**Depleting Forest Reserve in Cross River State and Rising Global Emission, The Way Forward**

**Imoh Akwang, Calabar**

Cross River State, South-South Nigeria, which occupies 20,156 square kilometres, contained the last sizeable though fragmented and isolated tropical forest in Nigeria. This forest reserve that had served as a buffer for carbon emission and climate change is today at the brink of complete diminution occasioned by increased deforestation in the state.

This deforestation and continuous clearing of the forest ecosystem for different purposes including but not limited to, plantation agriculture, migration and settlement expansion, infrastructural development, energy (fuel wood), was first recorded during the establishment of the Pamol Estate in 1907; an agricultural plantation 39 minutes and 23.9 km away from Calabar. Before the establishment of Pamol Estate, Cross River had about 4,367.47square kilometres of tropical rain forest. However, by 2017, 1,667 square kilometres was left. Although Pamol is today defunct, the forest that was cleared to establish this plantation is lost forever.

An associate professor in the University of Calabar, Rapheal Offiong opines that: “Deforestation in Cross River State is rampant largely due to pressure from agriculture, industry, human settlement and infrastructure.”

According to Global Forest Watch, “In 2010, Cross River had 1.31-Million-hectare metre (Mha.m) of tree cover, extending over 61% of its land area in Akamkpa, Biase, Boki, Ikom, and Etung. In 2020, it lost 12.7 Kilo hectare (kha) of tree cover, equivalent to 7.53Mt of carbon dioxide (CO2) of emission.”

While various concerned environmentalists have vilified the government for the lack of policies aimed towards the active conservation of the state’s forest reserve, the Programmes Director of “We the people,”” Ken Henshaw is of the opinion that the present state government has been complicit in the destruction of the forest and her ecosystem. He said; “Since 2015, there has been a sharp difference in the forest management policy in Cross River State. We have seen an alarming rise in deforestation in the state.”

**The Moratorium and its intricacies**:

In 2008, the Liyel Imoke’s administration placed a moratorium on logging of wood to checkmate deforestation and introduce the Reducing Emission from Deforestation and forest Degradation (UN-REDD+) programme in the state. In July 2019, the Cross River State House of Assembly made moves for the Government to lift the moratorium placed on the logging of wood and revert the management of the State’s Forests to the Forestry Commission as provided for by the Cross River State Forest Law 2010 as amended, with the Anti-Deforestation Taskforce existing majorly to provide a seeming “military” presence to enhance sustainable management of the Forest.

The House members adopted these resolutions sequel to the prayers of Member representing Boki 2, Hon. Hillary Bisong who moved the motion. Hon ltam Abang representing Boki 1 in her contribution described the activities of the Taskforce as, “a rape of the State’s forest reserve,” noting that under the Forestry Commission, there was replanting of trees while Forest Communities were paid some royalties which they used to meet the needs of the community.

The Speaker, Hon. Eteng Jonah Williams directed the Clerk of the House, Elder Bassey Ekpeyong to convey the resolution to the State Governor for implementation. Two years later, this implementation is yet to see the light of day.

Buttressing the lack of political will of the current administration to preserve the state forest, Odey Oyama, Executive Director, Rainforest Resource and Development centre, a Non- Governmental Organisation on environment and development, says “Our problem is not the lack of policies, but the ability to enforce these policies, and empower officers to ensure the compliance of these laws

” The Government knows what to do but is reluctant in enforcing the laws that protect the forest. The forest is going, the impact on the environment both locally and internationally is severe.”

Again, Ken Henshaw of “We our People”, while lending his thought on the issue of moratorium and its implications, said: “Basically, the moratorium and introduction of REDD+ violated seriously the communities’ rights to their forest. The legitimate economic and livelihood alternative of the people was forcefully taken away from them on account of the REDD­+programme and the laws for the protection of the forest in this administration has become very lax.”

He continued: “In the next five years, if the rate of logging in Cross River State is not checked, there will be no more forest in the state.”

Otu Paul Bissong, a timber dealer said: “The government should lift the ban on logging. They should designate specific places for reservation and leave the rest for the villagers. I need to cultivate my farm, I need to develop my plantation so If the government does not give me the space I need, then I have to kill the forest and cut down every tree in order to plant the specie of wood I want.”

**The effects of deforestation**

The forest ecosystem which is a complete compendium of different components of biophysical elements, including the climate, air, shrubs, climbers, lianas, animals, insects, soil, humus, litter, the freshwater ecosystem that runs across it and the aquatic biota have been significantly affected by the deforestation presently ravaging the state’s forest reserve.

Upon the background that a tree does not make a forest, Offiong maintains that “the cultivation of a single crop to replace deforested area such as the rubber palm, the oil palm plantations, cocoa, pineapple, cotton, citrus, coconut farms, among others, has severely depleted the tropical rain forest resources.

“Deforestation has also led to habitat modification and fragmentation resulting in the migration of wildlife and loss of plants that serve as medicinal components to the locals, livelihood sustainability has been threatened,” Offiong lamented.

He added that; “Deforestation brings about the loss of wild relatives: most of the common plants we rely on are fast eroding, while invasive species are threatening the existence of wild plants. The homogeneity of forest landscape has been lost.”

Again, the loss of wildlife, consequent of the ongoing deforestation, invariably reduces the chances of regeneration of the forest as hunting and other human activities threaten the existence of squirrels and other rodents as well as birds which are the major planters of the forest.

In recent times, Nigeria has experienced a change in climatic conditions; there has been a significant increase in temperature, drastic weather conditions, reduced rainfall, flooding, erosion, loss of biodiversity, water body pollution, siltation and sedimentation of streams, among others.

These changes are projected to continue to increase as drought in the Northern desert regions are expected to continue while the southern areas will be faced with flooding and submersion of coastal areas.

Fresh water bodies have been contaminated and lakes are drying up. These changes have affected and will continue to have significant impact on various spheres of Nigeria’s socio-economic and political condition.

Offiong maintains that, “Plantation as a culture is a major driver of deforestation and biodiversity loss in the country.”

It therefore, calls for concerted efforts to ensure that climate change mitigation and adaptation as well as capacity development take the front burner in the discourse of the state of the nation with conscientious implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

While the government in 2016 started the “Go Green” carnival to embark on the planting of trees to replace lost forest in the state, environmental activists opine that this is not sufficient to replace and restore the lost forest. “The trees in our forest take a long time to grow because they are wild species,” Offiong echoed.

Executive Director, NGOCE, Dr Odigha Odigha says “the whole forest management in Cross River State has collapsed. For the Go Green Carnival, trees were only planted on television and radio”

**Recommendations:**

Today, amidst the lack of political will to combat this challenge, pressure from agriculture, industry, human settlement, infrastructure, among others, deforestation has continued unabated, resulting in several damages to the ecosystem.

However, the need for community education and enlightenment cannot be overemphasised as it is pertinent for the natives to understand and address the impacts of the climate crisis; to empower them with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes needed to act as agents of change, while providing alternative means of livelihood for them as the forest has hitherto been their only source of livelihood.

There is also need to engage and empower all stakeholders and major groups on policies and actions relating to climate change through sustainable development programmes through media, networking and partnerships providing quality Climate Change Education (CCE).

The onus is on the state government to ensure that conservation policies are formulated and implemented. There is an outcry by several environmental activists for the Cross River state government to become the main drivers of forest conservation though climate policy formulation and implementation to mitigate the adverse consequences of climate change in the state, country and world at large.