
Cultural and conservation values of sacred forests in Ghana

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Introduction

Sacred sites, including sacred forests or sacred groves, are sites that have local cultural or spiritual significance. Sacred forests have been protected around the world for a variety of reasons, including for religious practices or ceremonies, as burial grounds, and for their watershed value (Castro, 1990; Dorm-Adzobu *et al.*, 1991; Lebbie and Freudenberg, 1996; Tiwari *et al.*, 1998; Chouin, 2002; Greene, 2002). There are often myths associated with sacred sites and taboos pertaining to the use of plants and the hunting of animals within the area. The size of groves varies greatly from very small plots (less than 1 ha) to larger tracts of several thousand hectares (Ntiemoa-Baidu, 1995).

Many places in the world have sacred natural sites, but certain countries stand out for the number and age of sites, specifically Ghana and India. Ghana, with over 1900 sacred groves, has a long history of community protection of sacred sites for cultural reasons (Ntiemoa-Baidu, 1995). These sites are commonly referred to as fetish groves and may contain a shrine or serve as burial grounds (Amoako-Atta, 1995). Local residents often believe that these forests are inhabited by ancestor spirits or a god.

Some sacred sites in Ghana, such as Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary, are officially protected sites, but the majority of sites are culturally protected lands and vulnerable to the changing values and practices of the people living around them. Taboos on the hunting of particular species, such as certain primates, offer a form of protection from the harvest of wild meat for personal consumption or the bushmeat trade (Ntiemoa-Baidu, 1987; Lingard *et al.*, 2003). Many sacred groves

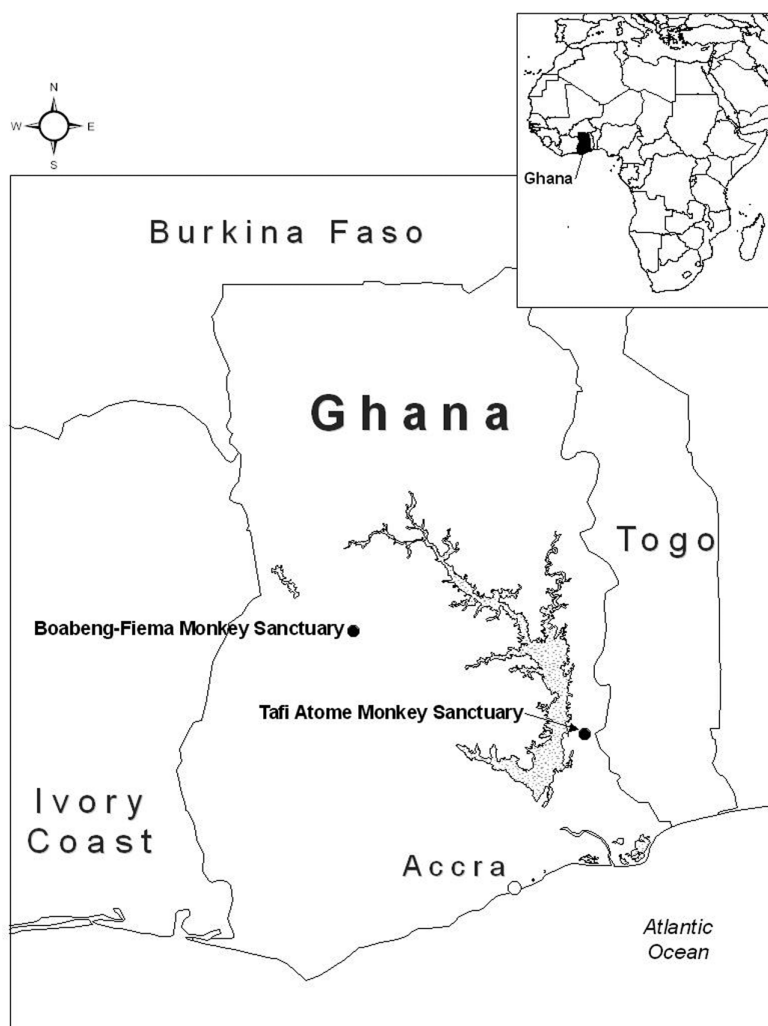


Figure 23.1 Location of research sites.

are the only remaining fragments of intact forest habitat, surrounded by farms, pasture and houses, and may therefore serve an important role in biodiversity conservation (Campbell, 2005). Pressures on these forest remnants include farming, bushfires, plant and wood collection, and hunting. Both sites of this study protect monkeys, but other sacred sites in Ghana protect other species, such as the sacred crocodiles of Paga in Northern Ghana (Pleydell, 2005).

This research investigated whether traditional forest protection for cultural reasons might support a broader agenda for biodiversity conservation in Ghana. In addition, the research aimed to compare and contrast the effectiveness of community-based conservation with government management.



Figure 23.2 Mona monkey at Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary (© Michael Scace). See colour plate section.

Research was conducted at two sacred groves in Ghana: Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary and Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (Figure 23.1). Both sanctuaries are in a savannah woodland ecosystem type with dry, semi-deciduous forest (Fargey, 1992; Gocking, 2005). Tafi Atome is a village with over 1000 residents located on the eastern side of Lake Volta in the Volta region. Residents speak Ewe. Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary (TAMS) was officially established as a tourism site in 1996 to protect the subspecies of true mona monkeys (*Cercopithecus mona mona*) living there (Figure 23.2). The sanctuary is approximately 28 ha in size and is run by a community Tourism Management Committee which employs four local guides and a gift shop manager.

Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (BFMS) is located in the Brong-Ahafo region. There are discrepancies in the cited size of the sanctuary. According to Fargey (1992), the core forested sanctuary area is 36 ha. Saj *et al.* (2006) say the core sanctuary covers 190 ha and the larger forest is 500 ha, which is consistent with Densu (2003), who says the sanctuary is 450 ha. The larger, official sanctuary includes forest fragments in a farm matrix around the core area (Campbell, 2004). The sanctuary is named after two villages, Boabeng and Fiema, which both have associated sacred forests. Residents speak Twi. The population of Boabeng is approximately 1000 and that of Fiema is 1800. BMFS was legally recognised in 1975 to protect two species of primates, black and white colobus monkeys (*Colobus vellerosus*) (Figure 23.3) and Campbell's mona monkey (*Cercopithecus campbelli lowei*). The sanctuary is managed by employees of Ghana's Wildlife Division: an officer-in-charge,



Figure 23.3 Black and white colobus monkeys at Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (© Alison Ormsby).

a wildlife officer, a technical assistant and a sanctuary guide. There is also a community Sanctuary Management Committee that employs an additional sanctuary guide.

Methods

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with residents of three communities near sacred groves to investigate:

- (1) the history of each sacred site;
- (2) the purposes for the protection of the sacred site;
- (3) the taboos relating to the grove; and
- (4) the grove management techniques.

A qualitative, ethnographic research approach was used, including interviews, participant observation, and focus groups (Bernard, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Krueger, 1994; Weiss, 1994; Morgan, 1997).

During June and July 2006, working with a local translator, 33 residents of Tafi Atome (17 men and 16 women) were interviewed. A group interview was conducted with the Tafi Atome Tourism Management Committee during and at the end of the research period to offer feedback. In addition, using the approach of participant observation, guides were viewed interacting with tourists at both research sites. A stratified sampling method (by clan) was used for interviews. In

Tafi Atome, residents generally live near their family members or clan group. An attempt was made to include in the research sample representatives of each clan and a nearly equal number of men and women.

In July and August 2006, 26 residents of Boabeng (15 men and 11 women) and 29 residents of Fiema (13 men and 16 women) were interviewed. The villages of Boabeng and Fiema are not geographically organised by clan; however, an attempt was made to interview representatives of each of the approximately eight clans in Boabeng and approximately 11 clans in Fiema. In all locations, key community members were interviewed, such as Tourism Committee members, elected officials, sanctuary employees, storeowners and religious leaders.

Results

The two research sites have contrasting management approaches and community dynamics. Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary is older, established in 1975, whereas Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary was more recently established, in 1996. BFMS is government-managed and protected by a national 1975 law that prohibits the killing of monkeys and setting of fire within the sanctuary, whereas TAMS is community-managed and protected by a recent (2006) Hohoe District bylaw that forbids tree cutting, farming and hunting within the sanctuary.

Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary

In Tafi Atome, 33 residents were interviewed, ranging from 19 to 85 years of age. Of residents interviewed, 60.6% were born and raised in the village.

According to residents interviewed about the history of the sacred grove, approximately 200 years ago the ancestors of the residents of the Tafi Atome area migrated from Assini in central Ghana. They brought with them an idol or fetish that was placed in the sacred forest in Tafi Atome in order to keep it safe. The mona monkeys of the forest are associated with the fetish. The fetish priest of Tafi Atome acts as messenger between the village residents and the idol. Because the monkeys are associated with the idol and are sacred, it is taboo to kill them. A festival to celebrate the monkeys takes place every February, managed by the fetish priest who kills a goat and pours libations at the forest shrine.

Due to the influence of a Christian pastor in the 1980s, the tradition of protecting the monkeys was weakened and the monkeys were hunted by some of the village residents. In 1996, a representative from an Accra-based environmental organisation, the Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC), met with village representatives to discuss the ecotourism and conservation potential of the sacred forest. NCRC particularly stressed that the site is unique in being home to true

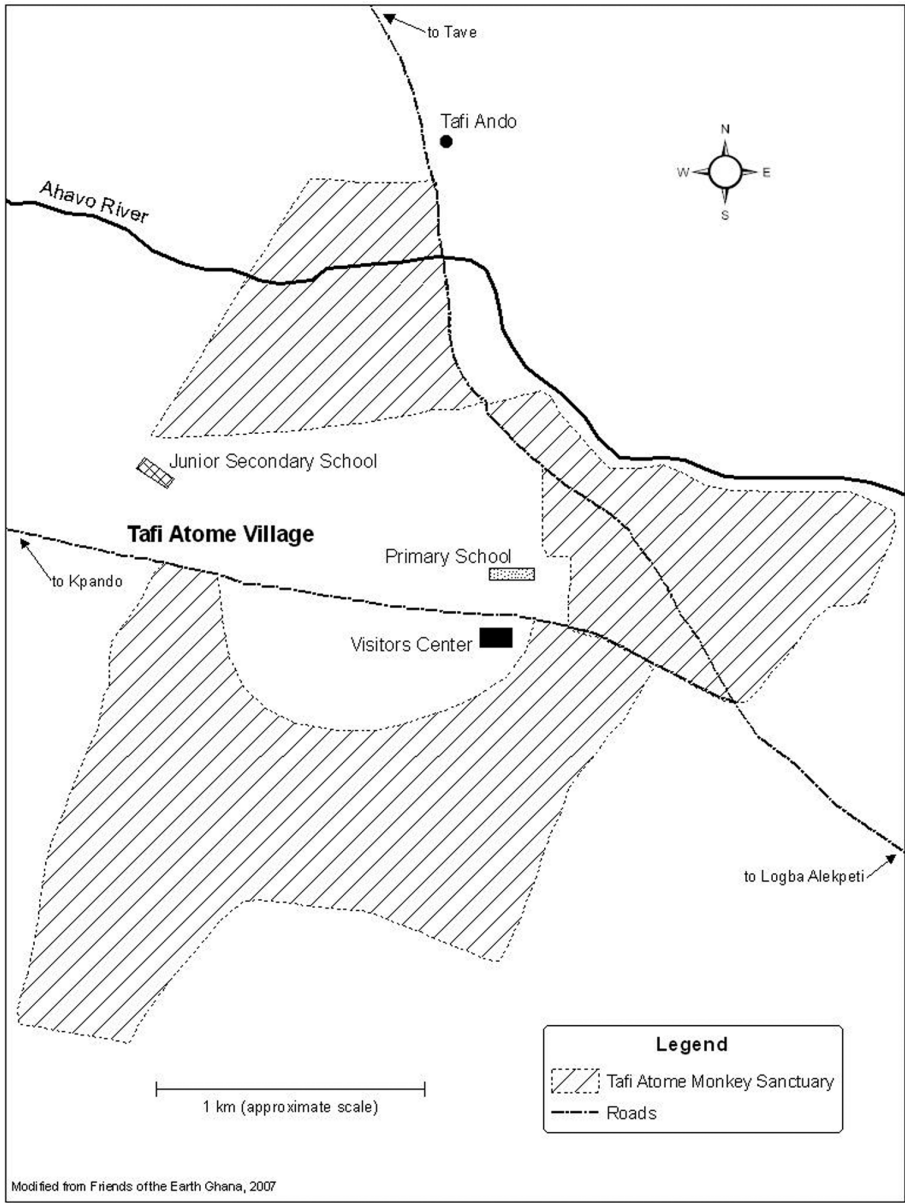


Figure 23.4 Map of Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary and village.

mona monkeys (*Cercopithecus mona mona*), the only intact population of this sub-species remaining in Ghana. There are numerous walking trails that traverse the sanctuary and residents use these as routes to access their farms. The core fetish grove, however, does not have clear trail access and entry is forbidden except by select persons during festival events.

Residents were asked what they believed was the purpose of the protection of the grove. The majority of respondents stated that the grove is protected for the monkeys as well as for the fetish shrine. As one Tafi Atome resident said, the grove is 'for the monkeys to live there and people can come watch the monkeys'. In addition, several residents mentioned the value that the grove serves as a windbreak and protection from storms, because the grove surrounds and shelters the village (Figure 23.4). A male Tafi Atome resident described how 'the forest is there for the monkeys. It buffers against rain and wind, protecting against storms that may hurt roofs'.

When asked about tourism, 51.5% of respondents said that they personally benefit in ways that ranged from direct employment as a guide to shop owners who sell to tourists and parents whose children's school fees are paid by visitors to the sanctuary. Tafi Atome received approximately 2850 visitors in 2005: 1820 foreign and 1030 Ghanaian. Some revenues from tourism at Tafi Atome are shared with the community; quarterly revenues are calculated and posted in the sanctuary Visitors Centre.

Interviewees were asked to explain the taboos associated with the grove. The two main activities identified as forbidden in the grove are tree cutting and hunting monkeys, both mentioned by 54.5% of respondents. Prohibition on entering the sacred fetish grove was noted by 36.4% of respondents. A taboo on collecting firewood was mentioned by 21.1% of respondents and farming was identified by 12.1% of interviewees as an activity not allowed in the grove. Interviewees were asked to try to imagine that there was no taboo on hunting monkeys. In the absence of a taboo, still only 18.2% of respondents said they would hunt monkeys.

There are two tree nursery projects underway in association with the sanctuary. A survey of plants within the sanctuary found that the flamboyant tree (*Delonix regia*) is the dominant species in several parts of the grove (Symon, 2006, unpublished data). This species is raised in the tree nursery and planted because it is a favoured food of the monkeys.

Residents were asked for their suggestions on what should happen to the grove in the future. To this open-ended question, respondents gave a wide range of answers, from forest expansion to creating a fence around the forest, which varied compared to the responses from Boabeng and Fiema to the same question (Figure 23.5). Currently, the area surrounding the Tafi Atome grove is primarily farmland or teak plantation.

Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary

A total of 55 people in the Boabeng-Fiema area were interviewed, 26 residents in Boabeng and 21 residents in Fiema, ranging from 16 to nearly

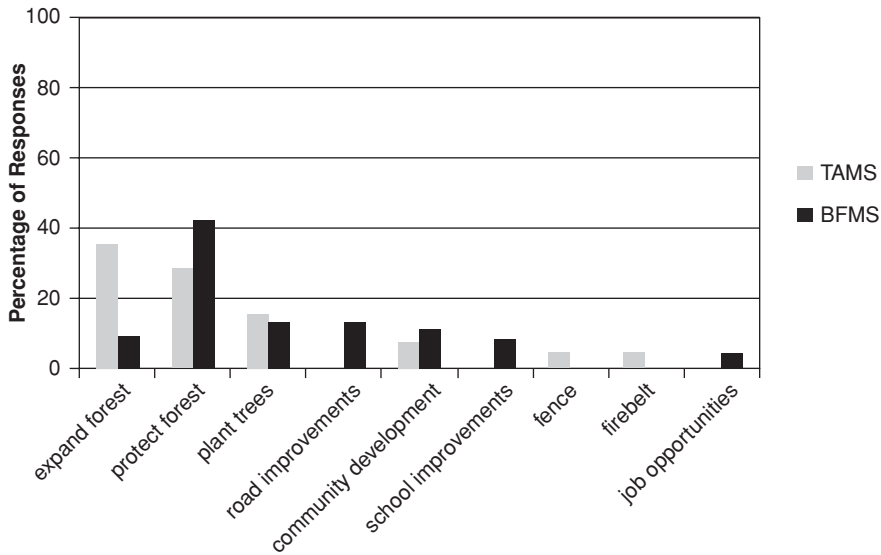


Figure 23.5 Residents' opinions of future initiatives regarding the grove.

100 years of age. The majority of residents interviewed (67.3%) were born and raised in their home village.

The core forested area of the Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary has a well-developed trail system for use by tourists as well as researchers (Figure 23.6). The Boabeng grove contains its own sacred area, where ceremonies and rituals are performed. Both Boabeng and Fiema have separate annual yam festivals that also celebrate the monkeys, although according to some interviewees the intensity of the festivals has diminished in recent years.

Residents interviewed told a range of stories about how the monkeys came to exist in the sacred forests as well as their association with local gods. The black and white colobus monkeys are associated with a male god, Abudwo, at Fiema and the mona monkeys with a female god, Daworo, at Boabeng. According to Boabeng residents, about 200 years ago a hunter was searching for a water source and saw the forest near what is now Boabeng. In the forest, the hunter discovered a shrine – a brass pan covered with a white cloth. It was guarded by two mona monkeys and two black and white colobus monkeys. The monkeys belong to the shrine and are therefore sacred animals. It is believed that the current monkeys in the sanctuary are the offspring of Daworo and Abudwo.

According to a Queen Mother from Fiema, elders came from the Ashanti Region with a god named Abudwo. The black and white colobus monkeys followed the god and settled near Fiema. The god's shrine was put in a small forest near the village (Figure 23.7) and the Abudwo Chief guarded the shrine. Every week on Wednesday,

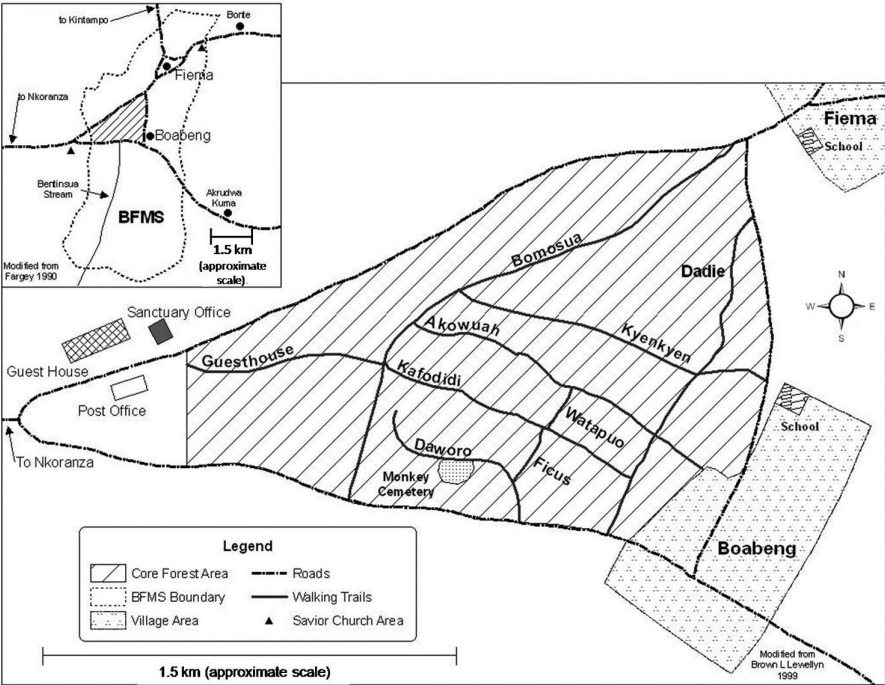


Figure 23.6 Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary area.



Figure 23.7 Sacred forest in Fiema (© Alison Ormsby).

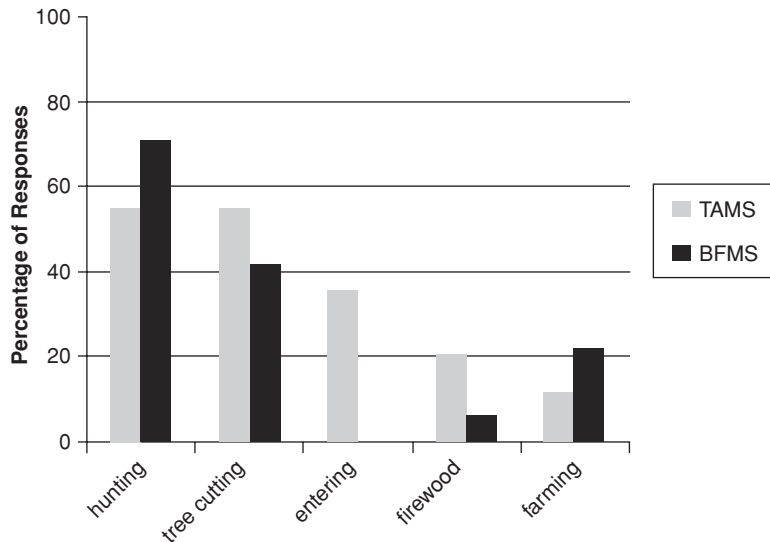


Figure 23.8 Reported taboos at sacred forests.

the Chief went to the shrine to pour libation and make sacrifice. Thus, there is a taboo in Fiema that forbids farming on Wednesdays.

Interviewees corroborated documented history that, in the 1970s, a local leader from the Savior Church said it was acceptable to kill the monkeys in the Boabeng and Fiema area. In reaction to increased hunting, some community members requested outside assistance, which led to the official government protection of the sanctuary in 1975 (Fargey, 1992; Saj *et al.*, 2006).

Residents were asked why the forest is protected. The main reasons given were for the monkeys and for tourism. As one respondent from Boabeng said, 'When the forest is no more, the monkeys will run away. The place will turn into grass-land'. Several other reasons for forest protection were given, including avoiding bushfires, the value of the forest as a windbreak and source of medicinal plants, community development (e.g. road, school, and clinic improvements), income, scientific research, future generations and local pride. As a resident expressed: the sanctuary 'serves as history for people – so young people can compare good forest to a degraded one'.

Interviewees were asked to explain the taboos associated with the grove. The main activities that residents clearly identified as forbidden are hunting monkeys and tree cutting, mentioned by 70.9% and 41.8% of respondents, respectively (Figure 23.8). Notably, prohibition on entering the sacred grove (idol shrine area) was not mentioned by any of the residents interviewed. A taboo on collecting firewood was mentioned by 5.5% of respondents and farming within the grove was

identified by 21.8% of those interviewed as not allowed in the grove. Residents in Boabeng and Fiema were asked to imagine the situation if there were no taboo on hunting monkeys. In the absence of a taboo, 60% of respondents said they would hunt monkeys. This was quite a different result from the 18% of Tafi Atome residents who said they would hunt monkeys without a taboo.

Tourism rates for BFMS have dramatically increased over time, from 150 tourists in 1991 to nearly 6500 in 2002 (Fargey, 1992; Densu, 2003) and 10 000 in 2005 (Dasah, personal communication). Of residents interviewed in Boabeng and Fiema, 48.1% said that they personally benefit from tourism. As of August 2006, information about revenues from tourism at Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary was not shared with the community, but revenues were allocated quarterly, with some tourism income given to the community. There was speculation by interviewees about what happens to income from tourism, representing a potential source of conflict regarding the sanctuary.

Due to the tourism success of the Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary, neighbouring villages are proposing establishment of their own forest protection in the form of corridors connecting to BFMS. These villages are Bonte, Bomini, Busunya, Konkrompe, Akrudwa Kuma and Akrudwa Pinyin (Densu, 2003; Kankam, personal communication). In recent years, monkeys have been observed in increasing numbers in these villages as a result of primate population growth and dispersal. Due to the taboo on hunting, the populations of monkeys are increasing in the sanctuary (Saj *et al.*, 2006).

The sacred forest sections in both Boabeng and Fiema are bounded on all sides by roads, houses, or farms (Figure 23.9). Boabeng and Fiema residents were asked whether they thought the forest should be expanded. When asked specifically (in contrast to an open-ended question), most residents (78.2%) did express support for expanding the forest because it would draw more tourists and provide space for the monkeys. Interviewees against forest expansion explained that there is already a shortage of farmland and, with village population growth, it would be harder for future generations to find farmland.

Monkeys frequently come into villages to steal food from residents. Tour guides respond to pressure from tourists to attract the monkeys for close viewing by feeding them bananas. Residents of Boabeng and Fiema were asked if monkeys ever come near or into their home compound and farms to steal food. In cases where the monkeys do steal food, the residents were asked how they feel about it. All of the residents surveyed said that monkeys steal food. Residents' varied emotional responses to this action included the following range of comments, each from a different Boabeng or Fiema resident: 'Since the monkeys are like children being reared, we can't do anything or feel angry'; 'I am happy when monkeys come steal food from the house'; 'I chase the monkeys away and I am



Figure 23.9 Road through Boabeng sacred forest (© Alison Ormsby).

angry'. The majority of interviewees were not mad about monkeys taking food: 61.8% felt neutral, 11.8% were happy, and 26.5% were angry.

Discussion and conclusions

The question of whether community conservation or government protection is more effective at protecting sacred groves is complex. Without the 1975 government law protecting Boabeng–Fiema, the monkeys would likely have been hunted until they were locally extirpated. However, government management and legacy in the area seems to have created a lack of initiative and feeling of ownership among village residents. When local village improvements are needed, or resource use issues arise, concerns are deferred to government representatives. The situation is further complicated by the fact that two villages are involved in the management of the sanctuary, yet these two villages have managed their own separate sacred groves in different ways. The grove near Boabeng is larger, denser and better protected than the grove near Fiema, and tourists usually visit only the Boabeng grove. Yet revenues from tourism are evenly shared between Boabeng and Fiema. This may result in Fiema having no incentive to reforest or restore local habitat areas.

Observing management challenges at Boabeng and Fiema raises questions about the Boabeng–Fiema corridor project, which is creating linkages to protected forest patches in six nearby communities. Ecologically, this corridor project is certainly advantageous. However, might this new initiative create more village rivalries or false expectations in terms of future tourism revenues?

Both Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary and Boabeng–Fiema Monkey Sanctuary charge an entrance fee of approximately \$7 US for foreign visitors and \$3 for Ghanaians. Tourism revenues at Tafi Atome are publicly posted in the sanctuary Visitors Centre, whereas at Boabeng–Fiema the fees are collected by a government employee at the sanctuary office and revenues are not made public. This leads to community speculation about the amount and allocation of revenues.

In both Tafi Atome and Boabeng–Fiema, some residents did not make the direct connection between village projects, such as electrification, road and school improvements, and the fact that these benefits are in part funded by tourism revenues or, in the case of Tafi Atome, by direct benefactors who were former visitors to the sanctuary.

Making a culturally protected sacred grove open to tourism can cause a shift in the cultural significance of the site as well as an increase in the environmental impacts on the site (Anyinam, 1999). In Tafi Atome, access to the core sacred fetish grove is still forbidden. In Boabeng–Fiema, tourists are allowed to enter the core grove. It is recommended that the core groves be kept sacred and with limited access in order to protect each grove well into the future.

Residents of both study areas expressed pride in the local sanctuaries. A Tafi Atome resident said she ‘never imagined people from far places would come here to see the monkeys’. Although Tafi Atome is much newer as a tourism destination, it has a gift shop whereas Boabeng–Fiema does not. Tafi Atome has an advantage as a tourist site in that it is only three hours over well-maintained roads from Ghana’s capital city, Accra. In contrast, Boabeng–Fiema requires at least nine hours of travel time from Accra. Many interviewees in Boabeng and Fiema made comments about the need to pave the road to improve access to the sanctuary.

All villages – Tafi Atome, Boabeng and Fiema – received electricity only within the last decade. In addition, all villages delayed electrification to minimise impacts on the monkeys. For example, additional efforts were made to install some of the wires underground in both sanctuaries, and also to use insulated conductors (Densu, 2003; Egbeako, personal communication).

Interviewees at both research sites voiced support for expansion of the sacred groves. However, growing human populations will surely increase demands on the land within the groves. In addition, the cultivation of cash crops near sacred groves creates pressure on sanctuary land. At Tafi Atome, there is a teak plantation

on two sides of the grove. In the Boabeng–Fiema region, there is an extensive industry to grow and prepare tobacco for export. In recent years, part of the forest between Boabeng and Fiema has been cleared for new housing and a new church. Similarly, new farmland areas have been cleared near Tafi Atome. Thus, despite some community support for expansion of the sanctuary, there are never-ending pressures for use of the land up to and within the sanctuary. The Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary boundary was demarcated by Friends of the Earth Ghana in 2006, which should help clarify the location of the boundary and resolve any questions about whether a farm is inside or outside the sanctuary.

To facilitate positive tourism development, transparency in revenue sharing is needed. Tafi Atome is succeeding at publicising tourism revenues, but it will be an ongoing challenge, with external funding entering communities, to keep the lines of communication open and avoid speculation and misunderstandings about allocation of funds. There is a need for education and information sharing to explain how income is used in each community involved with tourist visits to sacred forests, and how funding assistance is allocated for community development projects.

The flamboyant tree (*Delonix regia*) is the dominant species in several parts of the Tafi Atome grove. This non-native species is planted because its seed pods are a favoured food of the monkeys. The problem is that the tree out-competes other species and is becoming a dominant species in the grove. Basically, the grove has been managed for the monkeys but not for habitat diversity. It is recommended that ecological studies be conducted on Ghana's sacred forests to measure current biodiversity and ensure that species representative of healthy forests are present and protected. Biological studies have been conducted at sacred groves in India and have shown that the groves are more species-rich than surrounding areas (e.g. Tiwari *et al.*, 1998; Bhagwat *et al.*, 2005).

The groves in this study have a similar history of receiving outside protection to support cultural traditions after erosion from external forces. In different decades – 1970s at Boabeng–Fiema and 1980s at Tafi Atome – each site faced pressures from religious leaders to hunt monkeys and cease idol worship. The communities at both sites responded with renewed protection and support for community conservation traditions. At Boabeng–Fiema, national government support was enlisted; Tafi Atome received support from a non-governmental organisation, regional government legislation and a community management committee.

Future research is needed – both in Ghana as well as other countries such as India with a strong tradition of sacred sites – that investigates the similarities and differences in natural resource use and management traditions at each site. This research could further evaluate the role of the preservation of sacred groves in supporting biodiversity conservation.

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