Once Upon a Game Reserve: Sambisa and the Tragedy of a Forested Landscape

Azeez Olaniyan

Summary

This article focuses on the loss of the Sambisa Forest as a game reserve. It is essentially a study of the transformation of a forested landscape from a tourist haven to a den of terrorists. The transformation of the erstwhile game reserve was largely possible due to state absence that gave room for an invasion by violent elements who converted it to a deadly enclave. Efforts to stamp out the rebels have further resulted in ruin to the landscape. The paper concludes that the conversion of the forest to military training camps signals the tragic end of the game reserve.

The Sambisa Forest, located in Borno State in northeast Nigeria, has become synonymous with Boko Haram terrorism. Boko Haram has waged a bloody war against the Nigerian state in a bid to foist its own brand of religious order on the secular state. Few people ever knew that an integral part of the forest was once a flourishing game reserve that attracted tourists from far and near. The British colonial administration had gazetted the Sambisa Forest as a reserve in 1958, making it one of the conservation legacies bequeathed to the Nigerian state by the colonial power. In 1977, the area was re-gazetted as a National Game Reserve for the preservation of rare animals and also as a way of generating funds from tourism.

Covering about 518 km² of landscape on a flatland and drained by the Ngadda and Yedseram Rivers, Sambisa's lush greenery could rightfully be called a pearl in the semi-desert environment that characterizes most parts of the upper region of northern Nigeria. For a long time, it was home to a variety of wild animals such as bush elephants, leopards, lions, hyenas, baboons, monkeys of various species, and gazelle, as well as about 62 different species of birds. It was also rich in flora such as acacia, baobab, rubber, tamarind, terminalia, and date palm, to mention a few. As late as the 1970s, Sambisa attracted tourists for safaris. Today, however, the story has changed. The once-thriving game reserve is dead. The animals are gone. What remains in abundance in the green landscape is a battalion of Nigerian troops battling a motley of brutal terrorists that specialize in killings, bombings, beheadings, and the abduction of girls and women for sex slavery. The forest has lost its serenity and sanctity. It has transformed from a game reserve for human and animal pleasure into a human abattoir of unimaginable proportions.

The story of the transformation started even before the Boko Haram insurgency. It began during the military era when a combination of corruption and poor leadership led to abandonment and neglect. As was the case with several sectors of Nigerian life, corruption reared its head in park management to the extent that funds budgeted for the game reserve were mismanaged. The number of forest guards and range managers was not only inadequate, but they were also poorly trained and funded. The neglect resulted in an invasion of the reserve by hunters and poachers without many restraints. This was to have effects on the wildlife in the space. Then General Ibrahim Babangida's military regime nursed the idea of a national guard. The general cleared the inner areas of the reserve and built a training camp fitted with military facilities. The facility was codenamed "Camp Zairo" (Zero). The national guard was a special security force designed to protect his military regime, separate from the

Olaniyan, Azeez. "Once Upon a Game Reserve: Sambisa and the Tragedy of a Forested Landscape." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (Spring 2018), no. 2. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8176.
Print date: 07 November 2026 15:22:09

police and the military. Eventually, public outcry prevented the national guard from taking off. The idea of an uncontrolled special security outfit in the hands of a dictatorial military regime was something the people could not accept. The facilities were left in the bush. It was these facilities that Boko Haram would convert into training camps several years later.



Nigerian soldiers demonstrating an attack against Boko Haram

Photograph by Nicolas Pinault. Courtesy of Voice of America. Click here to view source.

PUBLIC DOMAIN This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0 License .

The journey of Boko Haram into the game reserve started about five years ago, when they were dislodged from Maiduguri town by military forces. Finding nowhere else to launch their deadly attacks from, they invaded the forest. The security guards staffing the gate were killed and the remaining staff scampered away for their lives. The terrorists then set up various camps in the forest and made Camp Zairo (Zero) their headquarters. It was from the various camps that deadly plans of attack were made. These include: launching deadly raids on towns and villages for the purpose of killing and pillaging; abduction of women and children for rape, forced marriage, sex slavery, and suicide bombing missions; keeping kidnap victims for ransom or execution; building a factory to make materials for suicide attacks, as well as armories for looted weapons.

The Nigerian army has no other option than to invade the forest to take out the terrorists from their fortresses. Thus, for the past three years, the forest has been subjected to aerial and ground bombardments, aimed at the various camps and locations therein. The army has had appreciable successes in recent times. But as the necessary bombings and military actions intensify and succeed in degrading the terrorists, so also do the animals and the Sambisa landscape get destroyed. The images coming out of Sambisa Forest are no longer of animals of various species, beautiful flora, or pleasure-seeking tourists. Rather, the images that come out these days are of fierce-

looking terrorists showing live beheading sessions of captured security operatives; of their leader making incoherent speeches justifying horrendous killings; of soldiers and military tanks cutting through the forest; of forlorn-looking abducted girls and women in the terrorists' camps; of destroyed trees and dead bodies. Now, after the last of the terrorists must have been wiped out, the army has announced plans to occupy the landscape and turn it into a training ground. The army already staged its 2017 annual sports competition in the reserve. It has also started construction in the area. This is intended to totally dominate the landscape and deny the terrorists a haven, but it invariably signals the tragic end of the Sambisa Game Reserve.

Arcadia Collection:
National Parks in Time and Space

Further readings:

- Ayeni, J. S. O., T. A. Afoloyan, and S. S. Ajayi. *Introductory Handbook on Nigerian Wildlife*. Ilorin: SAOLOG Productions, 1982.
- Ladan, Suleiman Iguda. "Forests and Forest Reserves as Security Threats in Northern Nigeria." *European Scientific Journal* 10, no. 35 (2014): 120–42.
- Mbaya, Y. P., and H. Malgwi. "Species List and Status of Mammals and Birds in Sambisa Game Reserve, Borno State, Nigeria." *Journal of Research in Forestry, Wildlife and Environment* 2, no. 1 (2010): 135.

Related links:

- Abubakar Shehu, Maiduguri. "Inside Boko Haram's 'Camp Zero.'" *Daily Trust*, 31 December 2016. https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/inside-boko-harams-camp-zero.html
- Bodunrin, Kayode. "Sambisa: Forest of a Thousand Myths." *The Nation*, 25 December 2016. http://thenationonlineng.net/sambisa-forest-thousand-myths/
- Olaniyan, Azeez. "Destroying to Destroy." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* Autumn 2017, no. 34. http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/8175

How to cite:

Olaniyan, Azeez. "Once Upon a Game Reserve: Sambisa and the Tragedy of a Forested Landscape." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (Spring 2018), no. 2. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8176 .

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License .
2018 Azeez Olaniyan
This refers only to the text and does not include any image rights.
Please click on an image to view its individual rights status.

ISSN 2199-3408

Websites linked in image captions:

- https://www.voaafrique.com/a/en-images-lutte-armee-nigerienne-contre-invisible-boko-haram/3217712.html

About the author:

Azeez Olaniyan
Azeez Olaniyan was a fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in 2017. He is senior lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria. He is also the assistant director of the Institute of Peace Security and Governance at Ekiti State University. He holds a PhD in political science from the University of Ibadan. He is in the area of comparative politics, peace, conflict, and security studies as well as environmental politics.

Olaniyan, Azeez. "Once Upon a Game Reserve: Sambisa and the Tragedy of a Forested Landscape." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (Spring 2018), no. 2. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8176.
Print date: 07 November 2026 15:22:09