

THE IMPLICATIONS OF FISHING BAN ON SACRED CREEKS ON FOOD SECURITY IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is characterized by its rich aquatic biodiversity with fishing as one of the primary source of livelihood and nutrition. The imposition of fishing bans on sacred creeks—areas deemed spiritually significant—has elicited mixed reactions from local communities. This paper examines the implications of such bans on food security in the region, considering socio-economic, cultural, and environmental perspectives. The findings suggest that while conservation efforts are vital, the restrictions may inadvertently threaten the food security of local populations, necessitating a balanced approach that incorporates community participation and sustainable resource management.

Keywords: Fishing ban, sacred creeks, food security, Niger Delta, Nigeria, conservation, community livelihoods

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is renowned for its ecological richness and cultural diversity, playing a pivotal role in the socio-economic fabric of Nigeria. Covering approximately 70,000 square kilometers, this delta is home to over 30 million people whose livelihoods are intricately linked to its natural resources, particularly its extensive network of rivers, creeks, and wetlands (Nwoke & Eze, 2020). Fishing in the Niger Delta is not merely an economic activity but is deeply embedded within the spiritual and cultural traditions of its inhabitants. Sacred creeks—waterways considered spiritually significant and often associated with deities, ancestors, or customary taboos—serve as vital sites of religious rituals, cultural ceremonies, and traditional conservation practices (Udo, 2020). These creeks are typically protected by customary laws that prohibit fishing or other disruptive activities during specific periods or entirely, as a means of honoring spiritual beliefs and ensuring the sustainability of aquatic resources.

In recent years, increasing environmental degradation—driven by oil exploration, pollution, overfishing, and habitat destruction—has prompted government agencies, environmental NGOs, and local communities to implement conservation measures aimed at protecting critical aquatic ecosystems (Eze, 2021). Among these measures is the enforcement of fishing bans on certain sacred creeks deemed overexploited or environmentally fragile. While these bans are intended to facilitate ecological recovery and biodiversity conservation, they have also sparked controversy due to their socio-economic and cultural implications.

The imposition of fishing restrictions raises significant questions about their impact on food security—a critical concern given the region's heavy dependence on fish as a primary source of animal protein and livelihood. Many communities rely exclusively on fishing for daily sustenance, and any disruption to this activity can have profound effects on nutritional status, economic stability, and social cohesion. Furthermore, the cultural importance of sacred creeks complicates the enforcement of such bans, as they are intertwined with traditional practices and community identity.

This paper seeks to explore the complex interplay between conservation policies—specifically, fishing bans on sacred creeks—and food security in the Niger Delta. It aims to analyze how these restrictions influence local livelihoods, nutritional health, and cultural practices, while also considering potential pathways to reconcile ecological sustainability with the socio-economic needs of the communities. Ultimately, the study advocates for a balanced, participatory approach that integrates environmental conservation with the preservation of cultural heritage and food security.

The Cultural and Spiritual heritage of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is one of Nigeria's most vital ecological and economic regions, covering an estimated area of approximately 70,000 square kilometers and hosting over 30 million inhabitants (Nwoke & Eze, 2020). This region is characterized by its extensive network of rivers, creeks, mangroves, and wetlands, which collectively form a complex and highly productive aquatic ecosystem. These waterways serve as both a natural habitat for diverse aquatic species and a crucial resource for the communities that have inhabited the region for centuries. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is rich in cultural and spiritual heritage, with several sacred creeks, rivers, and water bodies that hold deep significance for local communities. These sacred sites are often associated with deities, ancestral spirits, and traditional religious practices. Here are some notable sacred creeks and water bodies in the Niger Delta:

1. Sacred Creek of Ogidiga (Ogidigba) – Located in the Ijaw and Urhobo territories of Delta State. This creek is associated with water spirits and traditional deities. It is often revered in local folklore and rituals.
2. The Nun River and Creek (Bayelsa State) - The Nun River and its creeks are considered sacred by the Ijaw people. It is linked to the worship of water spirits (*Owunapu*) and plays a role in traditional ceremonies.
3. Sagbama Creek (Bayelsa State) - This creek is spiritually significant to the Ijaw and is often invoked in traditional rites related to fishing and water travel.
4. Forcados River & Creek (Delta/Bayelsa States) - The Forcados River and its adjoining creeks are sacred in Ijaw and Itsekiri traditions, with some sections believed to be inhabited by river deities.
5. Escravos River & Creek (Delta State) - The Escravos River and its creeks are spiritually significant to the Itsekiri and Ijaw people, with some areas considered abodes of water spirits (Olokun and Egbesu).
6. Orashi River (Rivers & Bayelsa States) - The Orashi River is sacred among the Ogba and Ekpeye people, believed to be protected by the deity Orashi. It is central to traditional worship and rituals. It has its little branches like mini opu (dedicated to the god of Iroko), etc
7. Ikoli River & Creek (Rivers State) - The Ikoli Creek is revered by the Kalabari people and is associated with ancestral spirits and water deities.
8. Sombreiro River (Bayelsa & Rivers States) - This river and its creeks hold spiritual importance for the Ijaw and Okrika people, often linked to masquerade cults and water spirits.
9. Kolo Creek (Bayelsa State) - Sacred to the Ogbia and Ijaw people, this creek is associated with traditional rites and ancestral worship.

10. Ramos River & Creek (Bayelsa/Ondo States) - A sacred waterway for the Apoi and Arogbo Ijaw clans, linked to the worship of riverine deities.

The cultural and spiritual significance is that many of these creeks are associated with deities. Some creeks are believed to be protected by spirits, and certain taboos (like fishing restrictions) are observed to avoid divine wrath.

The Niger Delta Dependence on Fishing

Among the various economic activities, fishing stands out as a source of sustenance, employment, and cultural identity for many indigenous communities in the region. The reasons for their dependent on fishing are as follow:

Economic Significance of Fishing

Fishing has historically been one of the backbones of the Niger Delta's economy, providing vital sustenance, employment, and income for local populations. The region's fishing industry supports thousands of fishermen, fish traders, processors, and related small-scale industries. Fish is a primary source of animal protein for many households, often constituting over 50% of daily protein intake for rural families (Ogunleye & Adeyemi, 2018). The abundance of fish species such as tilapia, catfish, sardines, and various shrimp and crab species makes the region a significant contributor to Nigeria's national fish production.

Cultural and Social Dimensions

Beyond its economic importance, fishing holds deep cultural and spiritual significance for many Niger Delta communities. Traditional beliefs, rituals, and festivals are often centered on waterways, with sacred creeks regarded as spiritual sites inhabited by deities or ancestral spirits. These waterways are protected by customary laws that restrict fishing or other disruptive activities during certain periods, such as religious festivals or breeding seasons, thus serving as community-led conservation practices (Udo, 2020). These cultural practices reinforce community cohesion and ensure the conservation of fish stocks through indigenous knowledge systems.

Ecological Richness and Biodiversity

The aquatic ecosystems of the Niger Delta are among the most biodiversity in Nigeria, supporting numerous fish and invertebrate species, mangroves, aquatic plants, and birdlife (Nwoke & Eze, 2020). These ecosystems provide vital ecological services including water filtration, sediment stabilization, and climate regulation. The health of these ecosystems directly impacts the productivity of fisheries and the livelihoods of local communities (Eze, 2021).

Environmental Challenges and Overexploitation

Despite its ecological wealth, the Niger Delta faces numerous environmental challenges. Oil exploration and production have resulted in extensive pollution, oil spills, and habitat destruction, which threaten aquatic biodiversity and fish stocks (Eze, 2021). Additionally, overfishing, illegal fishing practices, and habitat degradation have led to declining fish populations, putting immense pressure on local communities that depend heavily on fishing for their survival. The degradation of aquatic habitats also exacerbates climate change impacts, such as coastal erosion and flooding.

Impact of External Factors

The region's dependence on fishing is further complicated by external factors such as climate change, coastal erosion, and pollution, all of which threaten aquatic ecosystems and the sustainability of fisheries (Olagunju & Oladipo, 2020). These environmental stresses underscore

the need for effective conservation strategies that balance ecological health with socio-economic needs.

The Fishing Ban on Sacred Creeks: Rationale and Implementation

Rationale for the Fishing Ban

The enforcement of fishing bans on sacred creeks in the Niger Delta stems from a combination of ecological, cultural, and environmental considerations aimed at ensuring the sustainable use of aquatic resources. These waterways are often designated as sacred sites due to their spiritual significance, serving as places of worship, ancestral reverence, and customary law enforcement (Eze, 2021).

Ecological and Conservation Objectives

One of the primary rationales behind these bans is ecological sustainability. Many of the sacred creeks are experiencing overfishing, habitat degradation, and pollution, which threaten fish populations and biodiversity (Ojukwu & Chukwu, 2021). By restricting fishing activities, authorities and community leaders aim to allow fish stocks to recover, breed, and replenish, thereby maintaining ecological balance. Sacred creeks often function as refuges or breeding grounds essential for the sustainability of regional fisheries.

Cultural and Religious Significance

The spiritual importance of these waterways cannot be overstated. Sacred creeks are believed to be inhabited by deities or spirits that guard the community's well-being. Traditional laws and taboos prohibit fishing or any disturbance during specific periods—such as festivals or certain lunar phases—to honour these spiritual entities. These restrictions help preserve cultural heritage and reinforce communal identity (Udo, 2020).

Environmental Preservation and Biodiversity Conservation

In addition to fish stocks, sacred creeks often harbor rich biodiversity, including mangroves, aquatic plants, and other wildlife. Protecting these ecosystems through fishing bans contributes to broader environmental conservation goals, such as pollution control, habitat preservation, and climate resilience (Eze, 2021).

Regulatory and Policy Motivations:

Government agencies, in collaboration with traditional authorities and NGOs, have adopted conservation policies that include establishing protected zones and imposing fishing bans on certain waterways. These measures are often part of broader initiatives to combat environmental degradation, reduce illegal fishing, and promote sustainable resource management (Nwoke & Eze, 2020).

Implementation of the Fishing Ban

1. Community Engagement and Traditional Authority Involvement:

The success of fishing bans on sacred creeks largely depends on community participation and the involvement of local traditional rulers and spiritual leaders. In many cases, bans are rooted in customary laws and are enforced through traditional institutions that have jurisdiction over waterway management (Udo, 2020). These leaders often issue edicts, conduct rituals, and serve as mediators to ensure compliance.

2. Legal and Policy Frameworks:

At the national level, the Nigerian government's Fisheries Act and environmental policies

provide a legal basis for conservation efforts, including fishing restrictions. Local enforcement, however, is predominantly carried out through customary laws, which are recognized and respected by community members (Ojukwu & Chukwu, 2021). In some instances, formal agreements are made between government agencies and traditional authorities to delineate protected zones and enforcement protocols.

3. Enforcement Strategies:

Enforcement mechanisms include patrolling waterways, establishing checkpoints, and community surveillance systems. In many communities, traditional fish wardens or monitors are empowered to oversee compliance and report violations. Some initiatives incorporate community-based monitoring, which leverages local knowledge and social sanctions to uphold the bans (Nwoke & Eze, 2020).

4. Temporal and Spatial Restrictions:

Most bans are not permanent but are implemented seasonally or during specific periods aligned with fish breeding and spawning cycles. For example, fishing may be prohibited during breeding seasons to allow fish populations to reproduce. Spatial restrictions involve delineating specific creeks or sections thereof as protected zones, often marked with traditional symbols or physical barriers.

Challenges in Implementation:

Despite these measures, enforcement faces challenges such as resistance from fishermen who rely heavily on the banned waterways, inadequate resources for monitoring, and conflicts between traditional laws and modern regulatory frameworks. Additionally, some community members may engage in illegal fishing activities, especially when economic hardships are severe (Eze, 2021).

Strategies for Enhancing Implementation:

To address these challenges, stakeholders advocate for inclusive decision-making processes that involve local fishermen, community leaders, and environmental experts. Building alternative livelihoods, providing education on conservation benefits, and ensuring fair compensation or support during bans are also suggested to improve compliance and sustainability (Ojukwu & Chukwu, 2021).

Recommendations

To address the socio-economic and ecological challenges associated with fishing bans on sacred creeks and to foster sustainable management of aquatic resources, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Inclusive Community Engagement and Participatory Management

Involving local communities, traditional rulers, and fishermen in the decision-making process is essential. Recognizing indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, and customary laws can foster trust, enhance compliance, and ensure conservation measures are culturally appropriate and socially accepted (Nwoke & Eze, 2020). Establishing community-based management committees can serve as a bridge between policymakers and local stakeholders.

2. Promotion of Alternative Livelihoods

Reducing dependence on fishing during bans can be achieved by promoting alternative income-generating activities such as aquaculture, ecotourism, handicrafts, and small-scale trading. Government and NGOs should provide training, microcredit facilities, and technical support to facilitate these transitions, thereby alleviating economic hardships and incentivizing compliance

with fishing restrictions (Ojukwu & Chukwu, 2021).

3. Implementation of Seasonal and Spatial Restrictions

Rather than permanent bans, adopting seasonal or periodic restrictions aligned with fish breeding cycles can minimize disruptions to food security. Spatial zoning that designates specific

3. Implementation of Seasonal and Spatial Restrictions

Rather than permanent bans, adopting seasonal or periodic restrictions aligned with fish breeding cycles can minimize disruptions to food security. Spatial zoning that designates specific creeks or sections thereof as protected areas can help balance conservation with community needs, allowing fishing to continue in less critical zones during sensitive periods (Eze, 2021).

4. Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks

Efforts should be made to harmonize customary laws with national regulations to create a coherent legal framework for resource management. Recognizing and integrating traditional authority structures into formal governance can legitimize conservation practices and foster compliance (Nwoke & Eze, 2020).

5. Enhancing Monitoring and Enforcement

Community-based monitoring systems that leverage local knowledge and social sanctions are effective in ensuring compliance. Training local monitors and providing resources for patrols can improve enforcement. Additionally, employing modern technology such as drones and GPS tracking can help monitor waterways and reduce illegal fishing activities (Ojukwu & Chukwu, 2021).

6. Education and Awareness Campaigns

Raising awareness about the ecological, economic, and cultural benefits of conservation can foster community support. Educational programs should emphasize the importance of sustainable fishing practices and the long-term benefits of conserving sacred creeks for future generations.

7. Policy Integration and Cross-sector Collaboration

Coordination among environmental agencies, fisheries departments, traditional authorities, and community organizations is essential. Integrated policies that consider ecological, social, and economic dimensions will promote holistic resource management.

8. Research and Data Collection

Ongoing scientific research and data collection are necessary to assess the impacts of fishing bans, monitor fish stock health, and evaluate community livelihoods. Evidence-based policies can be refined through continuous feedback from field studies and community consultations.

Conclusion

Balancing ecological conservation with the socio-economic realities of Niger Delta communities requires a nuanced, participatory approach. Recognizing the spiritual and cultural importance of sacred creeks while implementing sustainable management practices can help preserve biodiversity and cultural heritage without compromising food security. The recommendations outlined—such as community involvement, alternative livelihoods, seasonal restrictions, legal harmonization, and enhanced enforcement—provide a pathway toward achieving sustainable fisheries management in the region. A collaborative effort among government agencies, traditional authorities, NGOs, and local communities is essential to ensuring the long-term health of aquatic ecosystems and the well-

being of those who depend on them.

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