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Karimojong Community Engagement in Wildlife Conservation at Kidepo Valley National Park, Northeastern Uganda

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Abstract: *This study explores the relationship between active participation, emotional attachment, and long-term commitment to wildlife conservation within the Karimojong community in Kidepo Valley National Park, Northeastern Uganda. The objective is to assess how indigenous beliefs and customs can be meaningfully integrated into formal conservation frameworks to enhance biodiversity protection and strengthen community engagement. A convergent parallel mixed-methods research design was adopted, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Structured questionnaires were administered to 243 Indigenous Karimojong community members to evaluate their levels of active participation, emotional attachment, and long-term commitment to conservation practices. Additionally, five Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were held with government officials and wildlife conservation authorities, alongside five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Local Council 1 committee members. Quantitative data were analysed using Stata 17, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using NVivo 14. Findings indicate low community engagement in wildlife conservation. The overall mean for active participation was 1.4 (SD = 0.8), emotional attachment registered a mean of 1.4 (SD = 0.7), and long-term commitment also stood at 1.4 (SD = 0.8). These results underscore the need for more structured community engagement strategies in conservation programs.* ***This*** *study contributes to the Continual Engagement Model (CEM) by highlighting the value of integrating indigenous cultural values into conservation efforts. It advocates for a collaborative approach involving both local communities and wildlife authorities, ensuring culturally grounded, inclusive, and sustainable conservation outcomes. The findings call for embedding community engagement into national conservation policies to support long-term biodiversity and livelihood goals.*

Keywords*: Wildlife Conservation, Karimojong, Community Engagement, Emotional Attachment, Active Participation, Long-term Commitment, Kidepo Valley National Park*

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1. Introduction

Wildlife conservation in pastoral communities, particularly among indigenous groups such as the Maasai and Karimojong, is shaped by a complex interplay of active participation, emotional attachment and long-term commitment by immediate community members (Jones, 2025; Ssenkaaba, 2015). These communities have long maintained livelihoods closely linked to their natural environment, developing traditional land management strategies that support human-wildlife coexistence. For example, rotational grazing and communal land tenure among the Maasai have historically facilitated sustainable ecosystem use while preserving biodiversity. However, modern conservation interventions have shifted these dynamics, often disrupted traditional practices and prompted growing calls for separating human settlements from protected wildlife areas. As Unks, Goldman, Mialhe, and Roque de Pinho (2021) argue, these contemporary conservation approaches risk undermining indigenous ecological systems and exacerbating human-wildlife conflicts.

In Karamoja, northeastern Uganda, the situation mirrors these broader trends but is further compounded by historical grievances and governance challenges (Lolem, Ngambo, Kemigisha, & Nyakato, 2025; Stites, 2022). During the 1960s, the establishment of protected areas such as Kidepo Valley National Park resulted in the displacement of many Karimojong communities. This dispossession, while aimed at preserving biodiversity, led to the loss of ancestral lands and a breakdown of traditional land stewardship. (Rugadya & Kamusiime, 2013) highlight how the lack of accessible information about land rights and conservation policies left many Karimojong communities disempowered and resentful, fueling tension between conservation authorities and local populations.

Beyond land rights, cultural practices also significantly influence Karimojong's interaction with conservation. The region's chronic food insecurity, intensified by erratic climate patterns, intersects with deeply rooted dietary norms that limit access to diverse nutritional sources. (Lolem et al., 2025; Olum, Okello-Uma, Tumuhimbise, Taylor, & Ongeng, 2017) emphasize how such cultural constraints affect community well-being and complicate external conservation agendas that may not fully consider local nutritional needs or survival strategies.

Efforts to promote wildlife conservation in Karamoja therefore face multifaceted challenges: balancing biodiversity protection with food security, recognizing land claims, and respecting indigenous ecological knowledge (Lubogo, 2024). Despite the setbacks, there is increasing recognition that long-term conservation success hinges on community engagement defined not only as active participation but also as emotional attachment and sustained commitment to engagement in wildlife conservation aspects. Yet, current research remains limited in understanding how Karimojong cultural traditions shape their engagement with conservation, especially in the specific context of Kidepo Valley National Park.

As noted by Unks et al. (2021), conservation strategies that neglect cultural sensitivities often generate resistance and undermine local ownership. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how Karimojong beliefs and social systems influence their attitudes towards wildlife conservation. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the relationship between cultural heritage, land tenure, and conservation policies in Kidepo Valley National Park. It will examine how these factors affect community engagement and offer insights into integrating indigenous perspectives into conservation planning. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to more inclusive, culturally grounded, and sustainable conservation models that align with both ecological and community well-being.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study adopts the Continual Engagement Model (CEM) to examine the Karimojong community's involvement in wildlife conservation at Kidepo Valley National Park. CEM emphasises sustained, adaptive participation through iterative cycles of dialogue, co-design, action, and feedback. It acknowledges that long-term conservation success depends on consistent community interaction, culturally relevant practices, and shared responsibility between local stakeholders and conservation authorities. The CEM draws upon principles from Engagement Theory (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998), which highlights meaningful engagement through collaborative and authentic tasks, and Practice Engagement Theory (Reder, Gauly, & Lechner, 2020), which underscores the development of proficiencies through regular engagement in relevant practices.

In the case of the Karimojong, engagement is cultivated through ongoing partnerships with traditional leaders, regular community forums (barazas), and co-management of natural resources (Ocaido et al., 2025). Activities such as seasonal patrols, community sensitisation, and local tourism initiatives serve as touchpoints that reinforce the community's active role in conservation. These actions are not one-time events but part of a structured loop that incorporates continuous reflection, recognition, and adaptation.

The cultural relevance of conservation is maintained through integrating local active participation practices, such as hunting taboos, protection of sacred sites, and customary land use rules, into formal management plans (Akalibey et al., 2024). Emotional attachment to certain species and landscapes, coupled with intergenerational knowledge sharing, helps sustain community interest and resilience over time. Regular feedback mechanisms, such as storytelling sessions, recognition of conservation champions, and visual monitoring tools, support transparency and accountability.

By framing conservation as an ongoing, co-created process, the Continual Engagement Model offers a flexible and culturally respectful framework that aligns with the dynamic socio-ecological realities of the Karimojong. It strengthens the foundation for inclusive, sustainable biodiversity protection in Kidepo Valley National Park by reinforcing community agency, ownership, and long-term commitment

2.2 Active Participation in Wildlife Conservation

Community participation is crucial for effective wildlife conservation, but challenges persist. Land tenure systems and wildlife policies significantly influence community engagement (Kipkeu, 2014). Education plays a vital role, with youth whose parents are involved in tourism-related activities exhibiting more positive attitudes towards conservation (Kioko & Kiringe, 2010). However, wildlife corridors face threats from human settlements and conflicting land uses. Minimal community involvement in planning and management, coupled with a lack of direct benefits, hinders active participation (Kiria, Ayonga, & Ipara, 2014). Also, cultural culture influences active community perspectives in participation within the wildlife conservation (Lolem et al., 2025). Equitable benefit-sharing and inclusive decision-making are essential for sustainable conservation efforts (Tarimo & Olotu, 2020). Proposed solutions include integrated conservation models, zoning for spatial conflict resolution, environmental education, and ecotourism initiatives that allow communities to benefit from protecting wildlife and their habitats (Kiria et al., 2014). Historical top-down approaches that disregard indigenous land rights further constrain conservation efforts (Ipara, Akonga, & Akama, 2005). These approaches aim to foster a sense of ownership and long-term commitment among local populations, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of conservation efforts.

2.3 Emotional attachment to Wildlife Conservation

Emotions play a crucial role in shaping human attitudes towards wildlife conservation. Studies have shown that emotional responses to wildlife are diverse and context-dependent, ranging from fear and anger to joy and interest (Arbieu, Taysse, Gimenez, Lehnen, & Mueller, 2024; Castillo-Huitrón, Naranjo, Santos-Fita, & Estrada-Lugo, 2020). These emotions can significantly influence conservation attitudes and behaviours. For instance, fear of large predators like wolves can negatively impact conservation efforts, while positive emotions like joy can foster support (Arbieu et al., 2024; Notaro & Grilli, 2022). Emotional dispositions, which are relatively stable traits, serve as criteria for appraising the emotional relevance of wildlife encounters (Jacobs, Vaske, & Roemer, 2012). Research has identified key emotional dispositions such as novelty, valence, and compatibility with standards (Jacobs et al., 2012). Understanding and addressing these emotional dynamics is crucial for developing effective conservation strategies, particularly for species that evoke ambivalent reactions (Castillo-Huitrón et al., 2020).

Research suggests that emotional attachment plays a significant role in wildlife conservation and influences human attitudes towards animals. Emotional bonds with conservation spaces, such as wildlife centres or parks, can foster pro-environmental behaviours and a deeper appreciation for biodiversity. For instance, Alias, Mariapan, Aziz, and Samdin (2023) found that visitors who formed emotional connections with wildlife centres were more likely to engage in environmentally responsible behaviour. However, the emotional landscape surrounding wildlife is complex and often species-specific. Large predators and reptiles commonly evoke fear, anger, or anxiety, while charismatic or endangered species may inspire empathy, admiration, or sadness (Castillo-Huitrón et al., 2020).

In the context of human-wildlife conflict, these emotions become particularly salient. For example, Kaltenborn, Bjerke, Vitters, and oslash (1999) showed that farmers' emotional attachment to their livestock strongly predicted negative attitudes towards large carnivores, reinforcing opposition to predator conservation. Similarly, Castillo-Huitrón et al. (2020) found that fear and empathy influenced how communities in Mexico perceived and engaged with wildlife, especially in areas prone to human-wildlife encounters. Media also plays a role in shaping emotional responses; Casola et al. (2020) demonstrated that wolf-related videos could elicit awe or fear, significantly affecting support for wolf conservation.

Recognising and integrating these emotional dynamics into conservation planning is increasingly seen as essential. Naranjo, Santos-Fita, and Castillo-Huitrón (2024) argue that the inclusion of local knowledge and emotional connections in conservation frameworks leads to more culturally resonant and effective interventions.

This perspective emphasises the need for emotionally intelligent conservation strategies that address community concerns, mitigate fear, and cultivate empathy, particularly towards species that elicit ambivalent reactions. Ultimately, understanding the emotional undercurrents in human-wildlife relationships can greatly enhance conservation efforts by fostering more inclusive and sustainable practices.

2.4 Long-term Commitment to Wildlife Conservation

Long-term commitment to wildlife conservation among African communities is influenced by historical, socio-economic, and policy factors. Colonial-era protected areas often created conflicts with local communities by restricting access to traditional lands (Tessema, Ashenafi, Lilieholm, & Leader-Williams, 2007). Attitudes towards wildlife conservation are shaped by perceived benefits, with agricultural expansion and land subdivision often viewed as more profitable alternatives (Okello, 2005). Challenges such as human-wildlife conflicts, lack of compensation for losses, and limited community involvement hinder support for conservation efforts (Okello, 2005). Among Maasai pastoralists, attitudes towards wildlife have shifted due to land dispossession, changing lifestyles, and conservation policies (Fernández-Llamazares, Western, Galvin, McElwee, & Cabeza, 2020). However, studies show that positive views towards protected areas can be fostered through providing benefits, maintaining good relations with staff, education, and addressing socio-demographic factors (Tessema, Lilieholm, Ashenafi, & Leader-Williams, 2010). Involving communities in co-management arrangements and honoring resource rights can improve community-protected area relationships (Tessema et al., 2010).

Early community-based conservation efforts were frequently marginalized in academic discourse, despite their significance (Matheka, 2005). Recent studies highlight the importance of integrating community perceptions and addressing socio-demographic factors to improve attitudes towards conservation (Katswera, Mutekanga, & Twesigye, 2022). In Uganda, community-based initiatives have shown promise in changing perceptions and reducing wildlife crime (Travers, 2021). Similarly, in Ethiopia, community perceptions and challenges to wildlife conservation underscore the need for inclusive strategies that consider local contexts (Bussa, 2023). These views contrast with exclusionary approaches and offer replicable strategies for sustainable conservation that align with local livelihoods.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed methods design to explore wildlife conservation community engagement practices within the Karimojong 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 quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the interplay of active engagement, emotional attachment and long-term commitment to wildlife conservation. The quantitative component aimed to assess the prevalence of certain conservation engagements within the Karimojong 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 practices align with contemporary conservation efforts (Ibbett et al., 2023).

3.3 Study Population

The study targeted 243 respondents, consisting of indigenous Karimojong 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 Chairman.

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The study employed a stratified random sampling technique to select 243 respondents from the indigenous Karimojong community. The sample size calculation followed Krejcie (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, active participation, emotional investment, and long-term commitment were key variables assessed to understand Karimojong indigenous systems in wildlife conservation within Kidepo Valley National Park (KVNP). This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative instruments to assess active participation, emotional attachment and long-term commitment practices related to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong living in the vicinity of KVNP. A structured questionnaire was used to explore quantitative data. To complement and validate the survey data, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with local leaders and other key stakeholders. These qualitative tools offered deeper insights into community perspectives and contextual factors influencing wildlife conservation. All instruments were pretested for clarity and 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 perceptions on their active participation, emotional attachment, and long-term commitment to wildlife conservation. 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 5 villages. The FGDs were designed to achieve saturation on the three 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 District LC V Chairperson.

3.7 Data Management and Analysis

The quantitative data were managed using Stata version 17. After data entry, the data were cleaned to identify and address inconsistencies and missing values. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were employed to summarise the key study variables (active participation, emotional attachment and long-term commitment).

Data from FGDs and KIIs were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis using NVivo version 14 to assist in organising and coding the data to identify common themes and patterns. Key subthemes and best quotes 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

Given the involvement of human participants, the study adhered to rigorous ethical guidelines to safeguard their rights and privacy. Before commencing the research, ethical clearance was secured from the Mbarara University of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee (MUST REC) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). Additionally, access to the study locations was granted by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of Karenga District.

All participants provided written informed consent after being fully briefed on the study's objectives, potential risks, and benefits. Their participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any point without facing any negative consequences. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and participant data was handled with strict confidentiality. The study was also carried out with cultural sensitivity, respecting local traditions. These ethical practices ensured compliance with national and international research standards while prioritising the safety and dignity of all participants.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Active participation in wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

Table 1: Active participation in wildlife conservation among the Karimojong (N = 243)

Active participation	Mean (SD)
I feel my community is actively involved in wildlife conservation efforts.	1.4 (0.8)
My community participates in decision-making processes related to wildlife conservation.	1.4 (0.8)
My community collaborates with government agencies or NGOs for wildlife conservation projects.	1.5 (1.0)
Overall	1.4(0.8)

Results in Table 1 show that participants reported low levels of active participation in wildlife conservation efforts. The overall mean score was 1.4 (SD = 0.8), suggesting limited active participation.

Views from qualitative data, community members reported limited involvement in conservation decision-making, marginalization in employment opportunities, and inadequate support for community scouts as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Subthemes and Quotes on Active participation in wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

Subthemes	Quote (Source)
Limited decision-making involvement	"In most meetings, they are informed, not consulted." (KII4)
Marginalised in employment	"Our youths are qualified but ignored... outsiders are employed in Kidepo." (KII5)
Poor facilitation for scouts	"How can you risk your life to sleep in the forest when you are not given anything, even soap?" (FGD B – R6)

Quantitative findings in Table 2 revealed that community members reported low levels of active participation in wildlife conservation efforts, with an overall mean score of 1.4 (SD = 0.8). Qualitative data supported these findings, highlighting limited involvement in decision-making, marginalisation in employment opportunities, and inadequate support for community scouts. These insights underscore the need for enhanced community engagement strategies to improve conservation outcomes.

4.2 Emotional attachment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

Table 3: Emotional attachment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

Emotional attachment	Mean (SD)
Indigenous knowledge is valued and incorporated into wildlife conservation strategies.	1.3 (0.7)
There are effective frameworks in place for addressing human-wildlife conflicts, reducing hostility and promoting co-conservation	1.4 (0.8)
Overall	1.4 (0.7)

Results in Table 3 indicate that participants reported low levels of emotional attachment to wildlife conservation efforts, with an overall mean score of 1.4 (SD = 0.7). These findings suggest a perceived lack of integration of indigenous knowledge and insufficient mechanisms for managing human-wildlife conflicts, potentially undermining community engagement in conservation initiatives. Views from KIIs and FGDs were indicated in Table 4.

Table 4: Subthemes and quotes on emotional attachment to wildlife conservation among Karimojong

Subthemes	Quote (Source)
Cultural heritage loss	"Sacred sites have been closed off... the community is spiritually frustrated." (KII5 – LC V)
Past harmony with wildlife	"We lived with animals... there was harmony between the community and wildlife." (FGD A – R1)
Displacement and identity erosion	"People were moved... lost dignity... depending on cows." (FGD A – R5)

Qualitative findings in Table 4 revealed that conservation efforts have led to significant cultural disruptions within the community. Participants reported the loss of access to sacred sites, resulting in spiritual distress, and highlighted a decline in traditional harmonious relationships with wildlife. Additionally, displacement from ancestral lands has contributed to feelings of identity erosion and diminished dignity. These insights underscore the necessity of integrating cultural considerations into conservation strategies to ensure they are inclusive and respectful of indigenous heritage.

Triangulating the quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a significant cultural impact of conservation efforts on the community. While quantitative results indicate low emotional attachment to conservation, qualitative data highlight the loss of sacred sites, spiritual distress, and identity erosion due to displacement. These insights suggest a lack of integration of indigenous knowledge and insufficient conflict management, which may hinder effective community engagement. Together, these findings emphasize the need for culturally sensitive and inclusive conservation strategies.

4.3 Long-term commitment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

Table 5: Long-term commitment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong (N = 243)

Long-term Commitment	Mean (SD)
There are regular workshops or training sessions in my community focused on wildlife conservation.	1.4 (0.9)
There is sufficient funding available for wildlife conservation initiatives in my community.	1.3 (0.8)
There is a clear plan for wildlife conservation activities that involves community members.	1.4 (0.8)
Overall	1.4 (0.8)

Results in Table 5 indicate that participants reported low levels of long-term commitment to wildlife conservation efforts. The overall mean score was 1.4 (SD = 0.8), suggesting limited engagement in sustained conservation activities. These findings highlight the need for enhanced community involvement and resource allocation to foster sustainable conservation initiatives.

Table 6: Subthemes and Quotes for Long-term commitment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

Subtheme	Quote	Source
Lack of compensation and follow-through	"They promise compensation... this remains a promise and nothing is done."	KII1
	"…they said, if animals eat someone's garden, it must be compensated. But since then, no one has been compensated."	FGD B – R5
Unsustainable conservation policies	"If people are not part of it, they won't support it... they retaliate by killing animals or setting fires."	KII3
	"We cannot live like this forever. There must be change."	FGD E – R8
Distrust in government/NGOs	"Communities don't see much... some projects are ghost projects."	KII4
	"They take records... but it remains there. Not being solved at all."	FGD B – R3

Qualitative insights from Table 6 further illuminate the challenges undermining long-term commitment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong. Participants expressed frustration over unfulfilled promises of compensation for wildlife-related damages, leading to diminished trust in conservation authorities. Additionally, perceptions of unsustainable conservation policies and distrust in government and NGOs contribute to community disengagement. These findings underscore the necessity of integrating culturally sensitive approaches and ensuring tangible benefits to foster sustained community involvement in conservation efforts.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings reveal limited long-term commitment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong. This is attributed to unfulfilled promises of compensation, unsustainable policies, and distrust in government and NGOs. Addressing these challenges requires culturally responsive strategies and equitable benefit-sharing to enhance community trust and sustained engagement in conservation efforts.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Active participation in wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

This study highlights a pressing concern in the conservation landscape surrounding Kidepo Valley National Park: community members exhibit low levels of participation in wildlife conservation, stemming from structural, social, and policy-related barriers. While global and national conservation frameworks emphasise the role of local communities, our findings indicate a persistent disconnect between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities. Qualitative insights revealed widespread exclusion from decision-making, marginalisation in employment opportunities, and insufficient support for community-based conservation efforts such as community scouts.

These findings directly address the research question on the extent and nature of Karimojong community participation in wildlife conservation. The low participation scores, supported by narratives of disempowerment, affirm the argument by Kipkeu (2014) that land tenure systems and restrictive wildlife policies are central barriers to meaningful community engagement. In the context of Karamoja, customary land ownership remains poorly integrated into conservation policies, limiting the community's perceived rights and roles in conservation.

Equally, the study resonates with Kioko and Kiringe's (2010) assertion that youth whose families are involved in tourism are more inclined to support conservation. In Kidepo, the absence of inclusive tourism development translates to limited exposure and benefits for youth, thereby weakening intergenerational conservation attitudes. These findings underscore the importance of deliberate investment in education and youth-oriented conservation opportunities.

The cultural dimension of conservation participation, often overlooked, is brought to the fore in this study. Lolem, Ngambo, Kemigisha, and Nyakato (2025) emphasise that active participation, emotional attachment and long-term commitment play a critical role in shaping community perspectives on conservation. Among the Karimojong, traditional livelihoods, mobility, and deep-rooted spiritual connections to the land interact in complex ways with modern conservation frameworks. The disconnect between formal conservation goals and local cultural realities may inadvertently alienate communities, reducing participation and trust.

In line with Kiria, Ayonga, and Ipara (2014), the study also exposes how minimal involvement in planning, coupled with a lack of direct economic or social benefits, continues to hinder community engagement. Respondents frequently pointed to unfulfilled promises and unshared benefits as reasons for their disinterest or opposition to conservation initiatives. This supports Tarimo and Olotu's (2020) proposition that equitable benefit-sharing and inclusive governance are essential to foster community ownership and sustainability.

Historically, as Ipara, Akonga, and Akama (2005) argue, conservation in many African contexts, including Uganda, has followed a top-down approach, often disregarding indigenous land rights and community governance structures. In Karamoja, such legacies remain deeply felt. The communities view conservation as an externally imposed agenda, rather than a co-created solution. This alienation undermines any sense of long-term commitment and ownership, further challenging conservation success.

Despite these challenges, the study reveals several actionable pathways. Kiria et al. (2014) propose integrated conservation models, spatial zoning to resolve land-use conflicts, and ecotourism initiatives as viable strategies. These approaches, along with environmental education and the revitalisation of community scouts, could enhance local livelihoods while aligning conservation goals with community engagement.

However, limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricts the ability to capture temporal shifts or measure the effects of interventions over time. Furthermore, qualitative narratives, though insightful, may not reflect the full diversity of views across all age groups, genders, or clans in the region. These limitations call for cautious interpretation and provide direction for future research.

Future investigations should explore the evolving relationship between conservation authorities and communities under changing policy environments. Longitudinal research could track how interventions, such as ecotourism development, educational outreach, or participatory land-use planning, impact community attitudes and participation. Comparative studies across regions or ethnic groups with varying cultural attributes as emphasised by Chegem et al., 2025) would also deepen our understanding of how to tailor conservation strategies to specific sociocultural contexts.

This study contributes critical insights to the discourse on community-based conservation by centering the lived experiences and cultural realities of the Karimojong people. It emphasises the urgent need for inclusive, culturally grounded, and economically beneficial conservation models. By moving beyond rhetoric to genuine co-ownership of conservation spaces, policymakers and practitioners can foster sustainable ecological stewardship while restoring dignity and opportunity to indigenous communities.

4.2.2 Emotional attachment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

This study reveals a significant emotional and cultural disconnection between local communities and wildlife conservation efforts in areas adjacent to Kidepo Valley National Park. The findings provide compelling evidence that while conservation initiatives may be well-intentioned, they often fall short of integrating the emotional and cultural realities of indigenous populations, thereby compromising community participation and long-term sustainability. Quantitative results show that participants report low levels of emotional attachment to wildlife conservation, with a mean score of 1.4. This suggests a prevailing perception of exclusion, likely stemming from conservation strategies that overlook local cultural engagement, indigenous knowledge systems, and human-wildlife conflict dynamics. This detachment can be understood through the lens of emotional disposition theory, which posits that human responses to wildlife are significantly shaped by emotions such as fear, anger, or joy, depending on personal and cultural context (Jacobs, Vaske, & Roemer, 2012). In areas where communities feel marginalized or displaced by conservation efforts, negative emotional dispositions can dominate, leading to apathy or even opposition to conservation goals.

Qualitative insights deepen this understanding by revealing the profound cultural disruptions caused by conservation interventions. Participants recounted the loss of access to sacred sites—places central to their spiritual identity—resulting in spiritual distress and a diminished sense of dignity. The displacement from ancestral lands further contributed to feelings of identity erosion and alienation from traditional harmonious relationships with wildlife. These findings resonate with Lolem, Ngambo, Kemigisha, and Nyakato (2025), who emphasize that cultural culture significantly shape community engagement in conservation. When such cultural dimensions are ignored or undermined, communities often perceive conservation as a threat rather than a shared responsibility.

The attributes of community engagement also reflect broader systemic issues, such as top-down governance and historical exclusion from land management. Kipkeu (2014) argues that land tenure systems and wildlife policies greatly influence the extent to which communities can engage meaningfully in conservation. This study's findings support that assertion, showing how restricted access and lack of recognition of indigenous rights contribute to emotional detachment and cultural loss. Similarly, Ipara, Akonga, and Akama (2005) criticise conservation models that fail to acknowledge indigenous land rights, noting that such approaches perpetuate alienation and reduce local ownership.

Moreover, emotional responses to wildlife are not uniform but are deeply contextual and species-specific. For instance, large carnivores may evoke fear and hostility, especially when they threaten livelihoods, as shown by Kaltenborn, Bjerke, and Vitter's (1999), who found that farmers' attachment to livestock predicted negative attitudes toward predators. Castillo-Huitrón et al. (2020) likewise observed that emotions like fear and empathy significantly shaped community attitudes toward wildlife, particularly in regions where human-wildlife conflict is frequent. This emotional complexity underscores why blanket conservation strategies are often ineffective; what works in one community may trigger resistance in another, depending on cultural and emotional dynamics.

Furthermore, emotional bonds to conservation spaces, such as wildlife parks, can foster pro-environmental behaviours, as demonstrated by Alias, Mariapan, Aziz, and Samdin (2023), who found that visitors with strong emotional connections to wildlife centres were more likely to adopt environmentally responsible behaviours. However, such bonds are unlikely to form when communities experience conservation as a source of displacement and cultural loss. This points to the urgent need for emotionally intelligent conservation strategies that foster positive emotional connections while addressing fear, loss, and exclusion.

In addition to emotional considerations, equitable benefit-sharing and inclusive decision-making remain critical for fostering community engagement. Studies by Kiria, Ayonga, and Ipara (2014) emphasise that minimal community involvement in planning and management, coupled with the absence of direct benefits, significantly hinders participation. When communities do not see

tangible or cultural returns from conservation, their motivation to support such efforts dwindles. Integrated conservation models that respect indigenous knowledge, facilitate conflict resolution, and create economic opportunities through ecotourism can bridge this gap (Kiria et al., 2014). These models not only reduce spatial and social conflict but also empower communities to view conservation as an asset rather than a liability.

Furthermore, education and intergenerational knowledge transfer play a pivotal role in shaping conservation attitudes. Kioko and Kiringe (2010) found that youth whose parents are engaged in tourism-related activities tend to exhibit more positive attitudes toward wildlife conservation. This highlights the potential for community-based environmental education initiatives to rebuild emotional and cultural ties to conservation landscapes, particularly among the younger generation.

Media representations also shape public perceptions of wildlife. Casola et al. (2020) demonstrated that emotional responses to wolf-related videos, ranging from awe to fear, could influence support for predator conservation. This illustrates the broader influence of storytelling, symbolism, and cultural framing in conservation messaging. Engaging with local narratives and emotional realities is thus essential in reshaping how communities relate to conservation.

While these findings offer valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The emotional attachment scale, though effective for quantitative analysis, may not fully capture the nuance of spiritual and cultural loss. Additionally, the study was geographically limited to communities around Kidepo Valley National Park, and thus, findings may not generalise to other conservation areas with different histories or socio-political dynamics.

Future research should investigate the long-term impact of culturally grounded conservation strategies, particularly those that integrate traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual practices. Longitudinal studies could help assess whether inclusive approaches foster sustained community participation and emotional investment in conservation. There is also a need to explore the emotional responses of conservation authorities to community resistance, as mutual understanding is vital for co-management.

This study highlights the urgent need for conservation models that are both emotionally intelligent and culturally inclusive. Conservation cannot succeed where it alienates the very communities expected to protect biodiversity. By integrating indigenous knowledge, respecting spiritual and ancestral ties, and addressing emotional and cultural dissonance, conservation initiatives can foster a sense of ownership, dignity, and long-term commitment. Ultimately, bridging the gap between conservation science and community engagement is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for ecological success.

4.2.3 Long-term commitment to wildlife conservation among the Karimojong

This study highlights a concerning lack of long-term commitment to wildlife conservation among communities living adjacent to Kidepo Valley National Park. The findings illuminate not just a deficit in sustained community engagement but also systemic issues tied to trust, governance, and benefit distribution that must be addressed to secure enduring conservation outcomes.

Quantitative findings presented show that participants expressed low levels of long-term commitment to conservation, with a mean score of 1.4 (SD = 0.8). This indicates that many community members do not engage consistently or meaningfully in conservation activities. Such limited engagement may stem from perceived inefficacies in conservation approaches, a lack of ownership over protected areas, and insufficient community incentives. These insights align with Okello (2005), who noted that without visible benefits, local populations often view land conservation as a less viable use compared to agricultural expansion or land subdivision. Furthermore, historical legacies from the colonial era have exacerbated this disconnect. Tessema, Ashenafi, Lilieholm, and Leader-Williams (2007) argue that the establishment of protected areas often entailed land dispossession and restricted access to ancestral lands, fostering long-standing resentment and apathy toward conservation efforts.

Qualitative data further illuminate the socio-political and emotional drivers of this disengagement. Participants consistently expressed frustration over unfulfilled promises of compensation for wildlife-induced damages. This unmet expectation has bred a profound sense of betrayal and weakened trust in conservation authorities, including both governmental bodies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Such experiences mirror the findings of Fernández-Llamazares et al. (2020), who reported that among the Maasai, shifts in conservation attitudes were often tied to land alienation and the erosion of traditional pastoralist lifestyles. Similarly, lack of tangible benefits and exclusion from decision-making processes perpetuate disillusionment and hinder community buy-in.

The results also suggest a perception among local populations that current conservation policies are unsustainable or externally imposed, further fueling distrust and detachment. This sentiment echoes findings by Bussa (2023), who identified similar discontent in Ethiopia, where communities felt sidelined by conservation initiatives that failed to consider local

socio-economic and cultural realities. Such exclusionary approaches contribute not only to disengagement but also to active resistance and illicit activities, such as poaching or land encroachment.

Importantly, these findings underscore the potential of culturally sensitive, inclusive, and community-driven conservation models. Evidence suggests that when local populations are actively involved in the management of protected areas, and when their rights and livelihoods are recognised, long-term conservation outcomes improve markedly. Tessema, Lilieholm, Ashenafi, and Leader-Williams (2010) emphasise the value of co-management structures and benefit-sharing arrangements in improving attitudes and fostering commitment to conservation. When communities are treated as equal stakeholders, with their socio-demographic characteristics, community engagement, and worldviews acknowledged, conservation becomes a shared endeavour rather than an external imposition.

In Uganda, emerging community-based conservation strategies have shown promise. Travers (2021) reports that such initiatives can reduce wildlife crime and reshape perceptions when rooted in respect for local contexts and supported by sustained engagement. This complements the work of Katswera, Mutekanga, and Twesigye (2022), who advocate for approaches that integrate community perceptions into conservation planning, especially in light of past efforts that often overlooked these voices (Matheka, 2005).

While the present study contributes valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The low mean score of commitment may not fully capture deeper emotional or spiritual dimensions of community engagement, which could be better explored through longitudinal qualitative methods. Moreover, the study was geographically focused on the Karimojong community near Kidepo Valley National Park, and while the findings resonate with regional trends, they may not fully generalise to other ethnic or ecological contexts across Uganda or sub-Saharan Africa.

Future research should explore how participatory governance and transparent compensation schemes influence long-term conservation behaviour. There is also a need to examine the impact of conservation education, especially among youth, as a way of building intergenerational commitment to biodiversity stewardship. Comparative studies across regions could further reveal how varying histories of conservation, governance structures, and land-use pressures shape community engagement.

This study reveals that without addressing the underlying issues of trust, equity, and cultural inclusion, long-term commitment to wildlife conservation will remain elusive. The low levels of community engagement in sustained conservation activities reflect deeper fractures in the relationship between conservation authorities and local populations. By acknowledging historical grievances, honouring community rights, and delivering tangible benefits, conservation strategies can foster the trust and participation necessary for enduring environmental stewardship. Moving forward, it is not merely ecological success that is at stake, but also the social contract that binds communities to the landscapes they call home.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study signals the end of an inquiry into the active participation of the Karimojong in wildlife conservation by illuminating the existing disconnect between conservation frameworks and community realities. Grounded in both qualitative and quantitative evidence, the findings tie back to the central concern of limited community involvement stemming from structural, policy, and cultural barriers. Key insights include marginalisation in decision-making, exclusion from economic opportunities, and the neglect of customary land systems and youth engagement. These findings reinforce the central argument that current conservation models inadequately integrate indigenous voices, limiting both the scope and sustainability of conservation outcomes. In light of this, the study links to broader implications regarding the urgent need to decentralise conservation governance, embed culture, and co-create benefit-sharing mechanisms. Future directions should explore participatory models and comparative studies across socio-cultural landscapes to deepen contextual understanding. There is hope that through culturally grounded strategies and inclusive policy reforms, indigenous communities like the Karimojong can transform from peripheral actors to empowered stewards of biodiversity.

The exploration of emotional attachment to wildlife conservation, this study underscores the stark emotional and cultural detachment felt by many Karimojong toward conservation efforts. These findings tie back to the research objective by demonstrating that exclusionary practices, disregard for spiritual connections to land, and unresolved human-wildlife conflict diminish emotional engagement. The assembled evidence confirms that negative emotional dispositions rooted in fear, loss, and alienation undermine conservation legitimacy and local ownership. Reinforcing emotional disposition theory, this study affirms that emotions are central to shaping conservation attitudes and behaviours. The broader implication is clear: conservation success depends not only on ecological outcomes but on emotional and cultural alignment with local communities. Moving

forward, emotionally intelligent conservation strategies that recognise indigenous knowledge, spiritual ties, and narrative storytelling are imperative. With such approaches, communities can begin to rebuild trust and emotional bonds, offering a hopeful path toward reconciliation between people and protected areas.

This study concludes that long-term commitment to wildlife conservation remains critically low among the Karimojong, pointing to deeper systemic barriers related to trust, governance, and inequitable benefit-sharing. Tying back to the research problem, the findings highlight that community members often disengage due to historical land dispossession, lack of perceived benefits, and exclusion from conservation ownership. The assembled evidence reinforces the premise that without visible, consistent gains, both economic and cultural, sustained community participation cannot be realised. This insight links to broader discourses on the importance of restorative justice and decolonised conservation planning. To address these challenges, future research should prioritise longitudinal studies examining how inclusive governance and intergenerational environmental education influence conservation commitment. Ultimately, there is hope that by recognising and integrating community aspirations, conservation can evolve into a shared journey of ecological stewardship and social restoration.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

1. Local communities and youth should promote the preservation of **Traditional Ecological Knowledge (**TEK) through cultural practices, community-led initiatives, and engaging youth in regulated conservation roles.

2. Traditional leaders should collaborate with formal institutions to integrate indigenous governance and ecological management into national conservation policies.

3. Government and policymakers should recognise and protect TEK within legal frameworks and ensure its inclusion in national conservation strategies.

4. Academic and research institutions should document and validate TEK through participatory research and ethical dissemination in collaboration with local communities.
5. Civil Society and NGOs should support TEK preservation through advocacy, participatory planning, and resource mobilisation for community-driven conservation efforts.

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