

Nigeria: Country's Newest Zoo At Gombe University

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Gombe — It may very well be that the Gombe State University Zoo, could be Nigeria's newest zoo. It also has a number of special features, as well as challenges. Our reporter investigates.

With the mere mention of the word area boy, one's mind goes to the touts commonly found in Nigerian cities, but in Gombe state university (GSU), the head of area boys is a five year old Chimpanzee that takes charge of every aspect of the university's wildlife, by controlling the small and the bigger animals that are resident within the newly established university zoo. The chimpanzee earned the name head of area boys, because of the attitude it exhibited the very first day it was introduced to the zoo. Despite the presence of small and bigger animals ranging from the porcupine to antelopes, the head of area boy scampers unperturbed within the zoo, without the fear of being attacked by the predators.

Professor Abdullahi Mahadi is the Vice Chancellor of Gombe State University (GSU) and has this to say about what informed the decision of the management of the state university to establish a zoo. According to him, "GSU has taken the issue of the environment very seriously. Hence the establishment of parks and gardens within the university, which later metamorphosed into the establishment of a Gene bank."

"The Gene bank in Gombe State University involves the collection of all species of trees right across Nigeria, from mangrove, equatorial, swamp forests to Guinea, Sahel savannah and desert."

He said the GSU Gene bank was the first of its type in Africa, and the institution was motivated to develop the Gene bank, considering the level of environmental degradation in the country, where trees were felled indiscriminately without a corresponding replacement. The creation of the Gene bank was what motivated the university to venture into wildlife, considering the fact that the two are interdependent.

The so called National parks in the country have been turned into hunting grounds for hunters. The situation is very pathetic, as most of the national parks were overrun by hunters and herders of livestock, while wildlife is vanishing. The essence of establishing the zoo in the university is to breed wildlife for reproduction, for the purpose of preservation, conservation and educating both the students of the university and the general public. "It gives us immense pleasure of fulfillment to educate the public, considering the number of people that visit the university's wildlife daily. This signifies that the zoo has started giving value for what it was established for," Mahadi stated.

One is surprised at the number of people visiting the university on daily basis, just to have a glimpse of these much talked about wild animals, in their natural habitat.

Mahadi opined that most of the Nigerian universities do not have zoos. Even the one established by the British in the University of Ibadan has died, and same fate befell public zoos established by various states government, largely due to lack of funds to feed the caged animals.

He said "in our own case, we are determined, because we are interested. Despite the fact that it costs the university a huge amount of money to run the zoo".

The University's wildlife programme that was started barely three years ago has in stock over 50 species of animals, ranging from chimpanzee (*papio cynocephalus*) to African savannah lion (*panthera leo*).

Mahadi said plans are in the offing for increasing the proportion of the animals, as well as the size of the zoo. He also revealed that this could easily be achieved, through the cultivation of a vast land that would house both the wildlife and the Gene bank. The erudite scholar commended the Gombe State government for indicating interest to support the proposed plan of the expansion, where Kupto village of Funakaye local

government area of Gombe state, which is located along the bank of river Gongola, was expected to be the site of the new project.

Hinting at how the University sourced and procured these wild animals, the Professor said some were bought from Waza game reserve in neighboring Cameroon republic , while others were donated by individuals that have interest in preserving and conserving wildlife. He said not quite long ago, an immigration officer serving in the border station of Nigeria and Cameroon, donated two crates of baboons and special monkeys to the university's wildlife, and only recently the zoo took delivery of two calf lions, as well as some antelopes.

The university bought the lions at the cost of N 1.3 million, while each of the six antelopes supplied to the zoo, cost the university about N 1 million. According to him, no amount of money invested in wildlife would be considered too much or a waste, particularly, at this point where the animals had started multiplying.

"GSU bought six antelopes, each at the cost of N 60,000 and now they are 25. The manner at which they are multiplying is fantastic", the VC added.

Very soon, the university will start disposing of these animals to the zoos across the country, that are willing to buy them. He said Keremi zoo in Maiduguri had since indicated interest, as well as Jos wildlife Park in plateau state, which was even willing to exchange antelopes for larger animals.

One of the biggest challenges confronting the university's zoo, is managing the male sex of the species, because it was not quite long ago that a single antelope killed four other male antelopes " You know they can go wild in defense of the female species", Mahadi stated. He added that the challenge or inability to bear the financial burden of feeding that consumed the first generation zoos which were largely owned by the government, is still confronting the university's zoo. The VC said, on daily basis the university spends N 5000 in buying meat remnants from an abattoir to feed the animals, and fortnightly a goat is killed for the lions. Despite the heavy burden, the university is determined to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining the zoo.

It may interest one to know that there was a researcher from Harvard University conducting research in West Africa, largely in Cameroon, who was looking for a particular specie of frog , but did not get it over the years until he visited the university's zoo.

The management of the Genebank and wildlife is a direct way of preserving and conserving African folklore, culture and history. Therefore in this regard no amount of money spent on them should be regarded as wasteful.

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