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*The Sacred Monkeys of Nigeria: Conservation and Understanding Using
Oral History and Ecology*

(Environmental Science / Arts and Sciences)

Local belief systems such as indigenous religions and social taboos are often credited with helping to conserve animal species worldwide. Due to religious beliefs, some species are given sacred status, such as the Hindu-based protection of cattle and monkeys. In indigenous African religions, animals may be protected due to their association with local deities or spirits. As religions change and societies modernize, the traditions and indigenous belief systems of many communities are often at risk. Although Christianity has long had a presence in the Igbo-speaking region of southeastern Nigeria (Igboland), examples of sacredness linked to the Igbo traditional religion still occur throughout the region, including several populations of sacred monkeys. This project focuses on the relationship between sacred monkeys (specifically, Sclater's monkey, a globally threatened species) and the residents with whom the monkeys regularly interact in two Igbo communities. Prior research in these sites showed that histories (stories) regarding the monkeys were not as widespread as expected. Rich tales regarding the monkeys were told mainly by the elderly, while many young people had little to no knowledge of these stories – or even why monkeys were allowed to freely roam throughout their villages. This project focuses on the memories of local people regarding their understanding of and relationship with the sacred monkeys. I will use oral-history methods to document and preserve stories regarding the origin of the monkeys' sacredness and their role in daily and spiritual life. In addition, I will census each monkey population to monitor any changes in abundance from previous censuses. Finally, I will map habitat corridors between the communities and neighboring forest patches. Ultimately, the three components of this project emphasize social and ecological knowledge needed to better understand: 1) the complexities of the changing relationship between sacred monkeys and the Igbo communities that protect them, and 2) conservation measures needed to help ensure the monkeys' long-term survival.