

Case 4

People in central African tropical forests have been hunting wildlife for at least 40,000 years. Today, as the human population grows, the harvest of large wild mammals known as “bushmeat” is increasing. The human diet of bushmeat includes many threatened and endangered species such as gorilla, chimpanzee, and elephant. The consumption of bushmeat in central Africa alone—Cameroon, Gabon, Central Africa Republic, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria, for example—is estimated between 1 and 3.4 million tons per year (1 million tons is comparable to 4 million cattle).

Scientists consider the current rate of wildlife killing an ecological crisis. They estimate that a tropical forest can support the protein needs of approximately 1 human per square kilometer and remain sustainable. In central Africa, wildlife is killed at more than 6 times that amount. Some scientists contend that the harvest of bushmeat will eventually result in “empty forest syndrome,” a situation where the forest canopy survives, but is devoid of large animals.

Other scientists are even more alarmed, arguing that when wildlife species are wiped out, disappearance of the forest itself will follow. A recent study of the ecological connection between spider monkeys, a preferred bushmeat species, and a common tree (*Inga ingoides*) in the lowland forests, demonstrated that monkeys are instrumental in seed dispersion. For these reasons, opponents of bushmeat harvest around the globe have called for the end of hunting.

Some contend, however, that the harvest of bushmeat is essential to avoid human catastrophe in Central Africa. It is estimated that 50% of the people living in the region are malnourished. Social scientists note that the poorest in these regions depend upon bushmeat as a vital source of protein. Because of the problems associated with the tsetse fly and sleeping sickness, animal agriculture has generally been unsuccessful. Crop cultivation has also proven unsuccessful due to low prices on the global market caused by massive farm subsidies in wealthy nations.

Moreover, the worldwide trade of bushmeat is estimated at 300 billion dollars; 1,000 tons of illegal meat is smuggled into Britain each year from West and Central Africa. Although much of the international trafficking of bushmeat is illegal under the 1975 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), this trade in bushmeat is a tempting source of income for impoverished nations with few other natural resources.

Advocates of the poor fear that the end of bushmeat harvest would seal the fate of an already suffering population left with few options.

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