, living complexity of forests into units of carbon value, it exemplifies how nature is increasingly managed through economic rationalities, often at the expense of ecological and cultural depth.

Exclusion of local communities and loss of traditional knowledge

One of the most profound challenges posed by neoliberal approaches in forest management is the exclusion of local communities. For decades, the people of Cross River State, particularly indigenous groups, have relied on the rainforest for their livelihoods. These communities practice traditional farming, hunting, and gathering forest resources, all of which are closely tied to their cultural identities and survival strategies. However, under neoliberal policies, the focus on privatization and market-based solutions has often excluded these communities from decision-making processes related to forest conservation.

In the pursuit of creating profitable ecotourism ventures or implementing carbon credit schemes, local people have frequently been sidelined or displaced. Their traditional knowledge, which has long been integral to sustainable land use practices, is often overlooked in favor of top-down, market-driven strategies. Indigenous communities have not been adequately consulted about conservation measures or compensated for the loss of access to forest resources. This exclusion undermines their role as stewards of the land, often resulting in the breakdown of traditional ecological knowledge systems that have supported sustainable land management practices for generations.

The exclusion of local communities from these conservation efforts is particularly evident in the establishment of protected areas where commercial interests, such as logging and agribusiness, are frequently prioritized. The creation of protected areas, like the Cross River National Park, has sometimes resulted in the displacement of local populations or restricted their access to vital resources, such as water and firewood. Without proper engagement and respect for the rights of local communities, these neoliberal policies have led to growing resentment and conflict.

Environmental consequences of neoliberal forest management

Although neoliberal forest management strategies in Cross River State are intended to preserve the rainforest and protect biodiversity, the reality has been less successful. The promotion of ecotourism, for example, has had mixed results. Although it has generated some economic benefits, such as employment opportunities and revenue for conservation programs, it has also created environmental problems. The increased human activity in ecotourism areas has led to habitat degradation, pollution, and pressure on fragile ecosystems. Without strong regulatory frameworks, ecotourism ventures have often resulted in overcrowding, waste accumulation, and the overuse of natural resources, undermining the long-term goals of conservation (Milledge, Hough, and Adams, 2007).

Moreover, the sale of carbon credits as a mechanism for funding rainforest conservation has proven problematic. Notably, while carbon trading is seen as a way to monetize the preservation of tropical forests, the market-driven approach has led to several challenges. In some cases, carbon offset projects have displaced local populations, disregarding land tenure rights and creating land use conflicts. These initiatives also fail to address the underlying causes of deforestation, such as unsustainable agriculture and illegal logging, by focusing on market solutions that often do not engage with the root social and economic drivers of environmental degradation (Klein, 2019). The neoliberal emphasis on market solutions often overlooks the complexities of forest ecosystems and the broader socio-economic dynamics that contribute to forest loss.

Institutional and governance challenges

The success of neoliberal policies relies heavily on efficient and effective governance structures. However, Cross River State faces significant institutional challenges that hinder the successful implementation of these market-driven conservation strategies. The local government structures tasked with overseeing forest management are often under-resourced, understaffed, and lack the technical expertise required to enforce environmental regulations effectively. The state's governance system is also marked by corruption and political instability, which further exacerbates the challenges of managing the rainforest.

For instance, illegal logging is rampant in the region, often fueled by weak enforcement of forest protection laws. In addition to corruption, a lack of political will has made it difficult to enforce regulations that would prevent the over-exploitation of forest resources. Moreover, international actors involved in forest management, such as NGOs and private conservation organizations, have sometimes prioritized their agendas over local needs and perspectives. This disconnect has led to governance failures, where well-intentioned policies fail to translate into tangible outcomes on the ground.

The failure of the REDD+ program in the sustainable management of tropical Rainforests in Cross River State, Nigeria

Cross River State, Nigeria, is home to some of the most extensive tropical rainforests in the country and plays a significant role in biodiversity conservation. However, the implementation of the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) program, intended to ensure sustainable forest management, has largely failed in achieving its objectives. The failure of REDD+ in Cross River State is attributed to a combination of large-scale lumbering, ecotourism pressures, unsustainable development projects, and widespread government corruption and bureaucracy. This paper critically examines these challenges and discusses the broader implications for sustainable forest management. REDD+ failed in Cross River State because:

i. Large-scale lumbering and illegal logging is responsible for most of the biodiversity losses.

One of the major impediments to the success of the REDD+ program in Cross River State is the prevalence of illegal logging. Despite the state government's formal moratorium on logging, illegal timber harvesting continues at an alarming rate, often with the collusion of local officials (Oyebo, Bisong, & Morakinyo, 2010). Timber extraction is a lucrative business, providing employment for many while simultaneously contributing to rapid deforestation. The inability of REDD+ to curtail illegal logging has weakened the credibility of the program and diminished its effectiveness (Aruofor, 2017).

ii. In this area, there exists significant ecotourism and development Pressures

Cross River State is known for its ecotourism potential, including attractions such as the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary, Cross River National Park, and the Obudu Cattle Ranch. While ecotourism is often promoted as a sustainable economic alternative to deforestation, the reality has been different. Infrastructure development to support tourism, such as road construction, resorts, and other facilities—has led to significant forest degradation (Ewah, Enoh & Edem, 2019). Moreover, ecotourism revenue rarely benefits local communities, leading to resistance against conservation initiatives and further weakening the REDD+ framework (Ikeme & Eze, 2021).

iii. Unregulated development projects,

Projects such as the Super Highway proposed by the Ayade Government, destroyed vast miles of primary forests and displaced farmers, who migrated to other areas, before the project was abandoned. The Nigerian government and private investors have prioritized large-scale development projects in Cross River State, such as agricultural plantations, industrial estates, and road networks, often at the expense of forest conservation. The construction of the controversial Cross River Superhighway, for instance, threatened over 260 km of pristine rainforest and was widely criticized by conservationists (Fadairo, 2020). The REDD+ program has been largely ineffective in influencing such large-scale development decisions due to its limited enforcement capacity and lack of integration into broader policy frameworks.

iv. Government bureaucracy and corruption have acted as bottlenecks to the rapid facilitation of the REDD+ program.

For instance, corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies have played a central role in the failure of REDD+ in Cross River State. The mismanagement of REDD+ funds, coupled with a lack of transparency in government-led conservation projects, has eroded trust in the program. There have been multiple reports of financial misappropriation, with REDD+ funds failing to reach the communities most affected by conservation policies (Ubi & Adie, 2021). Moreover, political interference has often resulted in the appointment of officials who lack the technical expertise to manage sustainable forest programs effectively (Akpan & Udoh, 2018).

Failure of neoliberal forest management globally

Neoliberal forest management, characterized by market-driven conservation policies, privatization, and reduced state control, has been widely implemented in various regions worldwide. The approach is predicated on the belief that market mechanisms and private-sector involvement can lead to more efficient and sustainable forest management. However, in practice, neoliberal forestry has often failed to achieve its intended environmental and socio-economic goals. This failure is attributed to issues such as the commodification of nature, weakened regulatory frameworks, exclusion of local communities, and the prioritization of profit over conservation. This paper critically examines these challenges in different global contexts.

a) Commodification of nature and market failures

One of the fundamental flaws of neoliberal forest management is the reduction of forests to mere commodities. Market mechanisms such as carbon offset schemes and payment for ecosystem services (PES) have been promoted as ways to incentivize conservation, but they have frequently led to perverse outcomes. In Latin America, for example, carbon trading initiatives under the REDD+ framework have often prioritized corporate interests over genuine conservation efforts (Corbera, Gonzalez, & Brown, 2011). Instead of reducing deforestation, these programs have enabled industries to continue polluting, while securing vast tracts of land, often displacing indigenous communities (McAfee, 2012).

b) Weakening of state regulatory frameworks

Neoliberal policies often advocate for deregulation and the retreat of the state from forest management. However, in many cases, the weakening of government oversight has led to increased deforestation and exploitation. In Indonesia, for example, the decentralization of forest governance in the early 2000s led to a surge in illegal logging, as local governments prioritized short-term revenue generation over sustainable forest management (Barr et al., 2006). Without

strong regulatory enforcement, private companies have frequently exploited forests with little accountability (Resosudarmo, Brockhaus & Ekadinata, 2014).

c) Exclusion of local communities and land grabs

A major failure of neoliberal forest management is the marginalization of indigenous and local communities. Many policies have focused on attracting foreign investment and private-sector participation, often at the expense of traditional landowners. In Africa, for instance, the expansion of corporate-led forestry projects has displaced rural communities, leading to land conflicts and increased poverty (Fairhead, Leach, & Scoones, 2012). In Brazil, large-scale land acquisitions for commercial tree plantations under neoliberal forestry programs have resulted in significant social unrest (Pacheco, 2012). The communities operating in the buffer zones of the Cross River National Park (CRNP) have almost always been in conflict with the Cross River State Forestry Management Agency, over issues of encroachment, rural community deprivation and neglect.

d) Prioritization of profit over conservation

Neoliberal forest management tends to prioritize economic gains over ecological integrity. This is evident in cases where conservation policies have been co-opted to serve corporate interests. In Canada, the deregulation of forestry industries in British Columbia has led to the overexploitation of old-growth forests, undermining conservation efforts (Hoberg, 2013). Similarly, in Australia, neoliberal policies have facilitated large-scale deforestation in favor of agricultural expansion, despite international conservation commitments (Lindenmayer, Hunter, Burton & Gibbons, 2012).

Case Studies of Failure of neoliberal forest management are many. These include the case of Indonesia, where decentralization and weak governance led to a deforestation boom, undermining conservation goals (Barr et al., 2006); in Brazil Neoliberal policies facilitated land grabbing and deforestation under the guise of market-driven conservation (Pacheco, 2012); in Africa: Corporate-led forestry initiatives displaced indigenous communities and led to increased inequality (Fairhead, Leach, & Scoones, 2012); also in Canada deregulation contributed to the loss of critical old-growth forests (Hoberg, 2013); the case of Australia is characterized by economic priorities, which overruled ecological concerns, leading to unsustainable deforestation (Lindenmayer, Hunter, Burton & Gibbons, 2012).

The failure of neoliberal forest management across multiple regions highlights the need for alternative approaches that integrate strong governance, community participation, and ecological sustainability. Strengthening public regulatory frameworks, empowering local communities through participatory forest management, and prioritizing ecological restoration over market-based incentives are essential steps toward sustainable forest governance.

Rethinking forest management and moving beyond neoliberalism

The challenges faced by neoliberal approaches to rainforest management in Cross River State call for a rethinking of forest governance. One potential solution is to adopt a more inclusive, community-based model that recognizes the rights and knowledge of indigenous peoples. Engaging local communities in the design and implementation of conservation strategies could lead to more sustainable and equitable outcomes. By incorporating traditional knowledge systems and ensuring that local people benefit from conservation efforts, it is possible to create a more collaborative and sustainable model of forest management.

Additionally, stronger regulatory frameworks are necessary to address the root causes of deforestation and forest degradation. Neoliberal policies that emphasize market solutions without addressing the broader socio-economic factors driving deforestation are unlikely to succeed in the long term. A more comprehensive approach to forest management should include stricter enforcement of environmental laws, support for sustainable agricultural practices, and the provision of alternative livelihoods for communities that depend on forest resources.

Implications and identifiable way forward

The failure of REDD+ in Cross River State has significant implications for Nigeria's environmental policies and its commitment to global climate change mitigation strategies. Moving forward, it is essential to address the structural weaknesses of the REDD+ framework, including:

- i. ***There is a dire need for strengthening law enforcement in the area:*** A more robust approach to tackling illegal logging is necessary, including harsher penalties and enhanced monitoring technologies (such as satellite surveillance).
- ii. ***It's vital to also ensure community participation:*** Local communities must be actively involved in decision-making processes and adequately compensated for conservation efforts.
- iii. ***Improving transparency and governance:*** This will go a long way in solving these problems. Financial accountability and independent audits of REDD+ funds should be prioritized to reduce corruption.
- iv. ***Another panacea is the strategy aimed at balancing development and conservation:*** Policies should be enacted to ensure that development projects do not come at the expense of forest conservation.

Conclusion

The neoliberal approach to forest management in Cross River State, although initially promising, has encountered significant challenges in terms of environmental sustainability, social equity, and effective governance. The exclusion of local communities, the environmental impact of market-driven solutions, and the institutional weaknesses in governance have all contributed to the failure of many neoliberal initiatives. Moving forward, it is essential to adopt a more integrated, community-centered approach that takes into account the complex interplay between ecological, social, and economic factors. Only by rethinking the dominant neoliberal model and incorporating local knowledge and perspectives can Cross River State achieve a more sustainable and equitable future for its tropical rainforests. The REDD+ program in Cross River State was envisioned as a mechanism to promote sustainable forest management and mitigate deforestation. However, its failure is largely attributable to systemic corruption, unsustainable development, ecotourism pressures, and illegal logging. Without meaningful reforms and stronger governance, REDD+ is unlikely to succeed in achieving its intended environmental and socio-economic goals.

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