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The uneven legitimacy of militarized conservation law enforcement: policy insights from Northern Cameroon

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Photo credit: Fergus Simpson (2025).



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Summary

This policy brief examines how the legitimacy of militarized conservation differs across northern Cameroon. Drawing on fieldwork around Bénoué and Bouba Ndjida National Parks, it shows that different communities respond differently to the integration of the military into conservation. While some see it as essential to combat poaching and insecurity, others experience it as an unjust restriction on land access. Some hold both views simultaneously. My central argument is that the factors that have driven wildlife decline and justify a militarized response – historical state neglect of protected areas, increasing pressures on land, and insecurity – are also the factors that shape how people experience and judge it. Recognizing this is essential for designing conservation policies that are ecologically and socially just.

Introduction

Much has been written about how the militarization of conservation law enforcement leads to the exclusion, dispossession and alienation of Indigenous and local people (Duffy et al., 2019; Lundstrum et al., 2025). While shining an important light on the injustices that militarization can produce, these accounts present a somewhat binary framing of how local people view armed interventions to protect the environment – often focusing on opposition (e.g. Witter, 2021). Another strand of the literature demonstrates that local people's perceptions of militarized conservation are more complex: some people living around protected areas view armed park guards positively, as providers of basic law and order where the state is weak (Kelly, 2014; Simpson and Pellegrini, 2023).

This policy brief takes this heterogeneity seriously. It asks, what explains why some people support military interventions to protect the environment while others oppose them? Although this question remains poorly understood, it is essential to advance social science research on militarized conservation and to inform more socially legitimate conservation policies. To address this, I take inspiration from literature on actor-oriented approaches to development sociology and anthropology (Long, 2001; Olivier de Sardan, 2005). Rather than treating people as univocal recipients of development – or in this case conservation – projects, this perspective recognizes that local actors' experiences and agency in relation to such interventions are mediated by wider structural circumstances. Local agency is therefore inherently heterogeneous, shaped in interaction with this variable context, of which in the case of my research, militarized conservation law enforcement is but one part.

The research is based on qualitative fieldwork carried out around protected areas in northern Cameroon – a region where conservation has recently taken a militarized turn. From May to June 2025, in 8 villages around Bénoué National Park and 4 villages around Bouba Ndjida National Park, I conducted a total of 12 focus groups and 32 interviews. A further 12 interviews took place in the city of Garoua and another 6 in Yaoundé.

The militarization of law enforcement in northern Cameroon

The protected area network in northern Cameroon comprises three national parks – Bouba Ndjida, Benoue and Faro – and 28 hunting concessions (*Zones d'Intérêt Cynégétique*, ZICs). Covering an impressive 43% of northern Cameroon's land area, this complex constitutes one of the last major wildlife strongholds in north-central Africa (Scholte, 2011).



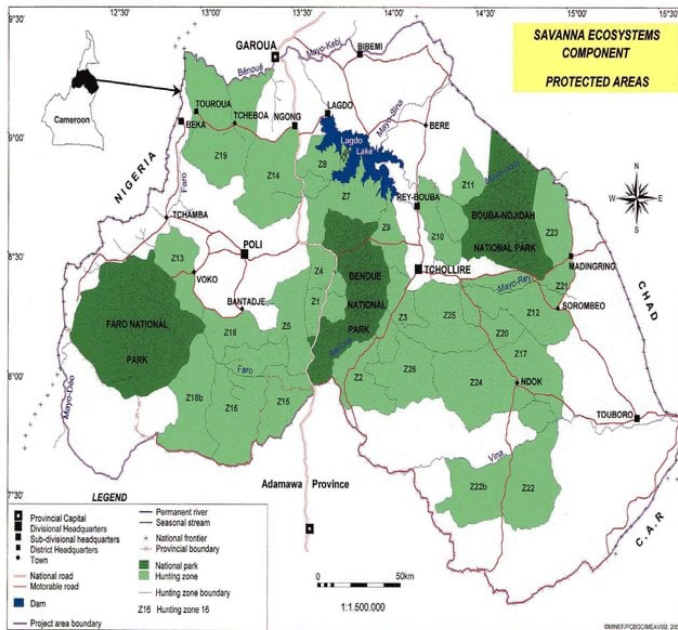


Figure 1: Bénoué, Bouba Ndjida, and Faro National Parks and the surrounding hunting zones (ZICs) (from Angwafo, 2006).

Despite their importance for biodiversity conservation in the region, animal populations in northern Cameroon's protected areas have declined dramatically. In Bouba Ndjida National Park, surveys conducted in 1968–1969 and 2012–2018 show that buffalo declined from 5,000–6,000 to around 4,000, hartebeest from 15,000–20,000 to 3,058, and elephants from around 300 to 40 (Garga Fils and Gormo, 2021). In Bénoué National Park, repeat surveys recorded a decline in hippopotamus numbers from 400 in 1987 to 188 in 2013 (Scholte and Iyah, 2016). Black rhinoceros have disappeared entirely. After decades of neglect (Kelly Pennaz et al., 2018), these trends have prompted a renewed focus on conservation law enforcement.

The turning point came in 2012. Crossing over from Chad, armed Sudanese poachers on horseback broke into Bouba Ndjida National Park and massacred between 200 and 650 elephants (depending on the estimate). Following international outcry, the Cameroonian government launched 'Operation Peace at Bouba Ndjida', deploying hundreds of soldiers to protect the park's

elephants during the dry season when, gathered around waterholes, they are most vulnerable. Before this, the park was protected by a team of just five eco-guards, equipped with outdated MAS 35 rifles, and supported by 20 villagers using traditional weapons (Tayo, 2025).

With technical assistance from the Wildlife Conservation Society and the African Wildlife Foundation, Cameroon's Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife has increasingly integrated the military into conservation in northern Cameroon. Mixed patrols of eco-guards, soldiers, and community trackers were introduced in Faro National Park in 2017 and in Bouba Ndjida and Bénoué National Parks in 2021. They have also been extended into the surrounding ZICs, where they are financed and organized by the concession holders.

As a consequence of conservation law enforcement becoming more coercive, the number of arrests of people illegally entering protected areas has massively increased. Based on ecological surveys, conservation authorities argue that this has drastically reduced poaching incursions and enhanced protection for large mammals, particularly elephants. However, research is lacking on how this massive increase in military personnel and equipment has been received locally.



Figure 2: Elephant carcass following poaching in Bouba Ndjida National Park, 2018 (photo credit: Garga Fils and Goma 2021: 12).

The wider context in which militarization occurs

Before examining local people's attitudes, it is necessary to look at the wider circumstances in which militarization is taking place. In what follows, I discuss three contextual factors that have driven wildlife decline, thereby justifying more forceful law enforcement.

The first factor is the historical decline of state support for conservation in northern Cameroon. Before German and later French colonizers arrived, parts of what are now Bénoué and Bouba Ndjida National Parks formed the hunting domain of the Lamido (chief) of Rey Bouba. Working with the French colonial administration, the Lamido agreed to establish the wildlife reserves of Bénoué and Bouba Ndjida in 1932, which were reclassified as national parks in 1968 following Cameroon's independence. The protected area network was subsequently expanded through a network of surrounding ZICs, a move intended to provide a buffer zone for the parks while generating revenue through trophy-hunting. During the colonial period, and for decades thereafter, the state invested considerable resources in conservation. Hunting guards were stationed in villages, wildlife populations remained abundant, and sports hunters numerous. From the 1980s onwards, however, when President Paul Biya came to power, conservation in northern Cameroon progressively diminished as a state priority (Kelly Pennaz et al., 2018). Budgetary constraints reduced the number of eco-guards and eroded management capacity. As poachers, farmers, and pastoralists entered protected areas in increasing numbers, wildlife populations – and the trophy-hunting economy that depended on them – declined (Garga Fils and Gormo, 2021). The recent militarization of conservation must be understood against this backdrop: as an attempt to restore state authority over protected areas and reverse decades of neglect.

Related to this is a second central factor: rapidly increasing pressure on land. While the amount of land available has dramatically decreased, the human population is increasing as a result of migration from Cameroon's Far North. Recurrent droughts surrounding the Lake Chad Basin since the 1970s (Raimond et al., 2020), followed more recently by displacement caused by the Boko Haram insurgency, have pushed large numbers of people into northern Cameroon's protected area landscape. Combined with the expansion of protected areas via ZICs, these changes have squeezed more and more people into an ever smaller area of habitable and cultivable land. What land remains available is distributed unevenly between social groups. The villages around Bénoué National Park, where disparities in land access are particularly stark between autochthonous and migrant populations, provide a case in point. This leads to tensions not only between migrants and long-term residents, but also – as we shall see – between migrants and militarized conservation actors.

Insecurity is a third major factor. While Cameroon's North has been spared Boko Haram, it has still experienced violence of its own. Around Bénoué and Bouba Ndjida, local inhabitants describe a notable deterioration in the security situation from 2000 onwards – driven by two parallel processes. On the one hand, wars in neighboring Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) led weapons to become increasingly available. Taking advantage of the glut, poachers became much more effective; the 2012 elephant massacre being the most striking example. On the other hand, the Cameroonian state has been troublingly unable to maintain basic law and order around the northern protected area complex. Foreign and Cameroonian groups of armed bandits –locally known as *Zaraguina* – have roamed the landscape since the 1980s (see Roitman, 2005), a situation exacerbated by the neglect of conservation law enforcement (Scholte and Iyah, 2016). Capitalizing on the power vacuum, bandits



established bases inside protected areas, ultimately causing eco-guards' patrols to be discontinued in some areas.

While these structural threats provide a rationalization for stronger conservation law enforcement, they also shape local people's experiences of and attitudes toward it. The following section illustrates how variations in these conditions produce heterogeneous reactions locally.



Figure 3: Mixed patrol of eco-guards and soldiers returning from Bénoué National Park (photo credit: Fergus O'Leary Simpson 2025).

How do people perceive and interact with militarized conservation?

My interview and focus group data reveal a variety of sometimes contrasting perspectives of militarized conservation in northern Cameroon. Contrary to much of the literature (e.g. Witter, 2021), most of the people had a generally favourable view of the mixed patrols – some even wanted more of them. Others favored stronger enforcement in the national parks, yet opposed it in the ZICs. Others, who had been pushed from their farms by patrols, were significantly more negative.

While the finding that local people hold heterogeneous and often ambivalent views of militarized conservation is not new to the literature (Simpson and Pellegrini, 2023), my research has started to provide some clues as to the reasons *why* attitudes vary. To do so, I

present three short vignettes from villages in northern Cameroon. The villages were chosen based on the fact that they exemplify how diverse perceptions are shaped by wider structural circumstances.

#1. Manguenwa: When militarized conservation threatens livelihoods

Located in ZIC 4, beside a wildlife corridor established to restore ecological connectivity between Bénoué and Faro National Parks, Manguenwa is the village with the most conflictual relationship with militarized conservation. It is comprised almost entirely of migrants from the Extreme North of Cameroon.

The migrants have weak access to land, most of which was occupied when they arrived in the area. As a result, they typically established farms on the only cultivable lands available, in the wildlife corridor. Since this land is of high conservation value, it is a focal point for the mixed patrols – which are charged with removing the farmers from the corridor. Yet, they meet stiff resistance when doing so. In June 2024, following a confrontation with a soldier in the corridor, one farmer was killed. In protest, the community blocked the main road and stopped all transport coming through the village.

To summarize, in Manguenwa, land scarcity leaves people particularly vulnerable to the restrictions imposed by militarized conservation, hence explaining their resistance to it. This is not the case for some other population groups in the region, such as the long(er)-term inhabitants, who have strong(er) access to agricultural land, and therefore less incentive to encroach into the ZICs or ecological corridors. As we shall see in the next vignette, some of them even favour expanding the mixed patrols.



#2. Koum: When militarized conservation provides security benefits

In the village of Koum, where the HQ of Bouba Ndjida National Park is located, people spoke enthusiastically about the deployment of soldiers to the area. During an interview, the chief remarked, “Since the mixed patrols began, our village has become much safer. No kidnappers or poachers dare enter anymore!”

Koum is comprised mainly of autochthonous people, living in the area for many decades. While land access is less of an issue for people, over the last decade or so they have been exposed to major insecurity, mostly coming from the park. This is created by a variety of actors, the most significant being armed poaching gangs from Chad, Sudan and CAR. Several villagers were killed during the 2012 elephant massacre and more during poaching incidents in 2018. These events have a major impact on local commerce, travel, and the regional economy. Security is therefore a priority for Koum’s inhabitants, with forceful conservation law enforcement seen as one way to provide this. In my interviews, some even said they would like the state to increase the military presence around the park.

Another important factor shaping perceptions of militarized conservation is the local population’s historical relationship to Bouba Ndjida National Park. The pre-colonial history of the park kept emerging in interviews and focus groups: since it was formerly part of the powerful and well-respected Lamido Rey Bouba’s private hunting reserve, the park is still seen as a legitimate institution by many people. Increased efforts to protect the park, even with a highly coercive approach, are not therefore seen as entirely out of sync with preexisting socio-cultural norms.

#3 Gamba: When militarized conservation is viewed ambivalently

Located between Bénoué National Park and ZIC 5, the village of Gamba demonstrates how the same community can view militarized

conservation in polar-opposite ways, depending on where it is carried out. While Gamba’s inhabitants largely accepted strengthened law enforcement as a necessary response to poaching and insecurity in the national park, they opposed it in the ZIC.



Figure 4: A trophy-hunter, his guide, and the carcass of a baboon, photo taken in a ZIC next to Bénoué National Park (photo credit: Fergus O’Leary Simpson, 2025).

Seeing as Bénoué National Park already existed when Gamba was moved to its current location in 1975, the population generally viewed the park as a legitimate and long-standing territorial institution. During interviews, they explained how they have “no problem with the park” and are “okay with the restrictions” that it imposes on their lives. Some people even argued that the park authorities should do more to prevent illegal grazing of cattle within park boundaries, hoping that this would bring back the tourists that once employed them as guides.

ZIC 5, on the other hand, was established after Gamba, in 1977. Without consulting people prior, large areas of farmland were incorporated into it. Yet, at least to begin with, the restrictions this imposed were partially offset by reciprocal benefits. Sport hunters provided employment and meat, and concessionaires contributed medicines and construction materials to the village. However, as insecurity reduced tourism over the past



decade, these benefits steadily declined. The situation deteriorated dramatically under the current concessionaire, who recruited private guards and soldiers to conduct anti-poaching in the ZIC. Access restrictions became more rigid, the number of arrests increased, and relations with the local population became more confrontational – in one case leading to the death of a young boy. As a result, the population now strongly oppose the militarization of conservation in the ZIC.

Conclusions

This policy brief shows that the legitimacy of militarized conservation cannot be understood in isolation from the wider context in which it takes place. In short, the same structural trends that justify military intervention also shape how people experience and judge it.

My core finding is that militarized conservation is experienced neither as uniformly legitimate nor as uniformly oppressive. While the residents of Manguenwa largely opposed the militarized patrols, the people in Koum viewed them as providers of security. In Gamba, the same community supported stronger law enforcement within Bénoué National Park while rejecting its extension into neighboring ZIC 5. Rather than being shaped by militarized conservation alone, these contrasting views emerge from the interaction between militarized conservation and wider structural circumstances – a history of state neglect, unequal access to land, and (in)security. In demonstrating the factors shaping the uneven legitimacy of militarized conservation, my findings provide a basis for designing law enforcement interventions that are both more socially just and ecologically effective.

Policy recommendations

- ⇒ Rather than applying a uniform approach, **tailor militarized conservation law enforcement efforts to local contexts.**
- ⇒ **Target support and compensation** towards communities most affected by the access restrictions this imposes.
- ⇒ **Take historical and socio-cultural relationships with protected areas into account** when engaging with communities affected by law enforcement.
- ⇒ **Recognise that improving local security can strengthen the legitimacy of conservation.** The failure to do so could be a reputational risk.
- ⇒ **Review the role of hunting zones.** Consider decommissioning degraded ZICs where this could reduce local conflict without major ecological consequences.
- ⇒ **Address the structural drivers of wildlife decline** – including state neglect, land scarcity and regional (in)security dynamics – alongside fortified law enforcement.

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