Interrogating Ecological Resource Conflicts in the Benue Valley: Human Distortion of Nature as a Cause

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Abstract
Depletion of natural resources seems to have become a common phenomenon in most developing societies across the globe. In most countries of Africa, especially in Nigeria, natural resources tend to have engendered disputes characterized by recurring tussles for access and utilization of natural resources. For instance, the agricultural epicenter known as Benue valley consisting of Benue, Plateau and Taraba states of Nigeria have experienced series of mind-boggling and unthinkable bloodshed that led to thousands of deaths and displacements to avoidable conflicts over natural resources of the biosphere. This trajectory is attributable to ecological problems resulting to bio diversity loss and destruction of habitat occasioned by human distortions of nature manifest in desertification, deforestation and pollution amongst others. It is indicative that human activities such as wood extraction, air and water pollution, bush burning, grazing and poor irrigation management amongst others result in natural resource depletion with dire implications for socio-economic and environmental order. Thus, this paper interrogates ecological resource conflicts in the Benue Valley by x-raying human distortion of nature as a cause. Relying on the abstractions of eco-violence theory and qualitative data sourced from relevant literature, the paper posits that human distortion of nature results in biodiversity depletion, soil infertility and increased colossal soil erosion other undesirable changes in microclimate that culminate to depletion of natural resources which constitute a major trigger of conflicts in the Benue Valley. Such conflicts tend to create situations of terror and horror marked by killings and reprisal killings on regular basis which hampers rural development and undermines lives and livelihoods of the citizens within the area. The paper, therefore, recommends, among others, a synergy of inter-state agencies to fashion out mechanisms for preservation and protection of nature, curtailing human distortions of nature so as to curb ecological resource conflicts in Benue Valley.
Key words: Climate change, conflict, ecology, human distortions, nature

Introduction

The Benue Valley is a region located in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. It is rich in ecological resources, including fertile soils, water bodies, and abundant biodiversity. Historically, it has been a significant agricultural hub and a significant component of Nigeria's food security. However, the region has increasingly witnessed ecological resource conflicts, which have escalated in recent years. These conflicts, often manifesting as violent confrontations between agriculturalists and pastoralists, as well as clashes between communities and environmental

pressures, are largely driven by the struggle over access to diminishing natural resources (Adamu & Anwuka, 2020).

Human activities, particularly those linked to unsustainable agricultural practices, such as deforestation and rapid urbanisation, soil degradation, overgrazing, and the overexploitation of water resources, have contributed to the distortion of nature in the Benue Valley. These practices have not only led to the warring away of vital ecological resources but have also increased competition among local communities for the remaining resources (Olorunfemi, 2014). Over time, such environmental degradation has significantly affected the region's ecosystem, further complicating efforts to resolve the conflicts (Salau, 2017).

The escalating environmental and natural resource conflicts in the Benue Valley have far-reaching implications for both local and national security, with a profound impact on livelihoods, social cohesion, and regional stability. The reliance of the region on agriculture, pastoralism, and fishing as primary sources of income and sustenance has made it vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and human activities that disrupt natural cycles (Rural Development & Environment, 2019). In recent years, the rapid expansion of agricultural land, coupled with increased demand for resources such as water and pasture, has led to the displacement of indigenous communities and created tensions between farmers and herders. These tensions, fuelled by the competing needs for land and resources, have often resulted in violent clashes, leading to loss of lives, destruction of property, and long-lasting animosities among the affected communities (Ibrahim & Yisa, 2018). The ecological degradation exacerbates these conflicts by reducing the availability of resources that both groups rely on for their livelihoods, further heightening competition and deepening social divisions (Gonim, 2017).

On the whole, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the relationship between environmental change and conflict, particularly within the context of Nigeria's socio-political landscape. It will provide valuable insights into the causes and consequences of ecological resource conflicts in the Benue Valley, offering policy recommendations for both local and national government authorities to address these challenges in a manner that promotes sustainable development and social harmony (Akinyemi, 2021).

Conceptualisation of Ecological Resource Conflicts and Human Distortion of Nature

Ecological Resource Conflicts are social or political conflicts where natural resources contribute to the onset, aggravation, or perpetuation of the conflict due to disagreements or competition over access to and management of natural resources, as well as the unequal distribution of benefits, profits, or power generated thereby. Schellens & Diemer (2020). According to Homer-Dixon (1999), resource scarcity, whether due to environmental degradation, population pressure, or unequal access, can lead to social instability and conflict. He introduces the concept of "environmental conflict" as violent conflict resulting from environmental scarcities of renewable resources, such as freshwater, forests, and arable land. Similarly, Le Billon (2001) distinguishes between "lootable" and "non-lootable" resources, arguing that the type of resource significantly influences the form and dynamics of conflict.

These conflicts can manifest at various levels, from local disputes among communities to international tensions between nations. They are influenced by a complex interplay of environmental, economic, social, and political factors. For instance, environmental degradation and population growth can lead to resource scarcity, intensifying competition and potentially resulting in conflict. Temper, Demaria, and Scheidel (2018). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has documented that over 40% of internal conflicts in the past sixty years have been linked to natural resources (UNEP, 2009). From the Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria to water conflicts in the Sahel, ecological resource disputes often combine environmental, political, and socio-economic grievances. These conflicts tend to emerge in contexts where governance is weak, corruption is prevalent, and local populations are marginalised from accessing resource benefits.

Human distortion of nature refers to activities that alter natural systems in ways that degrade ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and disrupt the ecological balance. These activities include deforestation, overgrazing, industrial pollution, unsustainable agricultural practices, urban sprawl, and climate change. The distortion is often rationalised in the name of development, yet the long-term consequences undermine both ecological integrity and human well-being. Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) refer to it as Anthropocene. They coin the term to describe a new geological period in which human beings have become the dominant force shaping the planet's systems. Unprecedented levels of carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, and ecological footprint mark this period. Human activities have not only intensified the exploitation of resources but have also changed the earth's biophysical processes, making certain environments more prone to conflict. One visible example of human-induced ecological distortion is deforestation, especially in the middle belt of Nigeria. Deforestation not only reduces carbon sinks but also displaces indigenous communities, creating social tensions. Similarly, the drying of Lake Chad, attributed to both climate variability and water mismanagement, has led to severe livelihood losses and has fuelled migration and competition among communities in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger (UNDP, 2017). Modern agriculture's reliance on chemical fertilisers, monocultures, and mechanisation has altered soil composition, contaminated water bodies, and reduced genetic diversity in crops. These distortions affect rural communities, especially in Africa, where subsistence farming depends heavily on ecological health.

The relationship between ecological resource conflicts and human distortion of nature is cyclical and self-reinforcing. On one hand, distorted ecosystems increase competition and scarcity, heightening the risk of conflict. On the other hand, conflicts can lead to further environmental degradation as displaced populations overexploit new lands or as warfare damages natural systems (e.g., destruction of forests, oil spills). A notable example is the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. Driven in part by desertification and land degradation in the north, herders move southward, encroaching on farmlands. This migration pattern, exacerbated by climate change and the shrinking of grazing reserves, results in violent clashes (International Crisis Group, 2017). Here, human-induced environmental change intersects with ethno-religious and economic tensions, demonstrating the complex nature of ecological conflicts

Theoretical Anchorage- Eco-Violence Theory

Eco-violence theory, also known as environmental conflict theory, emerged in the late 20th century as a framework for explaining how environmental degradation and resource scarcity contribute to violent conflict, particularly in developing countries. The theory is interdisciplinary, drawing from political science, environmental studies, and conflict resolution. The foundation of eco-violence theory is rooted in the environmental security discourse of the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars and policymakers began to observe that ecological factors, such as deforestation, desertification, climate change, and water scarcity, were increasingly linked to social unrest, forced migration, and violent clashes, particularly in ecologically vulnerable regions. Among the scholars who have contributed to the development and articulation of eco-violence theory are Thomas (1994) argued that environmental scarcities, particularly in renewable resources such as water and arable land, contribute to conflict in developing countries by undermining livelihoods and intensifying competition. Peter (1993) posited that disputes over freshwater resources can escalate into violent confrontations, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions. Another proponent of the theory is Håvard and Henrik (2005), that presented empirical analysis linking population pressure, resource scarcity, and political violence, offering sub-national insights that supported the eco-violence hypothesis. Again, Bächler, (1999), proposed the concept of "environmental conflict" by linking ecosystem disruption to social instability and violent strife, particularly in Africa.

The core assumptions of the theory canter around the argument that environmental scarcity leads to Conflict and that population growth exacerbates resource pressure. The proponents of the theory argue that rapid population growth increases the demand for limited resources, leading to overuse, degradation, and heightened social tensions. They further argue that inequitable access to resources leads to grievances, as perceptions of injustice and exclusion can provoke rebellion. Critics of the theory, such as Marc A. Levy, in his work *Is the Environment a National Security Issue?* (1995), argues that many claims linking environmental degradation to conflict suffer from weak empirical foundations. Despite these critics, Eco-Violence Theory is considered relevant and applicable in this paper as it the dynamics of human distortion of nature as a driver of ecological resource conflicts in the Benue valley. This follows the fact that Eco-violence theory posits that conflicts arising from competition over scarce environmental resources, such as water and land, can lead to violence and environmental harm. It suggests that these conflicts are exacerbated by human distortions of nature evident in deforestation, overgrazing, industrial pollution, unsustainable agricultural practices and urban sprawl.

Trends and Patterns of Ecological Resource Conflicts

Ecological resource conflicts follow discernible patterns that are shaped by environmental, socio-political, and economic factors, particularly in fragile or developing states. The regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are mostly in this category because they are often characterised by weak institutional frameworks, which make it difficult to mediate competition over scarce resources. Homer-Dixon (1999) underscores the vulnerability of

countries with fragile governance structures, which are more susceptible to conflicts fueled by environmental scarcities, particularly when combined with escalating population pressures. For instance, in the Darfur region of Sudan, desertification, coupled with population growth, has exacerbated competition for water and arable land, resulting in prolonged violence between agricultural communities and pastoralists. In recent years, climate change has emerged as a key driver in shaping the frequency and intensity of ecological resource conflicts. Changing weather patterns, marked by rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, desertification, and rising sea levels, have significantly heightened resource stress, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions. Uexkull, Croicu, Fjelde, and Buhaug (2016) argue that climate variability increases the likelihood of armed conflict in agriculturally dependent regions, especially when failed harvests lead to heightened competition over diminishing resources. A notable example of this can be seen in the Sahel region of Africa, where droughts and desertification have exacerbated the conflict between farmers and herders, escalating tensions and leading to a surge in violence (Uexkull et al., 2016).

Two of the most sought-after ecological resources globally are water and arable land, which are at the heart of many conflicts. Gleick (1993) identifies several instances where water scarcity has contributed to international tensions, particularly in the Middle East and parts of Africa. A prominent example is the conflict over the Nile River, where Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan have historically engaged in disputes over water rights, with climate-induced water shortages further intensifying these tensions (Gleick, 1993). Similarly, land-based conflicts, often involving the displacement of farmers and pastoralists, have become increasingly frequent in West Africa Benjaminsen, Alinon, Buhaug, and Buseth (2012) reported an increase in farmer-herder clashes in the Sahel, which are closely linked to environmental degradation, competition for land, and shifts in livelihood patterns. In the Middle Belt of Nigeria, for example, conflicts between Fulani herders and farmers over land use have escalated in recent years, fueled by both climatic changes and political tensions.

Another notable trend is the scaling-up of local ecological conflicts into broader national or even transnational crises. Often, these conflicts, which initially begin at the community level, escalate due to political manipulation, identity-based grievances, or the exploitation of transnational ecological resources. Peluso and Watts (2001) argue that ecological violence must be analysed within the context of historical injustices and global economic structures that influence how natural resources are accessed and governed. A case in point is the resource conflicts in the Congo Basin, where local disputes over access to forest resources have been exacerbated by international actors seeking to profit from timber and minerals, thus intensifying the conflict.

The militarisation of ecological resources has also emerged as a significant pattern in regions where natural resources are seen as valuable economic assets. In Niger Delta part of Nigeria, oil-related environmental degradation, coupled with the repression of local communities, has given rise to militant groups seeking control over oil wealth. Watts (2004) discusses how the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has used violence to demand a greater share of the oil revenue, which they argue has been disproportionately extracted by the state and multinational corporations. likewise, in the

Democratic Republic of the Congo, rebel groups and warlords have financed their operations through control over valuable natural resources, such as coltan and timber, leading to a protracted conflict that has displaced millions and devastated the region's environment (Global Witness, 2010). However, despite the prevalence of violent ecological resource conflicts, there is a growing trend toward institutional responses that aim to address these challenges. Regional and international bodies have increasingly sought to promote cooperative frameworks for managing shared resources, with a focus on sustainable practices and conflict prevention. For instance, the Nile Basin Initiative has facilitated dialogue among riparian states over the use of Nile waters, providing a platform for negotiation and reducing the potential for violent conflict. Similarly, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, involving Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, has worked to address shared water and land resources, aiming to reduce tensions and promote cooperation among these nations (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

Manifestations of Ecological Resource Conflicts in Benue Valley

As noted earlier**,** the Benue Valley, located in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, is one of the most ecologically and agriculturally significant zones in the country. It serves as a critical food-producing region, boasting fertile land and access to major rivers, including the Benue and Katsina-Ala. However, the region has become a hotspot for ecological resource conflicts, particularly those driven by land scarcity, environmental degradation, and the impacts of climate change. These conflicts are often violent, persistent, and intricately linked to socio-cultural and political factors.

The most visible and persistent manifestation of ecological resource conflict in the Benue Valley is the conflict between sedentary farmers and nomadic or semi-nomadic herders. This conflict, primarily centered on access to grazing land and water, has intensified in frequency and severity over the past two decades. The expansion of farmlands into traditional grazing routes and the decline in available pastures due to desertification in the northern Sahel have prompted Fulani herders to move further south into the Benue Valley (Abbass, 2012). Between 2015 and 2021 alone, Benue State witnessed a high rate of deadly clashes, especially in Guma, Agatu,Logo, and Gwer-West Local Government Areas. For example, in January 2018, a series of attacks in Guma and Logo LGAs led to the death of over 70 people, prompting a national outcry (International Crisis Group, 2018). These incidents are often triggered by cattle encroaching on farmland or farmers allegedly killing cattle, leading to cycles of reprisal.

The ecological conflicts in the Benue Valley have also led to significant internal displacement. In fact, thousands of residents have been displaced due to repeated violence. As of 2020, Benue State had over 500,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), many of whom are unable to return to their ancestral lands due to ongoing insecurity (UNHCR, 2020). This displacement often leads to secondary land disputes as IDPs attempt to resettle in new areas, sometimes clashing with host communities over land access and ownership.

Environmental degradation, including deforestation, soil erosion, and river siltation, has intensified competition over ecological resources in the Benue Valley. Large-scale deforestation for farming and fuelwood, particularly in rural communities in Makurdi, Otukpo, and Ogbadibo, has contributed to declining soil fertility and water scarcity. The resulting

decline in agricultural productivity prompts communities to compete for the remaining fertile lands and water sources (Ibeanu, 2000). Herders, in response to shrinking grazing fields, increasingly move into cultivated lands, destroying crops and provoking conflict. Farmers, on the other hand, are also forced to expand into marginal lands that are more vulnerable to climate variability, further escalating the environmental stress.

In many cases, ecological resource conflicts in the Benue Valley have assumed ethnic and political dimensions, making resolution more challenging. The farmer-herder conflict has been frequently portrayed as a confrontation between the predominantly Christian Tiv farmers and Muslim Fulani herders, reinforcing religious and ethnic narratives. Political actors often mobilise these identities to gain support or to delegitimize opposing groups, exacerbating tensions (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). The Benue State Anti-Open Grazing Law of 2017, while designed to regulate pastoralism and protect farmers, has further heightened tensions. The implementation of the law led to mass migration of herders out of the state, but also to violent reprisals from armed herder groups claiming exclusion and marginalization (Amnesty International, 2018).

A dangerous manifestation of ecological conflict in the region is the proliferation of armed militias and criminal gangs, some of which disguise their activities as ethnic or resource-based struggles. There have been allegations of armed Fulani herdsmen operating with military-grade weapons, while local vigilante groups have also formed in response, leading to further violence and lawlessness (ICG, 2018). This, therefore, implies that the ecological resource conflicts in the Benue Valley represent a complex interplay of environmental degradation, livelihood competition, political manipulation, and ethnic tension. The manifestations range from violent clashes between farmers and herders to large-scale displacements, institutional breakdown, and militarisation.

Human Distortions of Nature in the Benue Valley: Drivers of Eco-Resource Conflicts

As mentioned earlier, the Benue Valley, a fertile and resource-rich region in Nigeria's Middle Belt, is experiencing increasing ecological resource conflicts. While natural factors such as climate variability contribute to environmental degradation, human-induced distortions of nature are central to the escalation of eco-resource conflicts in the region. These distortions manifest through unsustainable land-use practices, deforestation, overgrazing, water pollution, and unregulated agricultural expansion, all of which disrupt ecological balance and trigger violent competition over scarce resources.

One of the most significant human-induced ecological distortions in the Benue Valley is deforestation. Forests are cleared extensively for farming, firewood, and settlement, contributing to the depletion of vegetation cover and the degradation of soil fertility. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2020), Nigeria loses approximately 350,000 to 400,000 hectares of forest annually, with parts of Benue State being particularly affected by forest loss due to intensive agricultural expansion. This environmental change has had direct implications for resource-based conflicts, particularly between farmers and pastoralists, also known as herders. As forest areas and grazing lands disappear, herders are forced to move into farmlands, often resulting in violent clashes over land use. The International Crisis Group

(2018) highlights deforestation as a factor shrinking available rangeland, intensifying contact and conflict between herders and sedentary farmers in Benue. The increasing population of livestock, without corresponding investment in sustainable grazing systems, has led to overgrazing, particularly in areas such as Makurdi, Guma, and Logo Local Government Areas (LGAs). The deterioration of pastureland causes herders to migrate further south in search of greener pastures, leading to encroachments on crop farms (Abbass, 2012). Overgrazing also leads to soil compaction, erosion, and the silting of nearby rivers, making farmlands less productive and triggering further competition over viable lands (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

Driven by population growth and food demand, there is widespread conversion of wetlands and riverbanks into agricultural fields. In areas such as Otukpo, Buruku, and along the Katsina-Ala River, farmlands have encroached into ecologically sensitive zones, disturbing aquatic ecosystems and reducing access to water for both humans and livestock. The cultivation of riverbanks often leads to river siltation and reduced water quality, which not only affects agriculture but also becomes a source of dispute between farming communities and herders or fisherfolk (UNEP, 2011). Furthermore, the intensive use of agrochemicals contributes to water pollution, which affects downstream communities that rely on rivers for drinking water and irrigation. This environmental contamination has triggered disputes over water access and quality, particularly in dry seasons when water is scarce.

Environmental regulations in Benue State aimed at protecting natural ecosystems are often either inadequately enforced or politicised. The Benue State Environmental Protection Agency (BESEPA**)** has struggled with inadequate funding and limited enforcement powers, making it challenging to regulate harmful activities, including illegal logging, bush burning, and waste dumping. This regulatory vacuum has allowed exploitative practices to flourish unchecked, contributing to environmental degradation and, ultimately, resource conflict (Ajene, 2020). Violent clashes themselves often lead to ecological damage. During periods of conflict, communities often resort to survivalist exploitation of nature, such as overharvesting of forest products, hunting, or land grabbing. Additionally, displaced persons, particularly in Gwer-West and Guma, often settle in unplanned clusters, which puts pressure on surrounding forests and water sources (UNHCR, 2020). These distortions increase the vulnerability of already stressed ecosystems and fuel new waves of conflict when host communities resist these ecological pressures.

On the whole, the argument is that in the Benue Valley, human actions have become a major driver of ecological disruption, transforming what were once resilient ecosystems into zones of contestation. Deforestation, overgrazing, unregulated farming, and inadequate environmental governance have exacerbated the scarcity and degradation of vital resources, including land and water. These distortions not only undermine local livelihoods but also fuel recurring cycles of violent conflict. Addressing eco-resource conflicts in the region, therefore, requires urgent attention to sustainable environmental management, community-based natural resource governance, and the restoration of degraded ecosystems.

Gagging Human Distortions of Nature

Human distortions of nature, such as deforestation, overgrazing, pollution, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, are well-documented contributors to ecological degradation and environmental conflicts. However, a less explored but equally consequential dynamic is the systematic suppression or "gagging" of information, dissent, and activism that seeks to expose or address these environmental harms. This suppression can take the form of censorship, intimidation of environmental defenders, legal constraints on civil society, and the politicisation of ecological discourse. These actions not only perpetuate environmental destruction but also hinder democratic participation in ecological governance and sustainability.

Environmental activists are increasingly subjected to threats, harassment, and even murder. According to Global Witness (2022), 200 environmental defenders were killed in 2021 alone, with Latin America, Asia, and Africa accounting for most of these deaths. These activists frequently protested against land grabs, illegal mining, and deforestation. In **N**igeria, cases abound where activists and journalists exposing environmental violations have been targeted. A notable example is the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa, who led the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1990s against environmental degradation by Shell in the Niger Delta. His judicial execution in 1995 by Nigeria's military regime drew international condemnation and is now seen as a classic example of state gagging of environmental advocacy (Boele, Fabig, & Wheeler, 2001).

Many governments, particularly in fragile democracies, employ legal mechanisms to limit access to environmental information or criminalise protest. These legal frameworks are often justified under the guise of national security or economic development. In Benue State, for example, efforts by local civil society groups to monitor illegal logging or enforce environmental laws have been met with resistance from political actors who benefit from such activities (Ajene, 2020). The Benue State Environmental Protection Agency (BESEPA**)** has limited capacity to investigate or prosecute offenders due to political interference and institutional weakness. In some countries, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) are used to silence NGOs, journalists, and citizens who speak out against environmental harm. These lawsuits drain the resources of activists and organisations, compelling them to remain silent (Greenpeace International, 2021).

Multinational corporations involved in extractive industries often employ public relations strategies to greenwash their environmental records while lobbying governments to weaken environmental regulations. In Nigeria's oil-rich regions, corporations such as Shell and Chevron have been accused of funding community development projects to silence dissent over oil spills and gas flaring (UNEP, 2011). This selective appeasement masks ongoing ecological harm and delays genuine remediation efforts. In the agricultural sector, large-scale commercial farms in the Middle Belt, including Benue, have reportedly displaced smallholder farmers without proper environmental impact assessments or consent processes (Ogbodo, 2015). These developments are often justified as a matter of economic necessity, with minimal public scrutiny and accountability.

The media plays a crucial role in uncovering ecological crimes, but in many cases, journalists are censored, coerced, or co-opted by state or corporate interests. In Nigeria, environmental journalism is underfunded, and reporters who attempt to investigate sensitive issues, such as illegal mining in Plateau or deforestation in Taraba, risk threats or denial of access to critical data (Akinwalere, 2022). Governments also promote narratives of national development that frame environmental concerns as secondary to economic growth. This framing serves to delegitimise grassroots resistance and stifle broader conversations about ecological sustainability.

The gagging of information and environmental voices undermines the principle of environmental justice, which demands fair treatment and involvement of all people in environmental decision-making. By silencing those affected by ecological degradation—often indigenous peoples, women, and rural communities' policymakers risk perpetuating unsustainable practices that deepen inequality and ecological decline (Schlosberg, 2007). When stakeholders are unable to express grievances, share knowledge, or participate in environmental governance, society loses crucial pathways for innovation, conflict resolution, and resilience building. Ultimately, gagging responses to human distortions of nature exacerbate the very crises it seeks to conceal. Therefore, human resistance to environmental advocacy is a significant obstacle to reversing ecological degradation and promoting sustainable resource use. Whether through direct violence, legal obstruction, or media censorship, efforts to suppress environmental truth-telling foster impunity and embolden further distortion of nature. Environmental sustainability and justice require not only the restoration of damaged ecosystems but also the protection of civic spaces and the voices that hold power to account.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The persistent ecological resource conflicts in the Benue Valley reveal a critical and often overlooked dimension of the environmental crisis and human-induced distortions of nature. From deforestation and overgrazing to unregulated land conversion, pollution, and unsustainable agricultural practices, these distortions have destabilised the region's ecological balance. Eco-violence theory, which links environmental scarcity and degradation to violent conflict, offers a valuable framework for understanding how these disruptions, when combined with population pressure, poor governance, and inadequate institutional responses, fuel competition and conflict over resources such as land and water. Evidence from the Benue valley demonstrates how the degradation of farmlands, drying rivers, and shrinking grazing zones have led to frequent clashes between farmers and herders, inter-communal tensions, and displacement. These outcomes are not merely environmental issues but are symptomatic of broader structural violence against nature often driven by human greed, negligence, and governance failures. Thus, interrogating the ecological resource conflicts in the region reveals a deep entanglement of environmental injustice and socio-political fragility. Without acknowledging and addressing the human role in distorting nature, efforts to resolve these conflicts will remain superficial and unsustainable. Therefore, there is urgent need to strengthen environmental regulations and enforcement mechanisms to curb deforestation, pollution, illegal mining, and harmful agricultural practices. Regulatory agencies, such as the

Benue State Environmental Protection Agency (BESEPA), should be empowered with sufficient resources and autonomy to perform their oversight functions effectively. Also, there is a need for inter-state collaboration between Benue and neighboring states on watershed management, grazing reserves, and forest conservation.

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