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Understanding community awareness, perceptions and attitude toward protected areas: Evidence from Gambella national park

Girma Lagiso, Pavla Hejcmanová

Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Dept. of Wildlife and Animal Sciences, Czech Republic

Abstract

Protected areas increasingly depend on the support of surrounding communities to achieve long-term conservation success. However, limited evidence exists regarding how local awareness, perceptions, and attitudes interact to shape conservation support in Gambella National Park. This study investigated community awareness, perceptions, and attitudes toward the park and evaluated how these factors influence willingness to support conservation. Data were collected from 333 randomly selected respondents across seven villages surrounding the park using a structured questionnaire administered via the KoBoToolbox application. Ordinal logistic regression was used to assess the influence of socio-demographic characteristics on awareness, perceptions, and attitudes, while Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was employed to examine the effects of perceptions and attitudes on willingness to support conservation. Residents living near the park were significantly more likely to report greater awareness of the park and its management structures, more positive perceptions, and more favourable attitudes toward the park. Distance from the park significantly predicted awareness ($\beta = 5.50$, $p < 0.001$; OR = 244.98), perceptions ($\beta = 2.66$, $p < 0.001$; OR = 14.24), and attitudes ($\beta = 19.06$, $p < 0.001$). Higher educational attainment also contributed to more positive perceptions and attitudes, while government employees demonstrated greater awareness than farmers. Structural equation modelling further revealed that perceptions strongly influenced attitudes ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$). Attitudes had a modest positive effect on willingness to support conservation ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = 0.020$), while perceptions also exerted a direct positive effect on willingness ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = 0.032$). Attitudes partially mediated the relationship between perceptions and willingness to support conservation. Overall, the findings indicate that support for conservation is shaped not only by socio-demographic factors but also by how communities experience and evaluate the park.

Keywords: Community awareness, conservation attitudes, Gambella National Park, local perceptions

Contact Address: Girma Lagiso, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Dept. of Wildlife and Animal Sciences, Kamycka 129, 165 00 Prague, Czech Republic, e-mail: lagiso@ftz.czu.cz