

Forest Reserves as Security Threats in Nigeria

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This project explores the connection between forestry and insecurity in Nigeria. Forests are not only an integral part of the environment but are also a significant factor in the continued existence of human society. It is on the basis of the centrality of forests to humanity that many countries designate portions of their territories as forest reserves. The practice predates the United Nations mandate that 25 percent of the surface area of every country be conserved under permanent forest cover as the minimum ecological requirement for the socioeconomic survival of the country and its people. In essence, forest reservation as a means of conservation is essentially a social and political issue deliberately employed by the state to preserve forests for the benefit of humanity. Forest reserves have witnessed steady growth in Nigeria since the Forestry Ordinance was promulgated as the legal instrument for the constitution of forest reserves in 1908. Such reservations have served as sanctuaries for endangered plant and animal species. In the northern part of the country, forestation has been used functionally as a bulwark against desert encroachment.

However, an emerging trend in respect of the forest reserves in Nigeria is the invasion and conversion of the forest spaces for criminal activities. Forest reserves are increasingly becoming bases for rebels to launch attacks: hideouts for armed robbers who launch attacks on travelers and traders; hideouts for thieves, kidnappers, ritual killers, criminals, and cattle rustlers; and camping sites for insurgents, as well as a base from which non-state armed actors organize guerrilla attacks against the state and/or its economic interests. The implication is that forest reserves have become ungoverned spaces that are mobilized by insurgents and criminal elements and redirected to anti-state activities.

While the extant literature on Nigerian forest reserves is replete with insightful analyses by scholars in the biological sciences, forestry, agriculture, and allied disciplines, the security dimensions of forest reserves have received insufficient scholarly attention. The centrality of forests to the Nigerian state and its citizens necessitates the need for an in-depth study and interrogation by scholars in the area of security studies. A security approach to the problems of forest reserves in Nigeria highlights factors that explain the descent of reserves into ungovernable spaces. We are compelled to examine how forests are created by the state, how they impact on communities that previously owned and used resources in the reserved area, and what role, if any, they play in the governance of reserved areas. These are important issues sorely missing from the scientific literature on forest reserves. Insights developed from the study shall pave way for policy prescriptions aimed at the effective governance of forest reserves, security of forests, and ensuring the latter serve the purpose for which they were created.