



Cultural Norms, Values, and Practices in Wildlife Conservation among the Karamojong of Kidepo Valley National Park, North Eastern Uganda

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Abstract: *study explores the relationship between traditional cultural values, norms, and practices and their impact on wildlife conservation within the Karamojong community in Kidepo Valley National Park, Northeastern Uganda. It aims to assess how indigenous beliefs and customs can be integrated into formal conservation strategies to enhance biodiversity conservation and community engagement. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. Questionnaires were administered to the 243 Indigenous Karamojong community members to assess observance of wildlife conservation norms, related cultural values and practices. Five Key Informant Interviews with governmental officials and wildlife authorities, and five Focus group discussions with Local Council 1 committee members. All quantitative data were analysed using Stata 17, while qualitative data were thematically analysed using NVivo 14. The study found strong community adherence to wildlife conservation norms, particularly regarding sacred animal protection (Mean = 3.5, SD = 1.6). Cultural practices such as totemic restrictions and hunting regulations significantly shaped community attitudes toward conservation. Engagement with traditional practices was moderate (Mean = 2.6, SD = 1.7), with practices like community-led regulated grazing and elder-controlled hunting requiring further strengthening. While there was moderate support for wildlife conservation based on cultural attachment to animals (Mean = 2.4, SD = 1.4), a disconnect between traditional values and formal conservation strategies was noted, indicating the need for better integration of these values into modern frameworks. This study contributes to conservation theory by highlighting the importance of integrating indigenous cultural values into formal wildlife management. Practically, it suggests that leveraging local cultural norms can enhance community buy-in and sustainable conservation. For policy, it advocates for a collaborative approach between wildlife authorities and local communities, incorporating traditional norms into national conservation strategies for more inclusive and effective outcomes.*

Keywords: *Wildlife Conservation, Karamojong, Cultural Norms, Traditional Practices, Traditional Values, Kidepo Valley National Park.*

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1. Introduction

Wildlife conservation in pastoral communities, particularly among indigenous groups like the Maasai

and Karamojong, is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural values, norms, and practices. These communities, whose livelihoods have long been intertwined with their natural environment, have developed unique land management strategies that have

historically fostered wildlife coexistence. Traditional Maasai land management, for instance, has enabled harmonious relationships between humans and wildlife, with communal grazing areas and rotational land use allowing for the conservation of ecosystems alongside pastoral practices. However, recent conservation interventions have introduced shifts in these dynamics, sometimes leading to increasing desires for the separation of wildlife from human settlements. According to Unks, Goldman, Mialhe, and Roque de Pinho (2021), modern conservation approaches have unintentionally disrupted the historical balance, often undermining traditional systems and contributing to conflicts between human and wildlife needs.

In Karamoja, the situation is similarly influenced by land rights and governance challenges. In the 1960s, large portions of land in the region were allocated to wildlife conservation, leading to significant and brutal displacement of local communities. These land allocations, while intended to preserve biodiversity, left many Karamojong communities vulnerable to land loss and a diminished sense of ownership and agency. Rugadya and Kamusiime (2013) highlight the long-term impacts of these land-use decisions, noting that many Karamojong lacked sufficient information about their land rights and conservation policies, exacerbating tensions between local populations and conservation efforts.

Cultural norms also play a central role in shaping the food security and dietary practices of the Karamojong. The Karamoja region, often affected by climatic variability, faces food security challenges that are compounded by restrictive cultural practices around food consumption. These dietary norms, which limit access to certain nutritious foods, contribute to reduced dietary diversity, further exacerbating the challenges faced by local communities (Olum, Okello-Uma, Tumuhimbise, Taylor, & Ongeng, 2017). Such norms can often conflict with external conservation goals, where the need for nutritional security may clash with the priorities of conservation interventions.

Wildlife conservation efforts in pastoral communities, such as the Karamojong in North Eastern Uganda, face significant challenges due to the complex relationship between local cultural norms, land rights, and conservation policies. Traditional land management systems among the Karamojong, like those in other pastoralist communities, have historically facilitated coexistence between humans and wildlife. However, modern conservation initiatives, such as the establishment of Kidepo Valley National Park, have often marginalized these communities, leading to land dispossession, loss of traditional ecological knowledge, and strained human-wildlife interactions. According to Rugadya and Kamusiime (2013), large-scale land allocations for conservation in the 1960s left many Karamojong communities vulnerable to land loss and ill-informed about their rights, aggravating tensions

between local populations and conservation policies. Furthermore, cultural practices that govern land use and food security, while deeply embedded in the community's way of life, may conflict with external conservation objectives, further complicating the sustainability of conservation efforts (Olum et al., 2017).

Despite these challenges, the importance of integrating local cultural values and norms in wildlife conservation is increasingly recognized as essential for long-term success. However, there is limited research on how the cultural practices of the Karamojong influence their participation in and support for wildlife conservation, particularly within the context of Kidepo Valley National Park. As noted by Unks et al. (2021), conservation interventions that ignore local cultural norms can disrupt traditional systems and generate resistance among communities. Without a comprehensive understanding of these cultural dynamics, conservation policies risk being ineffective or counterproductive, as they may fail to address local needs, rights, and traditional knowledge.

This study aims to investigate the values, norms, and practices of the Karamojong about wildlife conservation in Kidepo Valley National Park. By examining the interplay between cultural traditions, land tenure issues, and conservation interventions, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how these factors influence conservation outcomes and community engagement. It will also explore potential pathways for integrating cultural values into conservation strategies, ensuring that conservation efforts are more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable for both wildlife and local communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study is anchored in the Indigenous Wholistic Theory (IWT), which offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the Karamojong people's relationship with their environment. IWT emphasizes the interconnectedness of cultural, spiritual, ecological, and social systems (Berkes, 2017). This interconnected worldview underlines that indigenous communities like the Karamojong do not perceive humans and wildlife as separate entities but rather as part of a more extensive spiritual and ecological system.

Berkes (2017) and Gadgil, Berkes and Folke (1993) advocate for the recognition of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in biodiversity conservation. In this light, the study aligns with the assertion that local cultural systems can and should inform formal conservation strategies. For instance, sacred sites and ritual prohibitions among the Karamojong serve ecological functions equivalent to protected zones in modern conservation. Melubo (2020) supports this approach,

showing how the Maasai's land management and cultural practices create spaces for biodiversity to flourish.

Thus, IWT and TEK validate the integration of indigenous values and norms into formal conservation frameworks, countering conservation models that have historically marginalized local communities.

2.2 Cultural Norms in Wildlife Conservation

A growing body of literature recognizes that indigenous cultural norms are not merely social customs but act as de facto environmental governance systems, especially in pastoral communities. Within the Karamojong of Northeastern Uganda, this study highlights how traditional norms, particularly prohibitions on hunting sacred or non-edible animals and the exclusion of wild meat from ritual use, continue to serve as effective tools for wildlife conservation. These norms, deeply embedded in spiritual and communal life, offer a structured moral framework for regulating human-wildlife interactions.

Studies from other African contexts reinforce the conservation potential of such normative systems. For instance, Bortolamiol et al. (2018) and Ngoufo et al. (2014) demonstrate that taboos, totemic species, and sacred sites in Uganda and Cameroon significantly influence conservation behavior. These authors argue that cultural prohibitions create "no-take zones" that parallel formal protected areas, reducing human disturbance and promoting species preservation. Such parallels position indigenous norms as not only culturally significant but ecologically strategic.

Despite this potential, the literature also reveals a persistent tension between formal conservation laws and local customs. Government policies often impose top-down regulations that fail to account for the spiritual and cultural underpinnings of indigenous conservation ethics (Unks et al., 2021). This mismatch can lead to resistance, loss of cultural authority, and diminished community engagement. Our study reinforces this concern, showing that while Karamojong norms align with conservation goals, they remain largely excluded from institutional planning processes.

This disconnect highlights a critical gap in the literature and policy practice: the lack of meaningful integration between indigenous normative systems and modern conservation frameworks. Although scholars such as Adolf et al. (2024) have recently advocated for culturally grounded conservation models, empirical research demonstrating how such integration could be operationalized remains limited. Our study contributes to filling this gap by offering specific examples of how Karamojong norms function as conservation

mechanisms, and by proposing their formal recognition within Uganda's conservation strategy.

The current body of knowledge, while rich in descriptive accounts, is limited in its analytical depth regarding the effectiveness, resilience, and transferability of these indigenous norms under changing socio-ecological conditions. Furthermore, most existing studies focus on normative practices surrounding charismatic or sacred species, with little exploration of how norms adapt to environmental pressures, demographic shifts, or external interventions. This lack of adaptive analysis constrains the ability of policymakers to develop flexible, culturally inclusive conservation strategies.

2.3 Cultural Values in Wildlife Conservation

Cultural values are defined as deeply held beliefs about what is meaningful and sacred and serve as a vital lens for understanding indigenous conservation behavior. Among the Karamojong of Kidepo Valley National Park, this study reveals a moderate level of cultural attachment to wildlife, especially animals revered as symbols of power, identity, wisdom, and continuity. This symbolic relationship forms a crucial yet underutilized foundation for conservation engagement.

Such findings resonate with broader literature from Uganda and Cameroon, where communities regard wildlife as part of their cultural and spiritual identity (Bortolamiol et al., 2018; Infield & Mugisha, 2018). Totemic animals, for example, are not merely symbolic but function as emblems of clan lineage and ancestral guidance. These associations contribute to a conservation ethic that arises not from external enforcement but from an internalized sense of responsibility and reverence for nature.

Yet, despite this strong cultural alignment with conservation ideals, a persistent gap exists between traditional values and formal conservation strategies. This disconnect is a recurring theme in African conservation research, where indigenous worldviews are often disregarded in favor of technocratic, economically-driven models (Ngoufo et al., 2014; Infield, 2001). The prevailing assumption that monetary incentives alone can mobilize community conservation has proven insufficient, particularly where conservation policies clash with local moral ecologies.

This lack of value alignment contributes to resistance, reduced cooperation, and, ultimately, ineffective conservation. Our findings support the assertion by Bortolamiol et al. (2018) and Infield & Mugisha (2018) that cultural values, if properly recognized, can be powerful enablers of conservation. Integrating these values into management plans could facilitate trust, cultural continuity, and deeper local stewardship.

However, the current literature remains underdeveloped in explaining how such integration might occur in practice. While scholars acknowledge the potential of indigenous values, few have mapped out frameworks for co-management that respect and incorporate these beliefs meaningfully. Additionally, limited attention has been given to understanding community resistance to conservation laws from a cultural perspective. Our study highlights the need to move beyond broad cultural generalizations to more nuanced, localized analyses of value systems and their interaction with formal policy structures.

Literature underscores both the promise and neglect of cultural values in formal conservation planning. Bridging the gap between heritage and policy requires not only acknowledging indigenous values but developing frameworks that operationalize them within state-sanctioned conservation regimes. By doing so, conservation efforts can become not only ecologically effective but also culturally resonant, securing long-term sustainability for both biodiversity and indigenous ways of life.

2.4 Cultural Practices in Wildlife Conservation

A rich body of literature has explored the role of cultural practices in wildlife conservation across indigenous and pastoralist communities in Africa. These practices are often embedded in traditional ecological knowledge systems and reflect long-standing relationships between communities and their environments. Among pastoral groups such as the Maasai in Tanzania, the Baganda in Uganda, and the forest-dependent communities of Cameroon, cultural practices have historically contributed to sustainable wildlife use, ecological balance, and biodiversity protection.

For instance, Bortolamiol et al. (2018) emphasize that in communities living at the edges of protected areas in Uganda, wildlife is not only valued for its material use but also for its spiritual and symbolic significance. These values translate into observable conservation practices such as regulated hunting seasons, avoidance of specific totemic species, and the use of sacred groves or forests as informal sanctuaries. Such practices, though unwritten, often function as effective conservation tools by limiting resource exploitation in ecologically sensitive areas.

Similarly, Ngoufo et al. (2014), in their study of communities around Korup National Park in Cameroon, illustrate how traditional belief systems and spiritual taboos determine patterns of wildlife use. Cultural restrictions on killing certain animals, as well as customary rituals tied to forest use, were found to reduce overexploitation and promote ecological coexistence. These practices also serve as informal governance

systems that reinforce community accountability in managing natural resources.

The Maasai of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania provide another widely cited case. Melubo (2020) discusses how the Maasai's rotational grazing systems, community-led wildlife surveillance, and age-set governance structures have historically contributed to landscape-level conservation. These practices foster wildlife corridors and seasonal rest periods for land, thereby supporting both pastoral livelihoods and biodiversity conservation.

Despite their demonstrated effectiveness, many traditional practices have come under strain due to external pressures such as land alienation, climate change, and the introduction of formal conservation laws. Infield (2001) argues that modern conservation efforts often marginalize cultural knowledge by privileging economic incentives or strict regulatory frameworks that fail to align with local worldviews. As a result, the erosion of traditional leadership structures and intergenerational knowledge transmission has weakened the practice and legitimacy of indigenous conservation systems.

Recent studies, such as Adolf et al. (2024), suggest that cultural conservation practices in Uganda remain relevant, but they require deliberate policy integration and institutional support. These authors emphasize that community-based approaches can only be effective when local knowledge systems are formally recognized, and when traditional roles (e.g., elder leadership in resource decisions) are maintained within contemporary management frameworks.

Despite increased recognition of indigenous practices in conservation discourse, the literature also reveals persistent gaps and limitations. Few studies have systematically evaluated the ecological outcomes of these cultural practices using empirical biodiversity data. Furthermore, there is limited understanding of how such practices adapt under socio-economic transformation or political marginalization. Research remains especially thin on how these traditions are being negotiated, reinterpreted, or revived by younger generations in response to conservation challenges.

Previous studies underscore the enduring relevance of traditional conservation practices in promoting ecological stewardship across African communities. These practices—rooted in culture, spirituality, and social structure offer valuable insights for designing inclusive and culturally sensitive conservation frameworks. However, for these approaches to influence policy meaningfully, further empirical research and interdisciplinary collaboration are required to bridge indigenous knowledge with formal conservation science.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed methods design to explore wildlife conservation values, norms, and practices within the Karamojong community in the Kidepo Valley National Park, Northeastern Uganda. The mixed methods approach allowed for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the community's perspectives on wildlife conservation (Creswell, 2014). The quantitative aspect involved the use of surveys, while the qualitative aspect included Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). This design is particularly suitable as it enables the integration of different types of data to provide a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

3.2 Research Approach

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the interplay of indigenous values, norms, and practices in wildlife conservation. The quantitative component aimed to assess the prevalence of certain conservation norms, values, and practices within the Karamojong community, while the qualitative component sought to understand the underlying cultural meanings, beliefs, and practices related to wildlife conservation. This integrated approach facilitated a deeper exploration of how traditional values and practices align with contemporary conservation efforts (Fetters et al., 2013).

3.3 Study Population

The study targeted a total of 243 respondents, consisting of indigenous Karamojong community members living in the vicinity of Kidepo Valley National Park. Also, the study targeted Key Informants (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions, all of whom were selected based on their extensive knowledge and involvement in local wildlife conservation efforts. The KIIs included key community leaders, such as the Parish Priest, the Agriculture and Production Officer, the Senior Warden Officer, the Senior Environmental Officer, and the LC V District Counselor in charge of education and health.

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The study employed a stratified random sampling technique to select 243 respondents from the indigenous Karamojong community. The sample size calculation followed Krejcie and Morgan (1970) method, with an additional 10% added to account for potential non-responses (Fink, 2024). Based on this, a final sample of

269 respondents was determined (i.e., $243/0.9 = 269$), representing the diverse socio-demographic profile of the community. This sample size was sufficient to ensure the representativeness of the study population and to allow for the generalization of the findings within the context of Kidepo Valley National Park. The inclusion of both KIIs and FGDs further enriched the data collection process, providing valuable insights into community perspectives on wildlife conservation as guided by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006).

3.5 Study Instruments

In this study, values, norms, and practices were key variables assessed to understand Karamojong indigenous systems in wildlife conservation within Kidepo Valley National Park (KVNP). This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative instruments to assess cultural values, norms, and practices related to wildlife conservation among the Karamojong. A structured questionnaire was used to explore cultural values (such as reverence for animals), social norms (like taboos on hunting sacred species), and traditional conservation practices (e.g., elder-led hunting and regulated grazing). To complement and validate the survey data, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with local leaders and stakeholders. These qualitative tools offered deeper insights into community perspectives and contextual factors influencing conservation. All instruments were pretested for clarity and cultural appropriateness.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

After relevant approvals, the study was conducted. Initially, a pre-test was administered to all participants to assess their baseline knowledge and attitudes toward Karamojong cultural conservation values, norms and practices. The participants were then engaged in face-to-face interviews using a pretested questionnaire, which included closed ended questions. Following this, five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each consisting of 6 participants, local council committee members from 6 villages. The FGDs were designed to achieve saturation on the study's key variables. Additionally, five Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with key community leaders, including the Parish Priest, the Agriculture and Production Officer, the Senior Warden Officer, the Senior Environmental Officer, and the LC V District Counselor in charge of education and health.

3.7 Data Management and Analysis

The quantitative data were managed using statistical software such as SPSS or Stata. After data entry, the dataset was cleaned to identify and address inconsistencies, outliers, and missing values. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were employed to summarize the

baseline characteristics of respondents, as well as their attitudes towards wildlife conservation. Inferential statistical methods may also be used to explore relationships between variables, providing insights into patterns and trends within the data.

Qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and coding the data to identify common themes and patterns. Key subthemes, such as cultural norms and traditional conservation practices, were examined to understand community perspectives. The findings from the qualitative analysis were triangulated with the quantitative results, providing a comprehensive understanding of the community's engagement with wildlife conservation.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

As the study involved human participants, strict ethical standards were followed to ensure the protection of their rights and privacy. Ethical approval was obtained from the Mbarara University of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee (MUST REC) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology

(UNCST) before the study began. Permission was sought from the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of Karamoja District to gain access to the study sites.

Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose, risks, and benefits of the research. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The research process was conducted with cultural sensitivity, considering the local customs and values. These ethical measures ensured the study adhered to both national and international research standards while prioritizing the participants' well-being.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Baseline characteristics of Respondents (Karamojong)

Table 1: Baseline characteristics of Respondents (Karamojong)

Characteristics	Definition	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	126	51.9
	Male	117	48.1%
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	34.4	10.2
	19–29 years	60	24.9
	30–49 years	147	61.0
	≥50 years	34	14.1
Education	No formal education	121	50.0
	Primary education	87	36.0
	Secondary education	28	11.6
	Tertiary	6	2.5
Marital status	Not married	8	3.3
	Married	235	96.7
Religion	Catholics	219	90.9
	Anglican	8	3.3
	Others	14	5.8
Residence	Rural	195	80.2
	Urban	48	19.8
Origin	Migrant	46	19.1
	Native	195	80.9

Table 1 shows that the majority were females, 51.9% (n = 126). The mean age was 34.4 years (SD = 10.2), with most participants aged 30–49 years, 61.0% (n = 147). Half of the respondents had no formal education, 50.0% (n = 121). Nearly all participants were married, 96.7% (n = 235). Most identified as Catholics, 90.9% (n = 219).

The majority resided in rural areas, 80.2% (n = 195), and most participants were native residents (80.9%, n = 195).

4.1.2 Cultural Norms of Wildlife Conservation Norms among the Karamojong in KNP

Table 2: Wildlife conservation norms of the Karamojong in KNP (N = 243)

Norms	Mean \pm SD
Our culture does not allow the hunting and killing of non-edible wild animals for fun	3.2 \pm 1.8
Our culture and religion do not allow the killing of sacred animals.	3.6 \pm 1.8
We do not use wild meat for sacred rituals such as weddings and childbirth ceremonies.	3.6 \pm 1.8
Overall norms	3.5 \pm 1.6

The overall trend across the three categories indicates that **norms** received the highest mean score of 3.5 (SD = 1.6), suggesting strong community adherence to norms that support wildlife conservation, particularly in

protecting sacred animals. This highlights the potential to integrate these established norms into formal conservation initiatives.

Table 3: Subthemes, quotes and Participant on norms

Theme	Subthemes	Quotes	Description of Source
Norms	Respect for sacred animals/sites	“Twins used to wear ostrich egg shells for protection... Calabash monkey healed mental sickness.”	FGD B, R17
	Totemic restrictions on species	“Extinction of certain species, roan antelope (Egoletyang) has disappeared and yet it is the totem of the plain elders... used to be very strict.”	KII 2: Agriculture Officer
	Cultural regulation of hunting	“Bonopek instructed people to kill only big animals... we killed only old animals.”	FGD A, R (No. A16 2024)
	Traditional beliefs governing wildlife-human coexistence	“In our time, certain species were not to be hunted (e.g., Royal Antelope)... Songs and dances were used to promote wildlife respect.”	KII 3: Retired Senior Warden Officer
	Community-based control of sacred places	“Akiriket is where we would gather for blessings... now locked in the park.”	FGD C, R10

Overall, the findings reveal strong community adherence to norms that support wildlife conservation, with a mean score of 3.5 (SD = 1.6), particularly in relation to the protection of sacred animals and species. Key cultural practices such as totemic restrictions, hunting regulations, and traditional beliefs around wildlife-human coexistence indicate the potential for integrating

these established norms into formal conservation initiatives.

4.1.3 Wildlife Conservation Values among the Karamojong in KNP

Table 4: Wildlife conservation values

Values	Mean \pm SD
The Karamojong cultural systems uphold wildlife conservation in the KVN	1.9 \pm 1.4
Cultural attachment to animal species as symbols of power, wisdom, and protection is a significant Karamojong Indigenous conservation opportunity for KVN.	2.8 \pm 1.8
Overall	2.4 \pm 1.4

The overall mean of wildlife conservation values was 2.4 (SD = 1.4), reflecting moderate support for wildlife conservation, with cultural attachment to animals as symbols of power being recognized as a significant conservation opportunity. However, the relatively low

score for the alignment between cultural systems and formal conservation suggests a need for greater integration of traditional values with modern conservation strategies.

Table 5: Subthemes, quotes and participants on cultural values

Theme	Subthemes	Quotes	Source
Values	Cultural attachment to animals;	“In our culture, animals are good! ... If the children are born and find no animals, it is not good at all.”	FGD A, R3
	Symbolism and identity	“The horn of a buffalo is worn by someone who killed it to show bravery”	FGD A, R16
	Medicinal and ritual use of wildlife	“The dung of an elephant was burned to smoke chickens... Leopard skin was used as a mattress for respected elders.” “The zebra’s brain is used to cure patients with epilepsy”	FGD C, R2 FGD D, R16
	Wildlife heritage as continuity	“So, I love animals and plead for their life, because... knowledge about animals must be passed on to our children.”	FGD A, R30A2024

The findings reveal moderate support for wildlife conservation, with an overall mean of 2.4 (SD = 1.4), highlighting the cultural attachment to animals as symbols of power and identity. However, the relatively low score for the alignment between cultural values and formal conservation indicates the need for stronger integration of traditional values with modern

conservation strategies to enhance community engagement and sustainability.

4.1.4 Wildlife Conservation Practices among the Karamojong in KNP

Table 6: Wildlife Conservation Practices

Practices	Mean ± SD
The Elder Leadership is one of the Karamojong Indigenous practices that upholds the traditional wildlife conservation practice.	2.6 ± 1.7
Restrictive hunting is a traditional practice among the Karamojong that demonstrates a wildlife conservation practice.	2.6 ± 1.7
Cultural protocols are a traditional practice that demonstrates wildlife conservation practices.	2.6 ± 1.7
Overall	2.6 ± 1.7

For practices, the overall mean was 2.6 (SD = 1.7), indicating moderate engagement with traditional wildlife conservation practices, particularly through leadership and restrictive hunting. This points to the importance of

strengthening these practices and ensuring their broader and more consistent application within the community for effective conservation.

Table 7: Subthemes, quotes and Participant on cultural practices

Theme	Subthemes	Quotes	Description of Source
Practices	Community-led regulated grazing	“People shared park resources... directed where and when to graze their cows... under surveillance of park authorities.”	FGD A
	Local hunting practices under elder control	“Long ago, there were open sessions for hunting. Controlled by elders.”	FGD E, R3
		“...the pregnant animals and those with the young are set free”	FGD C, R4
	Cultural performances as conservation education	“We even had days where cultural groups would dance in the park. That promoted peace.”	KII 3: Senior Warden Officer
	Use of local scouts for wildlife deterrence	“In 2022, there was recruitment of community scouts meant to guard gardens... but they have abandoned the work because of lack of motivation.”	FGD B, R6

	Traditional monitoring of animal movements and grazing synchronization	“Small animals like ngamemun were shepherded with cows and goats... moving with goats harmoniously.”	FGD A, R (No. A16 2024)
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The findings indicate moderate engagement with traditional wildlife conservation practices, with an overall mean of 2.6 (SD = 1.7), particularly through community-led regulated grazing and local hunting practices under elder control. This suggests the need to strengthen and ensure broader application of these practices, particularly through leadership, cultural performances, and the use of local scouts for more effective and consistent conservation efforts.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Wildlife Conservation Norms among the Karamojong

The findings of this study emphasize the strong adherence to community norms that support wildlife conservation, particularly in the protection of sacred animals and species. Karamojong's cultural practices, such as totemic restrictions and hunting regulations, reveal deep-rooted values that align with conservation goals. These findings suggest a significant opportunity to integrate traditional cultural norms into formal conservation initiatives, highlighting the relevance of indigenous knowledge in shaping human-wildlife interactions. Research from various African communities, including Uganda and Cameroon, confirms that local beliefs, taboos, and spiritual practices significantly influence attitudes towards wildlife and protected areas (Bortolamiol et al., 2018; Ngoufo et al., 2014). Such practices have historically regulated hunting and human interactions with wildlife, fostering conservation.

This study connects the Karamojong's practices to the broader research question of how indigenous norms can contribute to modern conservation efforts. Although there is a growing recognition of integrating traditional knowledge into formal conservation strategies, the implementation of modern conservation laws often conflicts with these practices, creating tension between local communities and authorities (Ngoufo et al., 2014). However, the study reinforces the value of culturally based conservation models, which have the potential to enhance the effectiveness of conservation efforts and foster stronger community engagement (Adolf et al., 2024). In practice, the Karamojong's norms provide a solid foundation for improving wildlife management policies, ensuring that local communities are actively involved in sustainable conservation.

Despite these promising findings, there are limitations in this study. The relatively small sample size and the specific regional focus may not fully capture the diversity of practices and norms across other communities in Uganda or broader African contexts. Additionally, the

research mainly focused on norms related to sacred animals and species protection, potentially overlooking other important conservation practices. Future research could expand the scope by exploring a wider range of cultural practices and how they influence conservation behavior across different African communities. Additionally, investigating the impact of integrating indigenous knowledge with formal wildlife protection policies could provide deeper insights into the efficacy of such collaboration.

This study contributes to the understanding of the critical role that cultural norms and practices play in wildlife conservation. By acknowledging the significance of indigenous knowledge, it challenges conventional approaches to conservation that often overlook local values and traditions. For wildlife conservation efforts to be truly effective and sustainable, policies must integrate these norms and collaborate with communities to create more inclusive and culturally sensitive strategies. This approach could lead to more resilient and participatory conservation practices, benefiting both biodiversity and local communities.

4.2.2 Wildlife Conservation Values among the Karamojong

The findings of this study reveal moderate support for wildlife conservation among the Karamojong community, with an overall mean of 2.4 (SD = 1.4), indicating a cultural attachment to animals as symbols of power and identity. However, the relatively low alignment between cultural values and formal conservation strategies suggests a disconnect that needs addressing. This gap underscores the need for integrating traditional values with modern conservation approaches to enhance community engagement and sustainability. This finding mirrors broader research in Uganda and Cameroon, where cultural values and traditional norms, such as totemic animals and sacred sites, significantly influence wildlife conservation efforts (Bortolamiol et al., 2018; Infield & Mugisha, 2018). These connections to nature can foster deeper community involvement in conservation, making it crucial to align formal strategies with local beliefs.

Despite these strong cultural ties to wildlife, there remains a disconnect between traditional values and formal conservation strategies. This gap reflects the challenges communities face when modern conservation laws clash with indigenous practices, often leading to resistance (Ngoufo et al., 2014). While many conservation initiatives have focused on economic incentives, these have proven inadequate in bridging the cultural gap, as they do not resonate deeply with local values (Infield, 2001). To address this, researchers

suggest that integrating local wildlife-friendly knowledge and cultural practices into protected area management plans could be an effective strategy to re-engage communities with their natural surroundings (Bortolamiol et al., 2018; Infield & Mugisha, 2018). By doing so, conservation efforts could be both more sustainable and more culturally relevant, ultimately leading to stronger community support for biodiversity conservation.

The limitations of this study include the narrow focus on cultural attachment to animals, without exploring other factors that may influence the disconnect between cultural values and formal conservation efforts. Additionally, the study did not investigate how community members perceive or resist formal conservation laws, which could provide insights into potential sources of conflict. Future research could explore these aspects more deeply, examining how traditional values can be systematically integrated into modern conservation frameworks. Understanding this dynamic could guide the development of more inclusive conservation policies that better reflect community values.

This study highlights the critical role of cultural values in wildlife conservation, particularly among communities like the Karamojong in Kidepo Valley National Park. The findings emphasize the need for policies that integrate traditional knowledge and practices into formal conservation efforts. By doing so, conservation initiatives could foster stronger community involvement and enhance sustainability, ensuring that both the environment and local cultures thrive together. This approach not only respects indigenous knowledge but also strengthens the effectiveness of biodiversity protection efforts in the long term.

4.2.3 Wildlife Conservation Practices among the Karamojong

The findings of this study reveal moderate engagement with traditional wildlife conservation practices within the Karamojong community, with particular emphasis on community-led regulated grazing and hunting practices under the guidance of elders. This indicates the necessity for strengthening these practices and ensuring their broader application, particularly through elder leadership roles, cultural performances, and the involvement of local scouts. Such strategies could enhance the consistency and effectiveness of conservation efforts, ensuring they are grounded in culturally relevant practices. This aligns with research in Uganda and other African communities, where cultural practices, including the regulation of wildlife use through totemic animals and sacred sites, have long played a pivotal role in shaping attitudes toward wildlife and conservation (Bortolamiol et al., 2018; Ngoufo et al., 2014).

The moderate engagement with these traditional conservation practices highlights the need for deeper integration of cultural values into formal conservation strategies. While traditional customs such as hunting

taboos and sacred beliefs contribute to wildlife protection, the implementation of formal conservation laws often leads to conflicts with local communities due to the perceived disconnect between these laws and indigenous practices (Ngoufo et al., 2014). As a result, current conservation efforts have sometimes prioritized economic incentives over cultural practices, which may not sufficiently resonate with the local population (Infield, 2001). By incorporating local beliefs, taboos, and knowledge into management plans, as suggested by Bortolamiol et al. (2018), conservation initiatives could foster more sustainable engagement from the community, thus improving both biodiversity protection and the alignment between modern and traditional conservation practices.

This study's limitations include a narrower focus on certain practices such as grazing and hunting under elder control, which may not fully capture the diversity of traditional practices across all Karamojong communities. Additionally, the study did not delve into the reasons behind community resistance to formal conservation laws, an area that could be explored further. Future research could examine the broader spectrum of traditional practices and explore how they influence community willingness to engage in conservation efforts. Further investigation into the integration of indigenous knowledge with formal policies, and the challenges associated with this process, could yield valuable insights for enhancing conservation strategies in the region.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the importance of traditional practices in wildlife conservation. It underscores the potential for stronger integration of indigenous knowledge into formal conservation frameworks, which can lead to more effective and culturally sensitive strategies. For sustainable conservation, policies must acknowledge and respect traditional practices, fostering a collaborative approach that benefits both the environment and the local community. By bridging the gap between modern conservation laws and cultural values, wildlife protection efforts can be more inclusive, effective, and long-lasting.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study highlights the significance of integrating indigenous cultural systems into wildlife conservation strategies in ecologically sensitive regions like Karamoja. Among the Karamojong, cultural norms such as taboos against killing sacred animals serve as informal conservation rules with spiritual authority. These unwritten norms regulate wildlife behavior through social enforcement, guiding sustainable interactions between the community and the natural environment. However, their exclusion from formal policies creates tension and limits community participation in state-led wildlife protection initiatives.

The study also demonstrates that cultural values, especially reverence for animals as symbols of power and protection, shape conservation attitudes and ethical behavior. These deeply held beliefs foster a spiritual connection to wildlife, influencing how communities perceive and respond to environmental change. Despite this, formal conservation efforts often fail to acknowledge or incorporate these values, weakening their effectiveness at the grassroots level. Addressing this gap is essential for aligning conservation goals with local moral and cultural motivations for biodiversity stewardship.

Traditional practices, including elder-led hunting and regulated grazing, are rooted in indigenous ecological knowledge and contribute to sustainable resource management. Although their application is currently moderate, these practices remain important for maintaining ecological balance and promoting community-led conservation. The fading of these practices poses a threat to both biodiversity and cultural continuity, especially among younger community members. Therefore, strengthening these practices is crucial for enhancing community-based conservation and preserving cultural identity in the process.

5.2 Recommendations

Local communities should prioritize preserving and transmitting traditional ecological knowledge through oral history, rituals, and community-led conservation initiatives. Cultural performances, storytelling, and youth involvement in wildlife protection can foster intergenerational learning and cultural pride. Community leaders and elders must engage young people in regulated grazing, cultural rituals, and conservation tasks to ensure continuity. Establishing youth conservation scout groups guided by elders could bridge generational gaps in environmental knowledge and practice.

Policymakers must formally recognize indigenous norms and governance systems by incorporating them into wildlife management and conservation frameworks. Cultural conservation practices should be supported through legal protections, participatory planning, and adequate resource allocation to community actors. Institutional collaboration with elders and local councils can enhance policy legitimacy and improve conservation enforcement on the ground. Providing training and logistical support for local scouts and elders will strengthen traditional enforcement systems and reduce conservation conflicts.

Academics should conduct interdisciplinary studies that evaluate the ecological impact of indigenous practices and their relevance to modern conservation science. Research should prioritize participatory approaches that involve local knowledge holders in the design and execution of conservation studies. Indigenous ecological knowledge must be documented and integrated into

conservation curricula, policy briefs, and practitioner training modules. Universities and research centers should create platforms to share traditional knowledge while protecting intellectual and cultural property rights.

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