

ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH IN AFRICA: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT FUTURE

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Abstract: This research article examines the critical role of environmental research in Africa, emphasizing its significance in addressing the continent's unique ecological challenges. The study highlights the multifaceted environmental issues faced by African nations, including deforestation, desertification, biodiversity loss, and the impacts of climate change. These problems not only threaten the continent's natural resources but also jeopardize the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on these ecosystems. Key findings from this research indicate that while there has been a growing body of environmental studies in Africa, there remains a substantial gap in data and resources. The research underscores the need for enhanced collaboration among governments, local communities, and international organizations to develop comprehensive strategies aimed at mitigating environmental degradation. The study also identifies successful case studies where integrated approaches have led to improved conservation outcomes and community resilience. The implications of this research extend to policy and practice, suggesting that targeted investment in environmental research can lead to more informed decision-making. Policymakers are encouraged to prioritize funding for research initiatives that address local environmental issues while fostering sustainable development. Furthermore, the article advocates for the involvement of indigenous knowledge and local expertise in environmental management strategies to ensure that solutions are culturally relevant and effective. Ultimately, this research serves as a call to action for stakeholders across Africa and beyond to recognize the urgency of environmental issues and to commit to collaborative efforts that promote ecological sustainability and enhance the quality of life for all citizens. Through a concerted focus on environmental research, Africa can pave the way toward a more sustainable and resilient future.

Keywords: Environments; Environmental research; Africa; Eco system; Citizens; Sustainable and resilient future

1 INTRODUCTION

Environmental research in Africa plays a pivotal role in understanding and addressing the continent's diverse ecosystems, which are among the richest in the world. With over 1,500 distinct species of mammals, birds, and reptiles, Africa's biodiversity is invaluable not only for ecological balance but also for the cultural and economic benefits it provides to its inhabitants. However, this rich tapestry of life faces significant threats from various environmental challenges, including climate change, deforestation, habitat loss, and pollution. The implications of these issues extend beyond the environment, affecting food security, health, and socio-economic stability for millions of people across the continent. Climate change, in particular, poses a formidable challenge to Africa, with rising temperatures and shifting precipitation patterns impacting agriculture and water resources essential for survival. Deforestation, driven by agricultural expansion and urbanization, further exacerbates these challenges by diminishing the natural habitats that sustain wildlife and regulate climatic conditions. The loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystems not only threaten wildlife but also disrupt the livelihoods of communities that depend on these natural resources for their daily needs [1].

This article aims to shed light on the significance of environmental research in Africa by outlining its scope and research objectives. It seeks to explore the current state of environmental research initiatives across the continent, with a focus on understanding the interplay between human activities and environmental sustainability. The objectives include identifying key environmental research areas, assessing gaps in data and resources, and highlighting successful case studies that demonstrate effective conservation strategies. By illuminating these aspects, the article endeavors to foster a deeper understanding of the urgent need for comprehensive environmental research in Africa and its potential to inform policy-making and promote sustainable practices [2].

1.1 Historical Context of Environmental Research in Africa

The journey of environmental research in Africa has evolved significantly over the past few decades, reflecting a growing awareness of ecological issues and the need for sustainable practices. In the early years, most environmental studies were largely descriptive, focusing on cataloging biodiversity and natural resources. The 1970s marked a pivotal moment as the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (1972) brought global attention to environmental issues, prompting African nations to recognize the importance of integrating environmental considerations into development planning [3].

Key milestones in African environmental research include the establishment of the African Centre for Technology Studies in 1980 and the African Environmental Outlook reports initiated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in the late 1990s. These reports highlighted regional environmental challenges, such as land degradation and water scarcity, and emphasized the need for collaborative solutions. The early 2000s witnessed a surge in research initiatives, notably the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which aimed to promote sustainable development through scientific innovation and environmental stewardship.

Influential studies, such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment [1], provided a comprehensive understanding of ecosystem services in Africa and their role in human well-being. This assessment laid the groundwork for further research into the impacts of climate change on ecosystems and livelihoods. Furthermore, international collaborations have played a crucial role in advancing environmental research. Initiatives like the African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI) and partnerships with institutions in Europe and North America have facilitated knowledge transfer and capacity building, enabling local researchers to engage in impactful studies.

Understanding the historical context of environmental research in Africa is essential for grasping its current landscape. The evolution from basic cataloging of resources to comprehensive studies addressing complex environmental challenges has underscored the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches and the integration of local knowledge systems. As the continent continues to grapple with pressing ecological issues, the legacy of past research efforts serves as a foundation for future endeavors aimed at fostering sustainable development.

1.2 Current Challenges in Environmental Research

Despite the critical need for robust environmental research in Africa, researchers face a myriad of challenges that impede their efforts. One significant hurdle is funding limitations. Many research projects are underfunded or lack financial backing entirely, which restricts the scope and depth of studies. International grants and aid can be competitive and often prioritize different regions or issues, leaving African researchers struggling to secure necessary resources for local projects. This funding gap can result in incomplete studies and a lack of long-term research continuity, undermining the overall quality of environmental science on the continent.

Additionally, inadequate infrastructure poses a significant barrier to effective research. Many regions in Africa lack the essential facilities, technology, and transportation systems necessary for conducting environmental studies. This deficiency not only hampers data collection but also limits researchers' ability to collaborate and share findings with the broader scientific community. As a result, research efforts can become fragmented, and important data may remain inaccessible or underutilized, further complicating efforts to address environmental issues.

Political instability in various African nations also complicates the research landscape. Frequent changes in government, civil unrest, and policy shifts can disrupt research initiatives, making it difficult for scientists to maintain focus on long-term goals. In some cases, researchers may face restrictions on their work or difficulty in obtaining necessary permits, which can delay or halt projects entirely. This instability can lead to a brain drain, where talented researchers leave their home countries in search of more stable environments, further diminishing local expertise [4].

Lastly, data shortages are a pervasive issue in environmental research in Africa. The lack of reliable and comprehensive datasets makes it challenging to draw meaningful conclusions and develop effective interventions. Many existing datasets are outdated or limited in scope, which can skew research outcomes and affect policy decisions. This scarcity of data highlights the need for improved monitoring systems and collaborative data-sharing initiatives among African nations.

These challenges collectively impact the quality and quantity of environmental research conducted across the continent. To foster a more sustainable and resilient future, it is imperative to address these barriers through increased funding, infrastructure development, political support, and enhanced data collection efforts.

2 KEY AREAS OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH

Environmental research in Africa encompasses a myriad of critical areas, each vital to understanding and addressing the continent's unique ecological challenges. Four key fields stand out: biodiversity conservation, climate change impacts, sustainable agriculture, and pollution management.

2.1 Biodiversity Conservation

Biodiversity conservation is essential for maintaining the ecological balance and ensuring the survival of numerous species. In Africa, significant studies have highlighted the importance of protected areas in safeguarding biodiversity. For instance, research on the Serengeti ecosystem demonstrates how protected areas can support large mammal populations and contribute to ecosystem services. Furthermore, studies have shown that community-based conservation initiatives, such as those in Namibia, have effectively empowered local communities to manage wildlife sustainably, leading to increased biodiversity and improved livelihoods.

2.2 Climate Change Impacts

The effects of climate change are profound in Africa, with rising temperatures and erratic rainfall patterns threatening food security and water resources. A notable study conducted in the Sahel region examined the impacts of climate variability on crop yields and highlighted the need for adaptive strategies. Researchers found that integrating traditional knowledge with modern agricultural practices could enhance resilience among farming communities. Additionally, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports underscore the urgency of addressing climate change, particularly in vulnerable regions like sub-Saharan Africa.

2.3 Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainable agriculture is crucial for food security and environmental preservation. Research in this area has focused on agroecological practices that promote biodiversity and soil health. For instance, studies in Ethiopia have shown that intercropping and organic farming methods improve crop resilience and increase yields while minimizing the use of chemical fertilizers. Implementing sustainable agricultural techniques not only enhances food production but also contributes to ecosystem restoration and climate mitigation efforts.

2.4 Pollution Management

Pollution management is an increasingly pressing issue in Africa, where urbanization and industrialization have led to significant environmental degradation. Research on air and water pollution in cities like Lagos and Nairobi has revealed alarming levels of contaminants affecting public health and ecosystems. Effective management strategies, such as the introduction of waste recycling programs and stricter regulations on emissions, have been shown to mitigate pollution's adverse effects. Studies advocating for community engagement in pollution management efforts highlight the importance of local participation in creating sustainable solutions.

These key areas of environmental research are interconnected, reflecting the complex challenges Africa faces. Addressing these issues through targeted research can lead to innovative solutions that support both ecological health and human well-being.

3 GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND INITIATIVES

African governments have increasingly recognized the need for robust policies and initiatives aimed at promoting environmental research. These policies are crucial for addressing the continent's pressing ecological challenges and fostering sustainable development. Various nations have implemented strategies that encourage collaboration among researchers, governmental bodies, and local communities, ultimately enhancing the scope and impact of environmental research.

One notable example is Kenya's National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP), which emphasizes the importance of research in developing climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. The NCCAP encourages partnerships between governmental agencies, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to facilitate knowledge exchange and bolster research capacity. This collaborative approach has led to successful initiatives, such as the Kenya Wetlands Toolkit, which provides guidelines for sustainable wetland management, underscoring the effectiveness of government-supported research initiatives.

In South Africa, the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) has launched the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI), which aims to attract and retain top researchers in various fields, including environmental science. By providing funding and infrastructure support, SARChI fosters collaboration between universities and research institutions, leading to impactful studies on biodiversity conservation and climate resilience. A successful outcome of this initiative is the establishment of research chairs focused on critical areas like water security and ecosystem services, which have generated valuable insights for policymakers [5].

Moreover, the African Union's Agenda 2063 promotes science, technology, and innovation as key drivers for sustainable development. The Agenda emphasizes the establishment of regional research networks that facilitate collaboration among African countries. The African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI) exemplifies this approach by supporting joint research efforts across multiple nations to address climate change impacts on vulnerable populations. This initiative has led to the development of actionable policies and frameworks that enhance regional capacity to respond to environmental challenges.

While these policies and initiatives demonstrate notable progress, their effectiveness largely depends on sustained funding, political commitment, and active participation from local communities. By continuing to prioritize environmental research through collaborative frameworks, African nations can make substantial strides toward achieving ecological sustainability and improving the quality of life for their citizens.

3.1 Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a pivotal role in facilitating environmental research in Africa, significantly contributing to funding, capacity building, and advocacy efforts. These organizations often fill the gaps left by governmental and institutional bodies, providing essential resources and support for various environmental initiatives across the continent.

One of the primary contributions of NGOs is financial support for environmental research projects. Many African researchers struggle to secure funding from traditional sources, such as government grants or international funding bodies. NGOs, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Conservation International, provide critical financial backing for research efforts focused on biodiversity conservation, climate change, and sustainable resource management. By channeling funds into local research initiatives, NGOs enable scientists to undertake meaningful studies that address pressing environmental issues.

In addition to funding, NGOs also focus on capacity building. They often conduct training programs and workshops to enhance the skills and knowledge of local researchers and community members. Organizations like the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) emphasize the importance of empowering local communities through education and skill development. This approach not only builds a strong foundation for environmental research but also fosters a sense of ownership among local stakeholders, ensuring that research outcomes are culturally relevant and sustainable.

Advocacy is another critical area where NGOs make a significant impact. Through campaigns and partnerships, they raise awareness about environmental issues and influence policy decisions at national and international levels. For instance, organizations such as Greenpeace and the Global Forest Coalition advocate for policies that protect forests and promote sustainable land use practices. Their efforts help to create a supportive environment for environmental research and encourage governments to prioritize ecological sustainability.

Notable NGOs like the African Centre for Technology Studies and the Centre for Environmental Policy and Advocacy have also made significant strides in promoting research initiatives that address climate change and biodiversity loss. Their collaborative efforts with local communities and researchers exemplify the vital role that NGOs play in advancing environmental research and fostering a culture of sustainability across Africa.

3.2 International Collaboration and Partnerships

International collaboration is crucial in addressing environmental issues in Africa, where the confluence of local challenges and global influences necessitates a multifaceted approach. Partnerships between African institutions and global organizations have emerged as effective strategies for tackling ecological problems, fostering innovation, and building research capacity. These collaborations not only enhance scientific understanding but also facilitate the sharing of resources, expertise, and best practices.

One prominent case is the collaboration between the African Union and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on the African Regional Seas Programme. This initiative aims to protect marine and coastal environments across Africa through a coordinated approach that involves multiple stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, and local communities. By leveraging international expertise, the program has successfully established marine protected areas and implemented sustainable fishing practices, showcasing how global partnerships can lead to tangible conservation outcomes. Another significant example is the partnership between the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and various African governments on climate resilience projects. These collaborations focus on developing adaptive strategies for vulnerable communities affected by climate change. For instance, in Ethiopia, IIED's work with local farmers has resulted in the implementation of agroecological practices that enhance food security while preserving biodiversity. This partnership highlights the importance of integrating local knowledge with global expertise to produce effective solutions. Furthermore, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) has funded numerous projects across Africa that address biodiversity loss and land degradation. The GEF's approach often involves collaboration with local NGOs and research institutions to ensure that initiatives are context-specific and sustainable. For example, projects aimed at combating desertification in the Sahel have successfully engaged local communities in land restoration efforts, leading to improved livelihoods and ecosystem health.

These case studies illustrate that international collaboration and partnerships are vital for addressing environmental challenges in Africa. By bringing together diverse stakeholders and leveraging a wide range of resources, these initiatives not only foster scientific advancements but also contribute to sustainable development and resilience against ecological threats.

3.3 Technological Advances in Environmental Research

Recent technological innovations have significantly enhanced environmental research capabilities in Africa, enabling more efficient data collection and analysis. Two prominent technologies that have revolutionized this field are remote sensing and

Geographic Information Systems (GIS). These advancements are instrumental in addressing the continent's pressing environmental challenges, such as deforestation, climate change, and biodiversity loss.

Remote sensing technology utilizes satellite imagery and aerial photography to monitor and analyze environmental changes over large areas. This approach permits researchers to track deforestation rates in real-time, assess land use changes, and evaluate the health of ecosystems without the need for extensive fieldwork. For instance, initiatives like the Global Forest Watch utilize satellite data to provide up-to-date information on forest cover loss, empowering stakeholders to take action against illegal logging and land conversion. This capacity for continuous monitoring allows for timely interventions and more informed decision-making regarding conservation efforts.

On the other hand, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) provide a powerful tool for spatial analysis and visualization of environmental data. GIS allows researchers to integrate various data sources, such as climate data, topography, and land use patterns, to create comprehensive maps that depict environmental vulnerabilities and trends. For example, GIS has been instrumental in analyzing the impacts of climate change on water resources in sub-Saharan Africa, helping to identify areas most at risk of drought or flooding. This information is crucial for developing targeted adaptation strategies that enhance community resilience.

Moreover, the combination of remote sensing and GIS facilitates participatory approaches in environmental research. Local communities can be engaged in data collection through mobile applications that feed into larger GIS databases, allowing for community-driven monitoring of environmental changes. This not only democratizes data collection but also enhances local ownership of conservation initiatives.

In summary, the integration of advanced technologies like remote sensing and GIS into environmental research is transforming the way data is collected, analyzed, and applied in Africa. These innovations are crucial for understanding complex environmental dynamics and devising effective strategies for sustainable management of natural resources.

3.4 Community Involvement and Indigenous Knowledge

Local communities and indigenous knowledge are paramount in shaping environmental research agendas, particularly in Africa, where diverse ecological landscapes are intertwined with rich cultural heritage. Engaging local populations not only enhances the relevance of research but also fosters a sense of stewardship over natural resources. Indigenous knowledge, which encompasses traditional practices, ecological wisdom, and cultural values, offers invaluable insights into sustainable resource management and biodiversity conservation.

A prominent case study illustrating the significance of community involvement is the collaborative approach adopted in the management of the Makuleke Contractual Park in South Africa. After the end of apartheid, the Makuleke community, who were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, regained control over a portion of the Kruger National Park. Through participatory management practices, the community integrated traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation strategies. This collaboration led to improved wildlife monitoring, sustainable tourism initiatives, and enhanced biodiversity protection, demonstrating that local input can yield effective environmental management practices.

Another notable example is the work of the Kalahari Peoples Fund in Botswana, which emphasizes the integration of indigenous knowledge in climate adaptation strategies. The organization collaborates with local communities to document their understanding of climate patterns, land use, and animal behavior. By utilizing this knowledge, the fund has developed community-led adaptation strategies that are culturally appropriate and highly effective. This initiative not only empowers local populations but also enhances resilience to climate change impacts.

Furthermore, the case of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon showcases how indigenous knowledge can guide environmental research and policy-making. In Brazil, indigenous groups have successfully advocated for the recognition of their land rights, arguing that their traditional practices are vital for preserving the rainforest. Their holistic understanding of ecosystems has informed conservation efforts that prioritize biodiversity and ecosystem services, leading to more effective environmental policies.

In conclusion, the integration of community involvement and indigenous knowledge into environmental research agendas is essential for achieving sustainable management of natural resources. By valuing and incorporating local perspectives, researchers and policymakers can develop more effective strategies that address both ecological and social challenges, ultimately promoting the resilience and well-being of communities across Africa.

3.5 Impact of Climate Change on Environmental Research

Climate change is profoundly reshaping the landscape of environmental research in Africa, driving a shift in focus towards understanding the intricate interactions between climate systems and ecological dynamics. As the continent grapples with rising temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, and increased frequency of extreme weather events, researchers are compelled to reevaluate existing paradigms and adopt innovative approaches to study these phenomena. The urgency of addressing climate impacts has catalyzed collaborative research initiatives aimed at both mitigation and adaptation strategies.

One striking case study is the work conducted in the Sahel region, where researchers have investigated the impacts of climate change on food security and agricultural practices. The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid

Tropics (ICRISAT) has partnered with local farmers to implement climate-resilient agricultural practices, such as drought-resistant crop varieties and improved soil management techniques. These initiatives not only aim to enhance food production but also to empower local communities to adapt to changing climatic conditions. The findings from these studies underscore the necessity of integrating scientific knowledge with local farming practices to develop sustainable solutions.

In East Africa, the impact of climate change on biodiversity and ecosystem services has spurred significant research efforts. The East African regional climate models have been utilized to predict changes in habitat suitability for various species, particularly in protected areas like the Serengeti National Park. Research findings indicate that shifting climatic conditions could lead to altered migration patterns and habitat loss for key species, prompting the need for adaptive management strategies. Such studies illustrate the critical role of climate projections in informing conservation policies and enhancing ecosystem resilience.

Moreover, community-based research initiatives have emerged as essential avenues for addressing climate change. In Namibia, the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) program involves local communities in wildlife management and climate adaptation efforts. By leveraging indigenous knowledge and local insights, researchers have been able to develop strategies that not only protect biodiversity but also enhance community livelihoods in the face of climate challenges [6].

These case studies exemplify the evolving relationship between climate change and environmental research in Africa. As researchers increasingly recognize the interplay between ecological systems and climatic shifts, the focus has shifted towards collaborative, adaptive management approaches that prioritize both scientific rigor and local engagement. Through these efforts, Africa can build a more resilient future in the face of an uncertain climate.

3.6 Future Directions for Environmental Research in Africa

As Africa faces an array of pressing environmental challenges, it is critical to identify future research directions that address existing gaps and leverage interdisciplinary approaches. One significant direction involves enhancing the integration of social sciences with environmental research. Understanding the socio-economic dynamics that drive environmental degradation is essential for developing effective conservation strategies. Research that examines the relationships between communities, land use practices, and resource management can yield insights that inform policy and facilitate sustainable practices [7].

Additionally, there is an urgent need for increased investment in research capacity across the continent. This includes funding for local researchers and institutions, as well as the establishment of training programs that enhance skills in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Strengthening research infrastructure, such as laboratories and field stations, will also empower African scientists to conduct high-quality research that is relevant to local contexts. Collaborative funding models involving governments, NGOs, and international donors can help bridge the financial gap that often hinders environmental research initiatives (International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics ICRISAT) [8].

Moreover, future research should embrace technology and innovation. The adoption of advanced methodologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning can enhance data analysis and predictive modeling, enabling researchers to better understand complex environmental issues. For instance, these technologies can be applied to monitor biodiversity changes or assess the impacts of climate change on various ecosystems.

Interdisciplinary collaborations should also extend beyond the realm of academia to include policymakers, local communities, and the private sector. Engaging stakeholders from diverse backgrounds ensures that research is not only scientifically sound but also socially acceptable and practically applicable. Such partnerships can help translate research findings into actionable policies and community-driven initiatives, fostering a holistic approach to environmental management.

Finally, emphasizing the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in environmental research is paramount. Future studies should prioritize collaboration with local communities to integrate traditional ecological practices with contemporary scientific approaches. This synthesis can lead to more culturally relevant and effective solutions for environmental conservation and sustainable development across Africa.

4 CONCLUSION

In summary, this article has explored the vital role of environmental research in Africa, highlighting the continent's unique ecological challenges and the urgent need for sustainable solutions. Key points discussed include the multifaceted environmental issues such as deforestation, desertification, biodiversity loss, and the impacts of climate change that threaten both ecosystems and the livelihoods of millions. The necessity for increased funding, improved infrastructure, and enhanced collaboration among various stakeholders has been emphasized as a means to bridge the existing gaps in research and data.

The historical context of environmental research in Africa has shown a significant evolution from mere cataloging of resources to comprehensive studies that address intricate environmental dynamics. This shift underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and the need to incorporate local knowledge systems in research and policy-making.

Community involvement is integral, as demonstrated through successful case studies, which illustrate how local expertise can lead to effective conservation practices and bolster resilience against climate change.

Furthermore, the implications of this research extend to sustainable development and policy-making. By prioritizing investment in environmental research, African nations can develop informed strategies that align with local contexts and cultural values. This not only enhances ecological sustainability but also improves the quality of life for communities across the continent.

Ultimately, the call to action for stakeholders is clear: recognizing the urgency of environmental issues and committing to collaborative efforts is essential for ensuring a sustainable and resilient future in Africa. The integration of advanced technologies, social sciences, and indigenous knowledge into research agendas will be pivotal in addressing the continent's pressing environmental challenges.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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