

# **The Value and Significance of Bushmeat to Rural Communities in the Lebialem Highlands of Cameroon**

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## **Abstract**

Rapid human population growth and socioeconomic change has transformed bushmeat into a commodity traded on a vast scale throughout western and central Africa. Academic attention over the last decade has primarily focused on ascertaining the extent of this trade and the sustainability of wildlife harvests. The impact of harvesting on terrestrial vertebrates, particularly non-human primates, has caused international concern; but vilifying and marginalising those that rely on this resource is not an effective solution. Bushmeat utilisation is of nutritional and economic importance to rural communities. Successful mitigation can only be envisaged if the social dimension of this multifaceted problem is appreciated and understood.

This research addressed the livelihood dimension of the bushmeat phenomenon from the perspective of the harvester. Research was conducted during May and June 2007 in the Lebialem Highlands of Southwest Province, Cameroon. A multiple-case study approach was adopted using a triangulation of qualitative data collection techniques and quantitative means of analysis. Ninety semi-structured interviews were conducted alongside rapid rural appraisal exercises in six rural communities. Hunters and trappers were identified using a snowballing sampling technique designed to locate individuals with the relevant knowledge, experience and level of involvement.

The bushmeat harvesters were exclusively male with a median age of 42 years, which is older than previously reported. Locally manufactured and inexpensive shotguns were identified as the weapon of choice with repercussions for vulnerable primate species. Although the brushtailed porcupine (*Atherurus africanus*) was harvested by the greatest number of respondents (n=86), arboreal monkeys came second (n=58) using this method of harvest rank. In total, 74 per cent of interviewees hunted primate species. Based on observations, respondent identification and evidence from the literature, the harvesters catch is believed to consist of seven Cercopithecidae species, two Hominidae subspecies and an unknown number of Loroidea species. Among these the red-eared guenon (*Cercopithecus erythrotis*), Preuss's guenon (*Cercopithecus preussi*), drill (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*), Nigerian-Cameroon chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes vellerosus*) and Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) are considered to be threatened.

The relative importance of bushmeat as a protein and income source depended on access to external markets and food security. Overall, the economic importance of bushmeat harvesting as a flexible income generating activity has surpassed nutritional benefits in the Lebiale Highlands. However, relatively few individuals were entirely financially dependent on bushmeat due to the economic diversification strategies employed. Diminishing returns within proximate forest blocks have caused hunters to venture into adjacent protected areas. Conversely, increased effort is likely to make harvesters more receptive to suggested alternatives. An overwhelming taste preference for porcupine was recorded. Focusing harvester attention on robust and favoured rodent species from the farm-bush matrix may alleviate harvesting pressure on biologically sensitive species whilst promoting the economic benefits of bushmeat trading. A multi-faceted community-based approach promoting dietary and monetary alternatives is required if conservation is to succeed without jeopardising the development prospects of the local people. Flexible income generating activities that can be incorporated into existing livelihood strategies must be piloted and nutritional information, particularly regarding non-animal proteins, should be disseminated at the local level.



*A trapper showing his catch to prospective buyers*



*Monkeys for sale*