

NIGERIA'S NATIONAL PARKS CAN GENERATE REVENUE FOR GOVERNMENT, CREATE MORE JOBS AND ENHANCE NATIONAL SECURITY IF PROPERLY MANAGED

– NACHA GEOFFREY

Nacha Geoffrey is Nigeria's Country Manager of Africa Nature Investors (ANI) Foundation. He bares his mind on the state of forest management in Nigeria; especially as regards their relationship or partnership with the Nigeria National Park Service

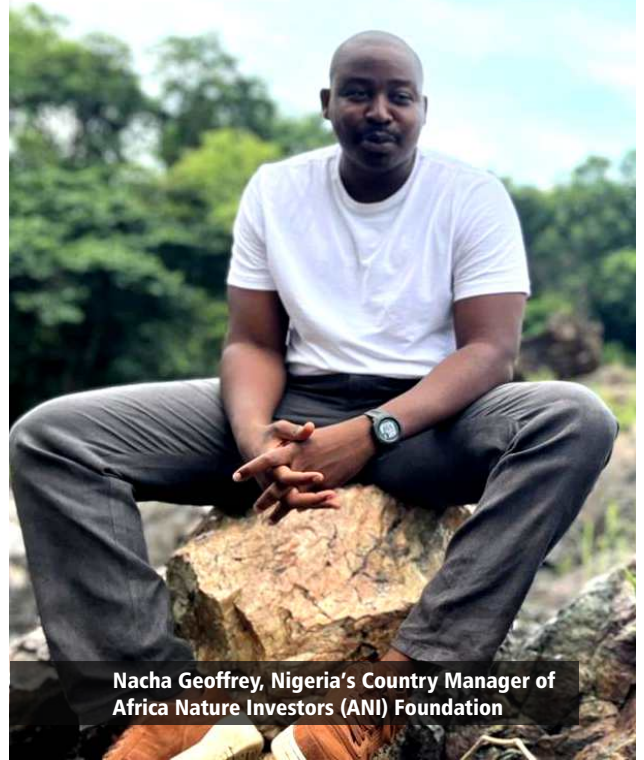
Nigerian protected forests face challenges of encroachment from farmers, miners, and insurgents. How do you think this should be addressed?

It is true that Nigerian protected face a lot of challenges of encroachment from miners, loggers, hunters, etc. The activities of miners expose the soil to harsh weather conditions, soil erosion, and harsh climate conditions. But the biggest problem these forests face is probably the presence of bandits, kidnappers etc, some of which are also associated with mining. In fact, it is some of these forests that have turned into hiding places that the so-called Unknown Gunmen (UGM) are using as safe heavens to attack communities e.g. Sambisa and many others. The presence of these UGM in these forests have prevented many households and communities from carrying out farming and other economic activities that they will normally carry out because of fears of being attacked or kidnapped.

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To address this problem, the government needs to be deliberate to look at forests as critical ecosystems for local and regional security but also important asset for food security. If forests are secured, communities can freely go to their farms and cultivate it and be able to provide their own livelihood and sell the extra. When these forests are not secured, communities cannot go to their farms and don't have enough to eat. For a nation that has most of its population young people who need food to grow and reach their potential, we risk losing some of these youths being recruited into extremist groups and organizations if we mismanage our forests.

Forests are not only for wildlife and tourism but are critical assets for local and regional food security. Government should diversity how these forests are managed by involving the expertise of the private sector and the host communities. More resources and technology need to be deliberately invested. There are many success stories around Africa that we can learn from. There are also some competent organizations that the government can engage.



Nacha Geoffrey, Nigeria's Country Manager of Africa Nature Investors (ANI) Foundation

Insurgent groups have turned a lot of Nigeria's forest reserves into bases, especially in Sambisa and Zamfara. Do you think this is a failure of the Nigeria park rangers or game guards to live up to expectations of securing the forests?

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Many of the forests that have turned into homes for insurgents are not National Parks. For Example, Sambisa is a state managed reserve and not a National Park. Has the federal government invested enough in the National Parks, not all, not even close. I think the Nigeria National Park Service is doing their best given available resources, expertise and powers. They have done well to leverage the expertise from organizations like ANI Foundation that is currently working with them to co-manage two parks (Okomu National Park and Gashaka Gumti National Park). However, there is room for improvement. All the National Parks in Nigeria are critically underfunded and almost on their knees except those two. I think the rangers are trying, they have potential to do better if the appropriate investments are made.

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several state managed forests/reserves that have a lot potential e.g. Yankari Game Reserve in Bauchi state which I was involved for almost a decade before I left due to lack of political will from the state. The governors must wake up to the state of forests in their states to compliment the efforts of the Federal Government.

***What kind of interaction/s does your organization have with staff of the National Park Service and, more specifically the park rangers?**

ANI Foundation has a fantastic relationship with the Nigeria National Park Service. We work very closely to ensure that both Gashaka-Gumti and Okomu National Parks are better protected. We work very closely as a team to manage both parks.

***In your interactions with Nigerian park rangers, what do you think are the challenges they face more?**

I think the challenges the rangers face include the following; insufficient training, poor remuneration, insufficient kits and equipment, insufficient logistical support (vehicles, technology, helicopter, & planes) etc. I also think there is need to properly recruit more rangers to have enough boots on the ground. Ranger recruitment must be done professionally and transparently ensuring that only competent people get the job. It is also important that rangers are recruited from the communities where forests are located. When you recruit rangers, it is very important to ensure that the rangers are properly managed so that they don't become a problem,

***Has your organization partnered with the park service to address any of this?**

Our partnership with the NPS in the two National Parks mentioned above has adequately addressed all the problems above. Gashaka Gumti National Park is the only protected area in Nigeria that has its own dedicated helicopter for aerial support which has helped to protect the park and the surrounding communities.

***As a private organization in forest resource management, in which ways do your work differ from those of government agencies? What kinds of skills do you give your rangers?**

As a private organization in forest resource management, we use cutting edge technology, we collaborate with international partners and are able to raise targeted funds to address specific issues and all our funding goes directly on the ground. ANI Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation registered in Nigeria that aims to demonstrate that investment in conservation can generate revenue and promote development locally and nationally. Our vision is for the parks to stimulate economic development. We don't have our own rangers. We rather support the NPS to better manage their rangers given the fact that we are able to attract targeted funding, expertise, and technology from all over the globe. As a Nigerian organization, we understand the local context better and are able to incorporate local cultures and values into what we do. We are also locally led, which means that we have nowhere else to go to if we don't get it right. Additionally, as a small organization there is zero bureaucracy in decision making which makes us very efficient.



Hosting community members for interactive session

How are you celebrating World Ranger Day?

The World Ranger Day is an important day to us and we take pride in celebrating it. However, we celebrate the rangers we work with everyday. Rangers are the unsung heroes that can never be celebrated enough. We dedicate time and resources in both parks to make the rangers understand that they mean a lot to us and we will do this journey with them all the way.

What does the Wildlife Ranger Challenge mean for rangers in Nigeria and how do you partner with Tusk and other international conservation partners?

WRC means a lot for rangers in Nigeria. It provides that sense of camaraderie that they belong to one big family. It helps them to realise that they are not alone in this struggle and that the challenges they face are similar across the continent. Most importantly, it has helped to unlock a lot of funds and matching funds that has helped rangers across the continent. We work very closely with Tusk on the WRC activities to ensure that the parks we work in are represented competitively. We have also been able to raise funds through the WRC working with Tusk which has helped us to support rangers in both GGNP and ONP where we work.



Coming down from the helicopter

Park has been chronically underfunded with poorly trained and inadequately equipped rangers unable to tackle these threats. However, all of this has changed now.

Tell us more about the activities of your organisation

ANI Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation registered in Nigeria that aims to demonstrate that investment in conservation can generate revenue and promote development locally and nationally. ANI's first project is the protection and development of Gashaka Gumti National Park (GGNP), covering 6,731 sq. km and located in Taraba and Adamawa States. While the park protects one of the most important watersheds for the River Benue and has huge potential to provide local jobs and employment through tourism, the park is threatened by poaching, logging, artisanal mining, and forest fires (from cattle grazing). Historically, the

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In 2018, we signed a 30-year partnership agreement with government to co-manage the Park and since then, we have engaged all the relevant stakeholders and have established economic development projects. We are currently supporting 3,000 beneficiaries (500 households) to utilise climate-smart agricultural practices, recognising their pivotal role in sustainable farming amidst the challenges posed by climate change. We utilise a structured approach by forming farmer organisations and working through them as a conduit for interventions, fostering social cohesion and community leadership through group-based economic intervention programmes. We are also supporting about 1,600 women through Savings and Loans Groups and Small/Medium Enterprises all around the park. We have supported with cattle vaccination for 150,000 livestock around the park. We are also empowering fifty community members on beekeeping and honey production. Our vision is for the Park to stimulate economic development.



Out in the field

We believe that if managed properly and intentionally the parks can overtime generate revenues for the government in addition to the local jobs and security that it is providing. However, the right amounts of investment need to be made.