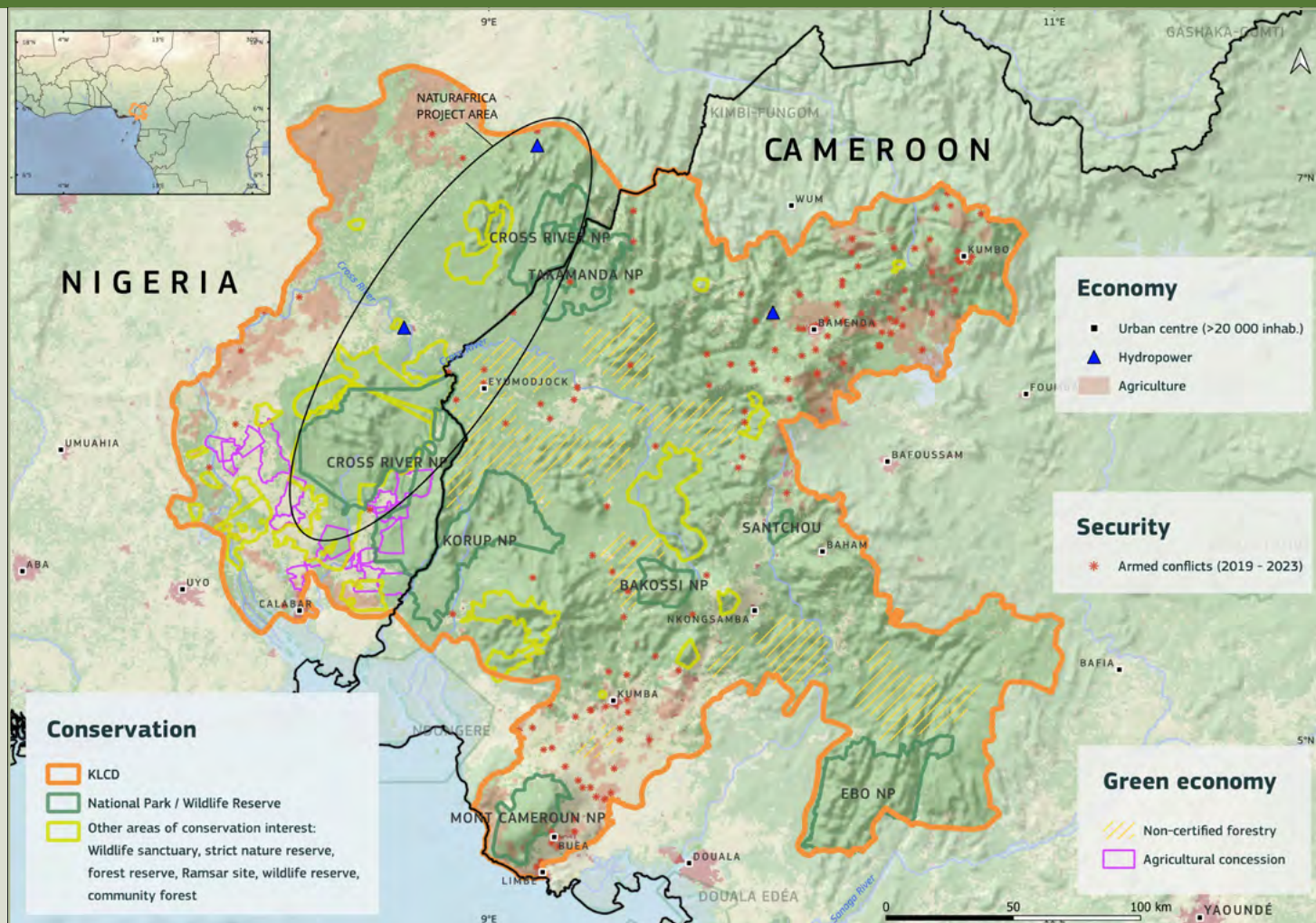


NaturAfrica West Africa

CROSS RIVER LANDSCAPE

Nigeria



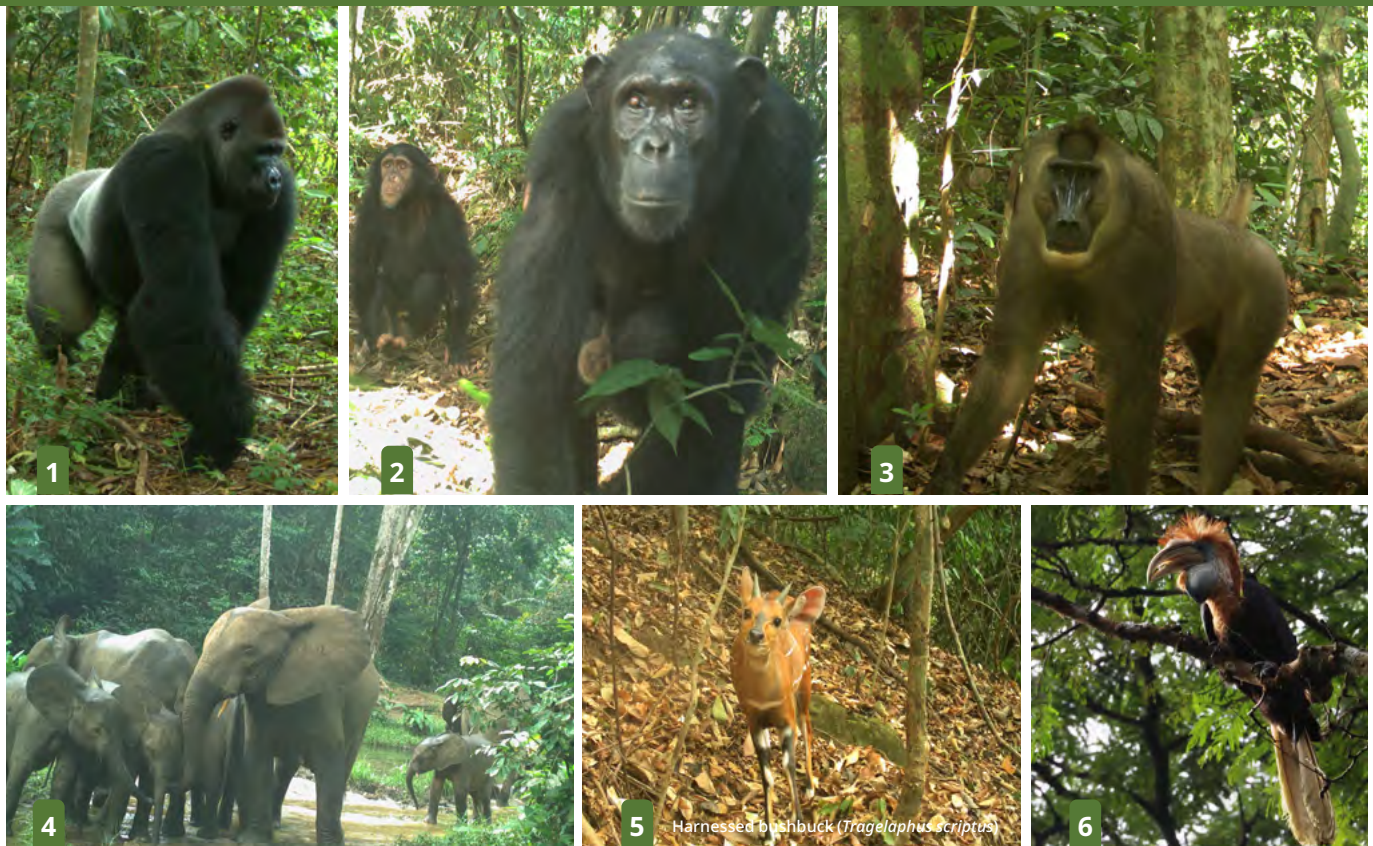
Cross River landscape at a glance

Main protected areas:	The project is implemented on the Nigerian side of the Key Landscape for Conservation and Development shown on the map. The main protected areas covered are: Cross River National Park, Mbe Mountains Community Forest, Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary, Afi River Forest Reserve and Cross River South Forest Reserve.
Ecoregion:	Cross-Sanaga-Bioko coastal forest in the Lower Guinean forests
Area:	52 269 km ²
Flagship species:	Primates including the Cross River gorilla and Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee; forest elephant; more than 470 bird species, including at least 10 globally threatened species

Objective of the NaturAfrica West Africa project in the landscape:

To ensure that the rainforests of Cross River State are effectively conserved for biodiversity and climate change mitigation, providing connected habitat, critical for Cross River gorillas, Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzees and forest elephants; conserving carbon; and sustainable livelihoods for local communities.

Project implementation period: 2025-2028



Conservation targets

- **Forests:** the sub-montane and montane forests of the Cross River National Park span an unbroken altitudinal gradient range from 150m to over 1 700m that hosts exceptional animal and plant diversity, including rare and endemic species, and serve as vital local watersheds.
- **Primates:** 19 species, including the critically endangered **Cross River gorilla** (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) (1), **Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee** (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*) (2), **drill** (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*) (3), Preuss's red colobus, and Preuss's monkey.
- **Elephants:** **Forest elephants** (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) (4) found in Oban and Okwangwo.
- **Birds:** Over 470 species recorded, with at least 10 globally threatened species such as the **yellow-casqued hornbill** (*Ceratogymna elata*) (6), mountain saw-wing, Cameroon montane greenbul, grey-headed greenbul, green-breasted bush-shrike, Mount Kupe bush-shrike, Crossley's ground thrush, white-throated mountain babbler, Bannerman's weaver, and grey-necked rockfowl.
- **Reptiles:** A rich diversity, including the critically endangered slender-snouted crocodile (*Mecistops cataphractus*).
- **Connectivity:** Maintaining ecological connectivity across the landscape is essential for fragmented populations such as the Cross River gorilla. Linking protected areas through forest corridors helps sustain genetic diversity, reduce isolation, and ensure long-term survival of endangered species.

Main threats to biodiversity

- **Agricultural encroachment.** The deforestation rate in Cross River is among the highest in the world, driven largely by subsistence agriculture and shifting cultivation. Cocoa production, in particular, has become a major driver of forest loss. Large scale conversion of forest for commercial plantations, such as oil palm, rubber, and pineapple, has also significantly impacted the region.
- **Hunting for the bushmeat trade** is widespread and wildlife populations have been largely extirpated outside of protected areas. Most hunting occurs to supply the commercial bushmeat trade, rather than for subsistence use, and most species sold are rodents and duikers (indicating depletion of larger game species). There is little or no control of the bushmeat trade.
- **Logging and forest loss.** A state-wide ban on logging was introduced in 2009, but enforcement was weak and logging remained widespread in Cross River State. The ban was later lifted, before being re-imposed. Despite these measures, illegal and uncontrolled logging continues, driving forest loss that threatens local watersheds and livelihoods through reduced water security, soil stabilisation, and diminished resilience to climate change – factors that further exacerbate rural poverty.
- **Illegal mining** is an emerging threat in and around Cross River National Park, destroying habitats, polluting rivers, and fragmenting ecosystems that sustain endangered species. The loss of forest cover undermines watershed integrity, accelerates deforestation, and compromises connectivity between protected areas. Beyond ecological damage, illegal mining erodes community livelihoods, fuels conflict, and weakens governance, making conservation efforts harder to sustain.

Ongoing interventions

Biodiversity conservation

Monitoring and law enforcement

Enhanced ranger patrols receive patrol allowances, essential field equipment and targeted training programmes to strengthen monitoring and law enforcement. Infrastructure development, including boundary demarcation, is reinforcing site integrity, while tools such as SMART and the Integrated Management Effectiveness Tool (IMET) are being deployed to track patrol performance and conservation outcomes. Active deforestation monitoring and support for the prosecution of offenders will ensure accountability and deter illegal activities.

Community engagement and awareness

WCS is establishing social safeguards and grievance redress mechanisms at each site to ensure inclusivity and fairness in management decisions. Conservation education campaigns and awareness-raising initiatives are supported to build support for biodiversity protection, complemented by innovative outreach such as a radio drama education programme. Annual stakeholder workshops provide a platform for partners to share best practices, fostering collaboration across the landscape.

Support for World Heritage Site nomination

The project contributes to the long term recognition and protection of the landscape by supporting efforts to achieve its designation as a World Heritage Site. This involves developing management plans for each site, strengthening governance frameworks, and ensuring compliance with international conservation standards.



Rangers with WCS staff in the Okwangwo division of Cross River National Park, on a track leading to an enclave village in the park.



The teacher and conservation club members at Butatong village school. The village is also the base of the national park's Okwangwo division headquarters.

Green economy development



Farmers attend a training on climate-smart cocoa agroforestry.

Supporting climate-smart cocoa agroforestry

The project is helping farmers transition to climate-smart cocoa agroforestry systems that improve productivity while reducing deforestation. By signing conservation contracts, organising farmers into cooperatives, and supporting processing and marketing, the project ensures that more value flows back to producers.

Empowering women through sustainable NTFPs

Women's cooperative groups are being strengthened through support for sustainable harvesting and marketing of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as bush mango. These initiatives, alongside small scale enterprise development, diversify household incomes and reduce reliance on unsustainable forest exploitation.

Enhancing nature-based tourism

A tourism plan is being developed for the Mbe Mountains in partnership with the local conservation association, state, local government and private sector operators. The plan will explore options for developing sustainable ecotourism and establish benefit-sharing mechanisms with communities. The strategy recognises the critical role of involving the private sector in building viable tourism opportunities.

Strengthening local livelihoods and compliance

The project promotes microenterprise development for women and youth, supports conservation-focused licensed cocoa buying associations, and partners with local universities and NGOs for research and data collection. These efforts strengthen livelihoods while ensuring compliance with the European Union Deforestation Regulation, positioning communities to benefit from sustainable trade opportunities.



A women's cooperative near the Mbe Mountains Community Forest, which collects and markets bush mango.

Strengthening territorial governance

Community-based conservation in Mbe and Afi

The project is strengthening community-based conservation in the Mbe Mountains and replicating this successful model in Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary. Support is being provided to CAMM for governance meetings, capacity building in project management and financial oversight, and for the establishment of a conservation association in Afi with 16 surrounding communities.

Strengthening community forest management committees

To tackle illegal logging and forest loss, the project is assessing existing forest management committees (FMCs) and supporting 20 across the landscape. Training and technical assistance are provided in collaboration with local community-based organisations and protected area authorities, while staff also receive training in community forest management.

Watershed management and restoration

Community watershed management plans are being developed to safeguard water supplies and biodiversity for 25 communities. Restoration activities include establishing tree nurseries to replant degraded watersheds and stream restoration initiatives, ensuring healthier ecosystems and improved resilience for local landscapes.

Reducing human-elephant conflict

Pilot measures are being tested to reduce human-elephant conflict on the edge of Cross River National Park. Working with CAMM and local communities, the project is assessing damage and implementing locally appropriate mitigation strategies such as the use of traditional noise-making methods such as firing canons to deter elephants from affected areas, while exploring other options such as chilli fences or beehive fences, guided by global best practices.



Meeting with the village chief in Wula, one of 9 communities around the Mbe Mountains Community Forest, for which a governance body ensures community-based management.



Meeting of forest management committees (FMCs) in Buanchor, a community in the Conservation Association of Afi Mountain (CAAFIM). The FMCs are being trained to improve forest monitoring and enforcement capacity.

Implementing partners

Operator: Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)

Nigeria

Nigeria National Park Service (NPS)

Cross River State Forestry Commission (CRSFC)

Conservation Association of Mbe Mountains (CAMM)

Communities



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About NaturAfrica

The NaturAfrica initiative is funded by the European Union and covers six terrestrial biomes and four coastal/oceanic areas in sub-Saharan Africa through 69 programmes (six multi-regional, 17 regional and 46 national), with more than €1.4 billion committed in its first phase up to 2025. It places human rights at the heart of its work and applies a landscape approach based on three pillars: conservation, green economy and governance.

The NaturAfrica West Africa Regional Programme supports transboundary landscapes with a budget of €41 million. It is complemented by national projects funded by the EU Commission and its Member States. The initiative contributes to the implementation of the regional environmental policies of WAEMU and ECOWAS, in particular the Regional Strategy for the Management of Protected and Conserved Areas in West Africa by 2050, as well as the 30x30 targets of the Montreal-Kunming Global Biodiversity Framework.