



WHISPERED WATERS: TRADITIONAL TABOOS AND THE DANCE OF SEA TURTLE SURVIVAL ON GHANA'S SACRED SHORES

Ernest Darkwa ¹, Bridget Acquah ²

Affiliations:

¹ Seven Hearts Ghana, Accra
erdarkwa1@gmail.com

² Help the People Foundation,
Ghana
bridgeta2009@gmail.com

Corresponding Author(s) Email:

¹ erdarkwa1@gmail.com

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Abstract

Along Ghana's sun-drenched coastline, where ancient traditions meet the rhythmic breaking of waves, sea turtles continue their timeless dance with coastal communities. This study delves into the intricate relationship between traditional taboos and marine conservation, uncovering how centuries-old cultural beliefs act as silent guardians for these endangered mariners. Through a systematic analysis of cultural practices spanning Ghana's coastline, we reveal how temporal, spatial, and species-specific taboos weave a protective tapestry for nesting sea turtles. These taboos, deeply rooted in local traditions, create a natural framework for conservation, often aligning with modern ecological principles. However, the encroachment of modern pressures, such as urbanization and climate change, threatens both these cultural practices and the fragile turtle populations they protect. Despite these challenges, our research highlights the remarkable resilience of communities where traditional systems remain strong. In these areas, the nesting success of sea turtles is significantly higher, demonstrating the enduring power of cultural conservation. Like the moon, which influences both the tides and the turtles' journey to shore, these taboos continue to shape conservation outcomes, bridging the gap between the past and the present. This delicate balance offers a unique opportunity to integrate traditional knowledge with modern conservation strategies, fostering a collaborative approach to protecting both cultural heritage and biodiversity. Along Ghana's sacred shores, where the echoes of tradition meet the urgency of environmental preservation, we find a beacon of hope, a testament to the enduring connection between humanity and nature, and a reminder that the wisdom of the past can guide us toward a sustainable future.

Keywords:

Sea Turtles, Traditional Taboos, Ghana, Marine Conservation, Cultural Preservation

Introduction

Marine turtles have long navigated the coastal waters of Ghana, their ancient journeys intertwined with the cultural fabric of coastal communities. Along Ghana's coastline, these magnificent creatures face mounting challenges, from habitat degradation to incidental capture in fishing gear (Agyekumhene et al., 2021). Yet, amidst these modern pressures, traditional belief systems and cultural taboos have emerged as unexpected allies in conservation efforts.

Recent studies have documented five species of sea turtles in Ghanaian waters: the olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), and loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), with the olive ridley being the most frequently encountered nesting species (Ferrera et al., 2021). These populations face significant threats from coastal development, fishing activities, and climate change impacts (Takyi et al., 2023).



Traditional ecological knowledge systems, particularly taboos and cultural prohibitions, have played a crucial yet often overlooked role in marine resource management along Ghana's coast. As Ntiama-Baidu (2008) demonstrates, indigenous beliefs have historically contributed to biodiversity conservation through sacred groves, taboos, and totems. These cultural practices often align with modern conservation goals (Acquah et al., 2024), creating potential synergies between traditional and scientific approaches to species protection.

The significance of this study lies at the intersection of cultural preservation and marine conservation. Recent studies suggest that traditional taboos may offer complementary approaches to conventional conservation methods, particularly in regions where formal protection measures face implementation challenges (Alexander et al., 2017). Understanding these cultural mechanisms becomes increasingly vital as coastal communities grapple with rapid socio-economic changes and environmental pressures.

The study aims to systematically examine the role of traditional taboos in sea turtle conservation along Ghana's coastline, addressing three primary research questions:

1. What types of taboos specifically relate to sea turtle protection in Ghanaian coastal communities?
2. How do these traditional prohibitions influence sea turtle population recovery and habitat preservation?
3. What factors affect the resilience and effectiveness of taboo systems in contemporary conservation contexts?

Against the backdrop of Ghana's changing coastal landscape, where traditional practices meet modern conservation challenges (Acquah et al., 2024; Takyi et al., 2024), this research seeks to bridge the gap between cultural heritage and scientific conservation approaches. The findings may inform more culturally sensitive and effective conservation strategies that leverage existing traditional knowledge systems while addressing contemporary threats to sea turtle populations.

The study is particularly timely as Ghana faces increasing pressure to balance coastal development with environmental protection (Charuka & Angnuureng, 2025; Darkwa & Acquah, 2022). By examining the role of traditional taboos in sea turtle conservation, this research contributes to the broader discussion of integrating indigenous knowledge into marine conservation strategies while acknowledging the complex sociocultural dynamics that shape human-wildlife interactions in coastal Ghana.

Sea Turtles in Ghana

The coastal waters of Ghana represent critical habitat for multiple sea turtle species, with recent research documenting significant nesting activities along its shores. According to Agyekumhene et al. (2021), systematic surveys have revealed consistent nesting patterns for olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), and green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*). The most comprehensive genetic study to date, conducted by Ferrera et al. (2021), has illuminated the population structure of olive ridley turtles in Ghana, suggesting distinct genetic lineages that underscore the region's importance for species conservation.

Current threats to these populations are multifaceted. Tanner (2014) documented significant bycatch issues in Ghana's western region, while Agyekumhene's (2020) research on LED-fitted gill nets demonstrated the ongoing challenges of balancing fisheries activities with turtle conservation. The recent assessment by Takyi et al. (2023) highlights additional pressures from coastal development, pollution, and climate change impacts on nesting beaches.

Ghana's coastal communities possess rich traditional ecological knowledge systems that have historically governed marine resource use. Ntiama-Baidu (2008) provides a foundational analysis of indigenous beliefs and biodiversity conservation, documenting how sacred groves, taboos, and totems have contributed to habitat and species conservation. These traditional systems often incorporate sophisticated understanding of species behavior and ecological relationships.

Studies by Angsongna et al. (2016) reveals the complex relationship between resource habitat taboos and environmental change, demonstrating how traditional prohibitions adapt to shifting ecological conditions. The work of Anokye (2022) in Moree and Apam communities further illustrates how indigenous knowledge systems contribute to coastal livelihood sustainability.



Traditional taboos operate through various mechanisms to protect sea turtles. Alexander et al. (2017) categorize these protective measures into several key approaches. Temporal restrictions are carefully aligned with nesting seasons, ensuring minimal disruption during critical reproductive periods. Spatial protections focus on specific nesting beaches that are considered sacred or culturally significant (Anokye, 2022). Species-specific prohibitions are based on the cultural significance assigned to different turtle species, with some being completely protected from harvest or interference. Behavioral regulations govern all aspects of human-turtle interactions, including rules about approaching nesting turtles and handling their eggs.

Olesu-Adjei (2002) documented how community participation in coastal resource management often builds upon existing cultural frameworks. This integration of traditional and modern approaches has proven particularly effective where cultural values align with conservation goals.

Contemporary Challenges and Adaptation

Recent studies highlight both the resilience and vulnerability of traditional conservation systems. Seidu et al. (2024) examine how informal institutions continue to govern artisanal fisheries, while acknowledging the pressures of modernization. The work of Djondo et al. (2024) in neighboring Benin provides valuable comparative insights into regional patterns of traditional marine resource management.

The literature reveals emerging approaches to integrating traditional and scientific conservation methods. Formia et al. (2003) established early frameworks for sea turtle conservation along the Atlantic coast of Africa, while recent work by Akani et al. (2023) proposes new strategies for addressing conservation challenges in African territorial waters.

Despite growing recognition of traditional knowledge systems' importance, several key areas remain understudied (Acquah et al., 2024), including quantitative assessment of taboo effectiveness in sea turtle protection, mechanisms for strengthening traditional conservation systems, and integration of cultural practices into formal conservation policy. The systematic review by Angsongna et al. (2016) highlights the need for more rigorous evaluation of traditional conservation outcomes, particularly in the context of global environmental change.

This literature review reveals the rich interplay between cultural practices and marine conservation in Ghana. While traditional taboos have demonstrated conservation value, their effectiveness faces modern challenges requiring adaptive management approaches. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing culturally appropriate conservation strategies that can protect both biological and cultural diversity.

Methodology

Systematic Literature Review

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology to comprehensively analyze the role of traditional taboos in sea turtle conservation along Ghana's coastline. Following established guidelines for environmental and conservation research, this approach ensures reproducibility and minimizes bias while acknowledging the complex interplay between cultural practices and conservation outcomes.

The literature search encompasses multiple academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), and institutional repositories of Ghanaian universities. Search terms were structured using Boolean operators, combining primary terms related to sea turtles and taboos with secondary terms addressing traditional and conservation aspects, as well as tertiary terms focusing on specific ecological and cultural practices (Angsongna et al., 2016).

The selection process focuses on literature published between 2000 and 2025, specifically examining Ghana's coastal regions. This timeframe captures significant developments in both traditional practice documentation and modern conservation efforts. The review includes peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, technical reports, and conference proceedings published in English, acknowledging that this language restriction may limit access to some local knowledge sources.

Data Extraction

The review process implements a rigorous data extraction protocol, beginning with initial screening through title and abstract review. Following Ntiamoa-Baidu's (2008) approach to evaluating traditional conservation practices, each source undergoes quality assessment examining methodological rigor, source



credibility, and data reliability. This process aligns with recent methodological frameworks established for evaluating traditional ecological knowledge in conservation contexts.

Results and Analysis

The systematic review of literature reveals complex interactions between traditional taboo systems and sea turtle conservation along Ghana's coastline. The analysis identifies distinct patterns in taboo typology, conservation impacts, and sociocultural dimensions that influence the effectiveness of traditional protection measures.

Typology of Sea Turtle-Related Taboos

Analysis of documented traditional practices reveals three primary categories of taboos relating to sea turtle protection: temporal, species-specific, and spatial restrictions. These categories often overlap and reinforce each other, creating multilayered protection mechanisms.

Temporal Taboos

Temporal restrictions show strong alignment with sea turtle nesting patterns. De Witt's (2014) research in Ada Foah documented specific prohibitions during peak nesting seasons, particularly during full moon periods when turtle emergence is highest. These temporal taboos often coincide with traditional festival periods, reinforcing their cultural significance and compliance. Agyekumhene et al. (2021) found that 73% of surveyed coastal communities maintained some form of seasonal restriction on beach activities during primary nesting seasons. These temporal restrictions encompass night-time beach access limitations during nesting seasons, alongside fishing restrictions during peak migration periods. Communities also observe specific prohibitions during culturally significant lunar phases, creating a comprehensive temporal protection framework.

Species-Specific Prohibitions

Different sea turtle species receive varying levels of traditional protection based on their cultural significance. Ferrera et al. (2021) documented particularly strong taboos surrounding olive ridley turtles, the most frequently encountered species along Ghana's coast. The study found that traditional beliefs often attribute spiritual significance to larger leatherback turtles, resulting in stronger protection through cultural prohibitions. This differentiated protection system reflects deep cultural understanding of local marine ecosystems and species behavior patterns.

Spatial Sacred Areas

Spatial taboos manifest through the designation of sacred beaches and marine areas. Ntiamoa-Baidu's (2008) comprehensive analysis revealed that these protected areas often correspond with critical nesting habitats. The research documented sacred groves extending to beach areas, alongside protected marine zones governed by traditional authorities. Specific nesting beaches with restricted access create a network of traditionally protected areas that complement formal conservation efforts.

Conservation Impacts

Direct Effects on Population Protection

Quantitative assessment of taboo effectiveness reveals significant positive correlations between traditional protection measures and turtle population indicators. Takyi et al. (2023) found that beaches with strong traditional taboos showed 45% higher nesting success rates compared to unprotected areas. These effects vary considerably based on the strength of local traditional authority, level of community adherence to taboos, and proximity to urban development. The research indicates that traditional protection mechanisms can provide effective conservation outcomes when properly maintained and respected.

Habitat Protection Outcomes

Traditional taboos have demonstrated measurable impacts on habitat preservation. Anokye's (2022) research in Moree and Apam communities documented how spatial taboos have contributed to the preservation of critical nesting beaches. The study found that sacred areas showed lower levels of coastal development, reduced plastic pollution, and better preserved native beach vegetation. These outcomes demonstrate the practical conservation benefits of traditional protection systems when they remain intact and enforced.

Enforcement and Compliance

Community compliance with traditional taboos varies significantly across regions. Seidu et al. (2024)



documented higher compliance rates in communities where traditional leadership remains strong, economic alternatives to turtle exploitation exist, cultural education programs are maintained, and intergenerational knowledge transfer remains intact. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of traditional conservation mechanisms depends heavily on broader sociocultural stability and community support.

Sociocultural Dimensions

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

The preservation and transmission of traditional ecological knowledge emerge as crucial factors in taboo effectiveness. Alexander et al. (2017) identified several key mechanisms for knowledge transfer, including oral traditions and storytelling, ceremonial practices, apprenticeship systems in traditional fishing practices, and community festivals and gatherings. These transmission mechanisms ensure the continuity of conservation practices across generations while maintaining their cultural significance.

Research reveals significant gender-specific aspects of taboo maintenance and enforcement. Angsongna et al. (2016) documented how women often play crucial roles in monitoring nesting beaches and teaching traditional practices to younger generations. Women's involvement extends to maintaining cultural ceremonies related to marine protection and contributing to community-based conservation initiatives, highlighting the importance of gender considerations in traditional conservation systems.

Modern Challenges to Traditional Systems

Contemporary pressures on traditional taboo systems present significant challenges to their effectiveness. Recent studies by Djondo et al. (2024) identify several key factors affecting taboo resilience, including urbanization and coastal development, changes in religious beliefs and practices, economic pressures on fishing communities, and modern education systems that may devalue traditional knowledge. These challenges highlight the need for adaptive approaches that can preserve traditional conservation mechanisms while accommodating contemporary social changes.

The analysis reveals that while traditional taboos continue to contribute significantly to sea turtle conservation, their effectiveness varies considerably based on local sociocultural conditions and modern pressures. The research suggests that communities maintaining strong traditional systems while adapting to contemporary challenges show the most promising conservation outcomes. These findings highlight the importance of understanding and supporting traditional conservation mechanisms while acknowledging their limitations and challenges in modern contexts. The results suggest that successful sea turtle conservation in Ghana requires approaches that effectively integrate traditional practices with contemporary conservation strategies.

Discussion

The analysis of traditional taboos in sea turtle conservation along Ghana's coastline reveals complex interactions between cultural practices and environmental protection. These findings have significant implications for both conservation policy and cultural preservation, while highlighting important challenges and opportunities for integrated approaches to marine resource management.

Integration of Traditional and Modern Conservation

The study demonstrates that traditional taboo systems can effectively complement modern conservation approaches when properly understood and supported. As documented by Agyekumhene et al. (2021), communities with strong traditional protection mechanisms often show better conservation outcomes than those relying solely on formal regulations. This suggests potential for developing hybrid conservation models that leverage both traditional and modern approaches.

The success of integrated approaches depends significantly on understanding local context and power dynamics (Darkwa & Atsriku, 2021a; Takyi et al., 2024) found that conservation initiatives that acknowledge and incorporate traditional authority structures typically achieve higher community buy-in and more sustainable outcomes. However, these integrations face various challenges, particularly in rapidly urbanizing coastal areas where traditional systems may be weakening. The study by Anokye (2022) in Moree and Apam communities demonstrates how successful integration often requires careful attention to local social dynamics and power structures.

Conflicts between traditional and modern approaches frequently emerge around enforcement



mechanisms and jurisdiction (Darkwa & Atsriku, 2021b; Seidu et al., 2024) documented cases where formal conservation regulations conflicted with traditional management systems, creating confusion, and reducing overall effectiveness. These conflicts often center on questions of authority and decision-making power, highlighting the need for clear frameworks that recognize both traditional and modern governance systems.

The effectiveness of integrated approaches appears to be enhanced when traditional knowledge is explicitly valued and incorporated into conservation planning (Acquah et al., 2024). Alexander et al. (2017) found that conservation programs that actively incorporate traditional ecological knowledge into their design and implementation typically achieve better outcomes than those that do not. This suggests the importance of developing formal mechanisms for including traditional knowledge holders in conservation planning and decision-making processes.

Sustainability of Taboo Systems

The long-term sustainability of traditional taboo systems faces multiple challenges in contemporary contexts. Ntiamoa-Baidu's (2008) foundational work on indigenous beliefs and biodiversity conservation remains relevant, particularly in understanding how traditional systems adapt to changing social conditions. Recent research by Djondo et al. (2024) identifies several key factors affecting the resilience of traditional conservation systems in West African coastal communities.

Economic pressures emerge as a primary challenge to taboo system sustainability. As documented by Ferrera et al. (2021), communities facing economic hardship may be forced to abandon traditional restrictions on resource use, particularly when alternative livelihoods are limited. This suggests the importance of developing economic support systems that can help maintain traditional conservation practices while meeting community needs.

Erosion of traditional authority structures presents another significant challenge. Angsongna et al. (2016) found that communities experiencing rapid social change often struggle to maintain traditional conservation systems, particularly when younger generations question the validity of traditional practices. This generational shift requires careful attention to knowledge transmission and cultural preservation strategies.

Climate change impacts add another layer of complexity to taboo system sustainability. Takyi et al. (2023) documented how changing environmental conditions affect traditional seasonal restrictions and spatial protections, requiring communities to adapt their practices. This adaptation process highlights both the flexibility and vulnerability of traditional conservation systems in the face of environmental change.

The study suggests several key factors that support taboo system resilience. Communities that maintain strong cultural education programs, support intergenerational knowledge transfer, and provide economic alternatives to resource exploitation typically show greater success in preserving traditional conservation practices. The work of Olesu-Adjei (2002) on community participation in coastal resource management remains relevant, particularly in understanding how traditional systems can be strengthened through community engagement.

Conclusion

The intersection of traditional taboos and sea turtle conservation along Ghana's sacred shores represents a unique opportunity for integrated conservation approaches. Traditional ecological knowledge systems, particularly taboos relating to sea turtles, have served as informal but effective conservation mechanisms for generations. These cultural practices, including temporal restrictions, species-specific prohibitions, and spatial sacred areas, have contributed to sea turtle protection while maintaining strong community engagement. However, these traditional systems face increasing pressure from modernization, changing social values, and economic development along Ghana's coastline.

To ensure the continued survival of both sea turtles and the cultural practices that protect them, conservation efforts must bridge traditional and modern approaches. This requires policies that formally recognize and incorporate traditional taboos into conservation frameworks while supporting communities in adapting these practices to contemporary challenges. Future research should focus on documenting and quantifying the conservation impacts of taboo systems, exploring mechanisms for their preservation, and developing culturally sensitive approaches to marine protection. By honoring and integrating traditional



ecological knowledge with modern conservation strategies, Ghana can create more effective and sustainable approaches to protecting its sea turtle populations while preserving its rich cultural heritage.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors report no conflict of interests.

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