

Oromo Traditional Attitudes towards Natural Resource protection; the case of Abbay Choman and Horro districts, western Ethiopia (Forest, Wildlife and Soil in focus)

¹Misganu Gabayo*

¹Center for studies of Environment and Society, Wollega university, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT: *Oromo indigenous knowledge (IK) and attitudes towards protection and conservation practices is essential for the sustainable natural resources and health of the environment and its inhabitants. This study deals with Oromo IK and attitudes toward Natural Environmental protection with the focus on the natural resources that have been thought as fundamental and vital of their entire lives (water, soil forest and wildlife in focus). This study employed qualitative research method. The result of study revealed that traditionally, Oromo attitude towards natural resources protection and indigenous environmental knowledge embedded in their worldviews, and they have been maintain a wise use of natural resources through their course of life which transfer from generation to generation. They know the sustainable use of Natural resources and live in harmony with the nature. Their Ik of laws of, and customary laws, norms, values, and the concept of “Safuu” in their worldviews guide their entire actions and relations in the use of natural resources. However, in recent time the attitudes of local community the conservation of natural resources were deteriorated. Hence, this study recommends that the government and stakeholder should take adequate steps to focus on mainstreaming IK and best practices to enhance the capacity of community for its adoption and application in environmental protection.*

KEYWORDS: *Environment, Natural resources, Indigenous knowledge; Oromo Worldview*

Date of Submission: 25-08-2020

Date of Acceptance: 09-09-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional knowledge (TK) is an important component in improving livelihoods, management of natural resources (Mackinson and Nottestad, 1998, and practices related to the protection of ecosystems and species (Shackeroff and Campbell, 2007). This type of knowledge is developed by local communities through experiences of adapting to their environment. It is dynamic and continuously modified, but very little attention has been focused on understanding the changes resulting from adaptations to new environmental, cultural, social, and economic conditions (Garcia, 2013). Africans had conservationist values, practices, and ways of life. Their views and thoughts on ontology, cosmology, medicine and healing, and religious practices supported their moral attitudes toward the conservation and preservation of nature. Traditionally, they thought sees nature as holistic and as an interconnected continuum of humans and all natural objects which exist in harmony.

Oromo are a Cushitic people who live in the East African region known as the Horn of Africa. They develop and governed by Gada system which known as African classical democracy. *Gadaa* system, it implies system of political, judicial, legislative, spiritual, and economic leadership. It is one of the pillar identity symbols the people of Oromo identify themselves with and it influences their social and environmental relationships and over all conception of reality. Also it regulates their social, economic and political life. Then in this Gada system they possess accumulated practical knowledge of their environment through experience and productive activity. They have developed complex systems of agriculture and intensive soil, water, vegetation and wildlife management and protection that have survived the test of time and the vagaries of environment. In their history they live and expand their settle at green environment and fertile land. Also they close to nature and guided by indigenous tradition addressing the dynamic human nature interaction (Workineh, 2001). Oromo recognize their cultural relations to nature and are conscious of the power that regulates them to nature (Debelo, 2012). According to Debelo, their wisdom of interaction between human and non-human nature is guided by their customary knowledge. In Oromo tradition, environmental ideas are clearly viewed. For example, the Oromo land according to (de Salviac 2005, pp. 21–22) is “an oasis luxuriant with large trees and known for its opulent and dark greenery used to shoot up from the soil”. As the day to day lives of the people chiefly depend on their environment, they share lots of experiences to members of community through different genres of their tradition. In keeping and protecting green environment the relationship of locals with environment, their

traditional and cultural views of the environment, their ethics and indigenous knowledge is plays great role in keeping and protecting the natural environmental resources and save green environment to the next generation. Environment and natural resources are always the fundamental concern of the rural people.

The today generation views and interest to use of indigenous knowledge and moral/safuu for natural resources conservation and protection are very low. Literatures show that Oromo society is very sensitive to their environment and when they used different natural resources; their intension is not only on the short period benefit, they think about the sustainability of the resource (Desalegn, 2013). Despite Oromo traditional local attitudes and practices of indigenous way of environmental protection is very interesting and guarantee for environmental protection. Also they are very sensitive to environment and natural resources during their cultural celebration, rituals, folks, and way of using resources, in Ethiopia including the study area environmental problem is at an alarming rate. Also none of studies were not undertaken in the area on the area of keeping and conserving the environment and natural resources by using Indigenous knowledge and best practices of locals then this study was undertaken based on this research gap to generate attention from concerning bodies to keeping both oromo indigenous knowledge which is on the verge of deterioration and environment and natural resources which is distracting at an alarming rate for future sustainability.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1 The study area

The study was conducted in Horro Guduru Wollega zone. Horro Guduru Wollega zone is one of the oromia zones. It is named after the former province of Wollega. The seat of the zonal administration is in shambu. Administratively, the zone has a total of 11 Districts and one urban administrative town. The landscape of the zone is belongs to the fourteen offspring of Horro and seven offspring of Guduru (Alemayehu, 2006). The landscape has diverse relief features. Within its total area of about 8213.56km², the area has an average elevation ranging between 1850-3300m above mean sea level, a vast plateau land (58.56%), very small proportion of low lands (23.76%), mountains (6.64%), and other topographic features (11.04%) Firdissa, 2007) Forests comprise about 16% of the landmass of Horro Guduru (Lemessa, (2014).

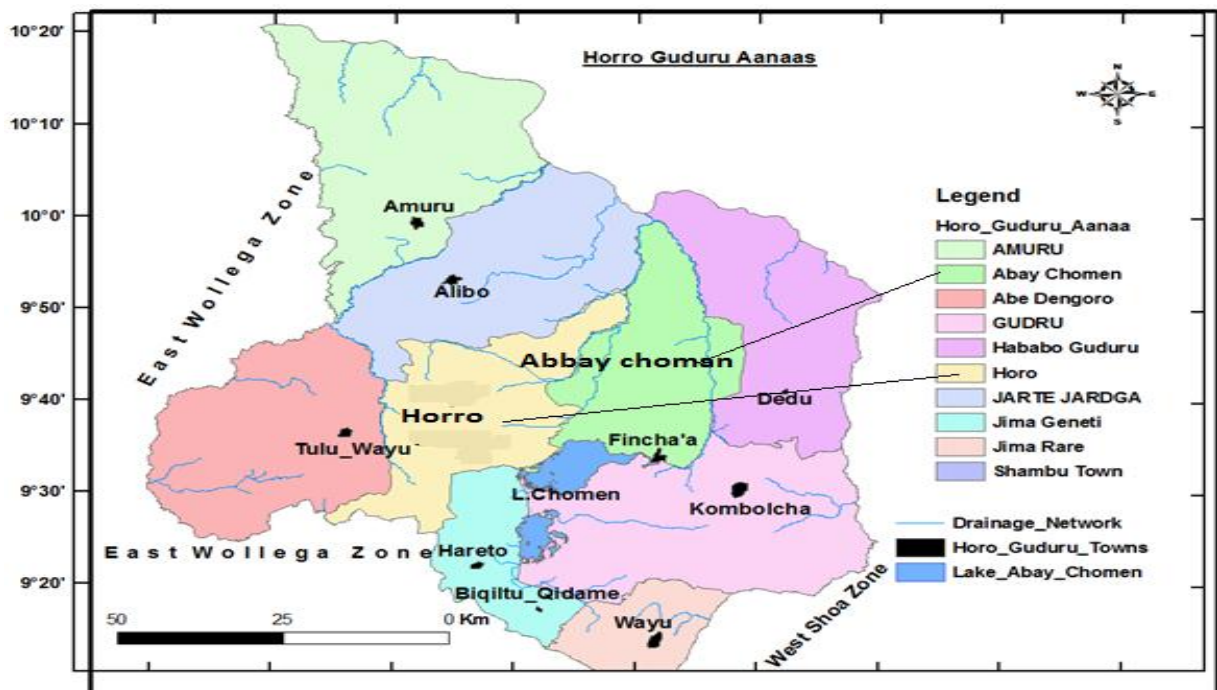


Figure.1 Map of the study area Horro Guduru Wollega zone Abbay Choman and Horro Districts of western Ethiopia.

The study sites are generally, have similar climate. The study sites experience long rainy season January and February is a dry Season. The three religions in these sites are traditional Oromo religion/ *waaqeffanna*/, Christianity and Muslims. The population is predominantly Oromo, and is engaged in subsistence farming, small/local trade and livestock.

2.2 Methodology

This study employed qualitative research approach and descriptive research design. The target population of this study was local communities who have direct relation and interaction with green environment and its natural resources. Therefore, primary data were collected from 48 purposively selected knowledgeable elders, *Abba Gada*, forest and wildlife experts, culture and tourism experts, environmental protection experts and development agents (DA's). Secondary data collected from different written documents. In this study, locals' thoughts, perceptions, values, religious and philosophical attitudes towards the natural resources were obtained by a combination of focus group discussions, in depth interviews, observations and revision of written document. All collected data were analyzed by using triangulation cross-checking of information obtained through interview, documentary analysis and observation was used in the study to assess the convergence of the information.

III. RESULTS

The results of this study were discussed based on data obtained from 48 purposively selected respondents, field observation and document review of the two districts for the study. Accordingly, the following results were analyzed and recommendation was forwarded.

3.1 Oromo Indigenous Knowledge on Environmental protection

Oromo has its own particular orientation or adaptation. The wider environment institutionalized in the culture of the group, particularly in its tradition which includes established knowledge of plants and animals, weather and minerals, as well as tools and techniques of extracting food, clothing, and shelter. This idea strengths and supports the importance of philosophical worldview of the community in the natural environmental protection. In Oromo tradition, Gada system is hold and controls the overall socio-economic, politics, way of interaction with societies and environment. Then the interaction between local communities and their environment and way of using natural resources are managed by their indigenous knowledge which they are accumulated in the course of life. Indigenous knowledge, as knowledge obtained through protracted interaction of humanity with its environment, and cannot be seen apart from the indignity of the people or adoption to the indigenous culture. Data collected from different data sources revealed that the Oromo societies of the study area have developed a moral of environmental conservations over long period of time which protect environment and natural resources for a long period of time. They accept the issue of the environment is equivalent to their life. They don't think about their present and future life apart from the environment.

This indigenous environmental knowledge is transferred from generation to generation in the form of oral tradition. That means they knew well about the value of the environment/ socio-economic, medicinal, ecological balance, cultural value and etc/ in the traditional way of life and they developed *moral/safuu* to protect their environment. In the era when there is no rule and regulation for environmental protection and conservation was not available, they respect the environment by *safuu Uumaa fi uumamaa/moral creature/* and by their accumulated knowledge. The attitude and the worldviews of local communities' and their accumulated knowledge for a long period of times observed as not in debate to protect the environment and its natural resources for both now and in the future parallel with modern approaches which used for forest conservation.

3.2 How local communities perceive their environment and manage to coexist in harmony with nature?

In the Oromo worldview, God is the creator of all things (*Uumaa waan hundaa*), including natural resources and human beings. Hence, He gave them the laws of order and harmonious co-existence between, human beings and the natural environment. The findings, thus, reveal that *safuu* and *Ayyaana* are important concepts of their worldview about cosmic order. In sum, the data obtained is revealed that in the Oromo worldview, there is strong dynamic relationship between the physical, the spiritual, and the human worlds. During observations of natural environment especially on forests resources from 17 October, 2018 to 26 November, 2018; at Abbay Choman and Horro districts, many big trees in the agricultural fields were observed. Therefore, these series of observations of the natural environment and forests resources at Horro and Abbay Choman districts appeared to confirm data obtained from the informants that the study area society respect big trees in farm land and traditionally they give great respect for their environment. Also traditionally local community respect mountain, rivers, forest and wildlife. Local elder with 65 years stated that:

...Traditionally our community /Oromo/ believed in tokkicha Waaqa gurracha or waaqa uumaa (Black/ Dark God), the single almighty God is the creator of the universe. And we believed that environment and all natural resources are created for us by waaqa /God. Therefore, traditionally we respect, protect and wisely used the natural resources for its sustainability for the next generation (local elder with 65 years, October, 2018).

To support this idea scholars like Kanno (2008) says *Waaqa* is the architect of the universe in Oromo worldview. He is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, just to use more powerful Latin descriptors of God.

Furthermore, Oromo religion is a discrete religion with believe in *Waaqa* either directly (through trance personal attachment) or indirectly through natural entities like forests, groves, some huge trees, mountains and springs. It is only *Waaqa* who gives life and creates human beings. As they belief the responsibility, respect and moral of conserving and protecting environment and natural resources is attached and go parallel with their traditional religious. Therefore, they belief that if peoples respect their natural environment like forest, mountain, river, seas and etc and when they pray their lord around tips of mountain or on the river and around the seas their God hear their pray and quickly give them the answer of their pray. So as local elders have been said that respecting natural environment and natural resources shows the positive relationship between Oromo peoples and their creator/*waaqa*. When interviewed the elder of local community with 78 years old, elaborated that;

...During the use of trees for different purpose culturally cutting down a straightly growing young tree in the forest and along the river bank is traditionally not allowed. "We consider young growing trees as our boys and daughters. If locals and child needed to cut down straightly growing young trees, local elders advice and teach how they should have to use trees and what kinds of trees they have to cut down. If straight growing trees are cut down, on local community meeting they had decided to curse the person who had cut the tree. Before they arrived at this final decision local elders advice again, if that person not stop his distractive activities they decided to go to the person to punish as their local rule and regulation (Abba Gada, October 2018).

It is common that people take rest under the shades of trees when they are on journey or on work during dry season and shelter under big trees to protect themselves from heavy rain during rainy seasons. Oromo have the ethos of selective management of trees as, for instance, in the agricultural lands where many trees characterize the agricultural fields of the Oromo. (Bassi (2003: 11), during the observation in Abbay Choman, what a researcher observed could be witnessed for this idea. Oromo society in general and particularly the study area have had the tradition of conserving trees in agricultural farm lands. They believed that forests divert or weaken strong winds (cyclone) from demolishing houses or damaging crops. Abba Gada members, December, 2018) states that

...We/Oromo used Oda/sycamore tree as a meeting hall in Gada assembly and it is one of the unique examples of the use of trees or forests as shades for our people. In our tradition cutting young straight growing trees and cutting big trees for different purposes and from the farm land is not allowed and not the moral or safuu of our society. Big trees in the farm lands were respected and seen as similar to local elder in the community. We used dead trees for firewood and branches for construction and for other purposes rather than cutting big and young growing trees. But when it becomes necessary to cut big or young growing trees, we will show our condolence by putting green grass on the remaining parts of the trees wishing them quick recuperation and we give care for the apex or growing parts of plants and for flowering and seed bearing trees (Abba Gada member, 11 October, 2018).

This shows that how Oromo societies perceive, respect and care for natural resources. Another noticeable feature in the Oromo society which this study digs out was the high presence of luxuriant big trees. Most of these trees are believed to be residents of the ancestral spirits. Observations during the study revealed that the bases of big trees with canopy for shade are used for social events and as groves for shrines.

The other is the spiritual relationships of Oromo society and forests or green areas. in oromo history green area have special respect. Data collected for this study revealed that during the holy days the followers of *Waaqeffanna*, keeping in mind the belief in *Waaqa* intact, giving due respect to the *Ayyaanaa* (spirit) of their fathers and mothers and carrying *irreecha/irreessa* (green grass and fresh leaves) climb up a mountain or go down to a river ascertaining *Waaqa*'s relations and unity with nature and pray to the almighty almost always under the shade of a big-trees *Oda* (sycamore tree). To support this idea Melba 1988: 1-4, Bartels 1994: 1-13) explained, "We believe in our creator and we pray to him/*Waaqa*." Nature is the graceful gift of *Waaqa* to human beings, therefore in accordance with natural laws maintaining *safuu* and giving a high regard to nature, the Oromo go to a life giving river or to a highly elevated place with *irreecha/irreessa* in their hands as a symbol of fertility or prosperity and worship *Waaqa*. During the serious field observation at the research area some trees are considered as *Abdaarii* (tree/s which identified as the place of worship) which are sacred and respected.

Cutting of these trees is strictly forbidden. That means in Oromo traditional beliefs trees are used as the place of worship and thanks giving/*waaqeffanna*. This shows that traditionally Oromo society well understood about the spiritual relationship, the socio-economic and ecological advantage of protecting natural resources and the environment. The Oromo of the area had the tradition of preserving big trees in agricultural land. This synchronization practice is not only encircled to forest but also this *moral/safuu* is used for protecting wildlife. According to the result of this study, the Oromo world view and according to their tradition, young wildlife was not killed. Local community should not kill young and female wildlife. They thought that the female wildlife

used for the animals' generational continuity. Concerning this, an elderly 55 years of age respondent explained that:

...Hunting and killing wildlife life in the forest and around the local settlement area was culturally not allowed. Especially killing young female wild animals is totally rejected. Traditionally our society believed that young female wildlife is responsible for the continuity of their family by replacing new born of their ancestor. Also in Oromo cultural transmission illegal hunting was not allowed. In general our community views on environment and natural resources were a real guarantee for the protection of fauna and flora in the past for a long period of time and also for the future (local elder with 55 years, 12 October, 2018).

This shows that Oromo people care for wildlife as their own animals. In their tradition, moral/safuu and ethics they respect resources around them both fauna and flora.

3.3 Worth of indigenous environmental knowledge and the continuity of the green environment among Oromo

Oromo have survived due to their understanding of forest importance for ecology, animal and human economic facility and systems of their management of natural resources, all of which are the products of complex processes of traditional and worldviews. Therefore, for ecology conservation to succeed and its use to be sustainable, traditional management practices have to be considered at all levels of conservation efforts. But presently, these traditional practices are being eroding because of several reasons. According to data gained from key informants, among the reasons for the eroding of traditional attitude towards the environment and natural resources, market oriented economies and other socio-economic pressure, urbanization, political and cultural changes took the first place. Oromo traditional attitudes and worldviews enforce codes to protect the environment and clearly prohibit activities which affect the natural resources such as felling trees from natural forests, commercial logging, charcoal making, timber extraction, unwise use of fire in the forest, debarking girdling, and indiscriminate under slashing.

3.4 The Interlink of Oromo traditional Worldview and Natural environmental Disaster

The results of that Oromo society believed that natural environmental disasters are the consequence of human behavior. They were believed that it will happen if human behave badly or if *safuu waaqa* (moral/creature law) is disobeyed. To support this idea, (Niekerk, 2011) Natural environmental disasters are believed that it is punishments for human misbehave. Traditionally Oromo respond for natural disasters spiritually by praying, sacrificing, libation, revealing one's own mistakes to *Waaqa (God)*, revealing the hidden truth and paying blood price for shaded blood. By doing these, Oromo negotiated to their creature and save their environments and its natural resources from disaster. They advices on local meeting persons who cut straight growing trees or killing young and female wildlife if that person continued it's unacceptable action they decide curse that person or groups on local meeting. By this process they advice their other members of the local community. In Oromo tradition cutting trees from the river banks and on the verge of water springs automatically not allowed.

The Oromo celebrate different rituals for insuring of peace and prosperity. These rituals have their own setting. If they are done at right time the life of people become smooth. Otherwise life turns into disorder and full of misfortunes. As result of data revealed that if drought persist for long time, speedy winds, lightening thunder, irregular heavy rain and ice happens continuously, animals and human suffered from untreatable diseases; sun, moon, stars and rainbow are visited at irregular positions and shown unobserved characteristics, domicile spirits are cry the people come together and pray, make libation, sacrifice and search for solution (Abbay choman district Culture and Tourism expert October, 2018).

IV. CONCLUSION

The study was designed to investigate traditional Oromo attitude towards natural resources and environmental protection in Horro and Abbay Choman districts in western Ethiopia. The Oromo accumulated indigenous knowledge and their worldview which protect green environment with its natural resources for a long period of time. The result of study indicates that Oromo peoples' traditional attitudes towards the natural environment and their accumulated knowledge passed through generation are given high priority for the natural resources and play a key role for the sustainable use of sacred resources. Traditionally, Oromo people have close and intimate ties with nature and the latter occupies central place in the cultural, religious, social beliefs, practices and local institutions.

The Oromo indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental protection have intrinsic worth in themselves. Such precious environmental protection is now being under constant pressure - and many such systems and the moral and environmental ethics of local community have already been weakened in the study area due to, the dominance of western ideology and introduction of modernization and globalizing economy; the encroachment of modern agricultural, and the often forceful incorporation of traditional peoples into mainstream

political and socio-economic systems in developing countries and in the study area. These processes of dominance make local community as they lose their accumulated indigenous knowledge and moral of protecting and conserving natural environment with its resources. Also the political pressure by previous northern based government in Ethiopia with current socio-economic, poverty, population growth and the decline of Gadaa system with its asset and values are a major reason today local community in study area and in Ethiopia losing and missing their indigenous knowledge.

However, when the tradition, moral/safuu and accumulated indigenous knowledge of this society appropriately studied, documented, transfer to the present and the coming generation and when locals retrieve and widely used the indigenous knowledge and its application, asset and values for environment and natural resources it used for a reduce today environmental problem. Also Strengthening the Gadaa system and its asset, values, and creating awareness about the role of Oromo indigenous environmental Knowledge for environmental natural resources needs to be focus.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The success of this research work is the cumulative output of the contributions of different individuals and governmental sectors that must be acknowledged. Therefore, I would express my deep gratitude to the kind and selfless people and governmental sectors who willingness to share their time and knowledge. Also I express my heartfelt thanks to individuals who contribute to this study specially; Desalegn Wirtu (PhD), Mr. Fanta wakwaya, Mr. Tesfa Chali, Mr. Bikila Regassa and Mr. Amanuel Birdida. Thanks for Research, Community engagement and Technology transfer Vice president of Wollega University for devote financial and material resources and efforts to facilitate my work.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Mackinson, S, and L. Nottestad. 1998. Points of view: combining local and scientific knowledge. *Reviews in Fish Biology and Fisheries* 8(4):481–490.
- [2]. Shackeroff, J. M., and L. M. Campbell 2007 Traditional ecological knowledge in conservation research: problems and prospects for their constructive engagement. *Conservation and Society* 5(3):343–360.
- [3]. Reyes-Garcia, V., Guèze, M., Luz, A. C., Paneque-Galvez, J., Macia, M. J. and others (2013) ‘Evidence of traditional knowledge loss among a contemporary indigenous society’, *Evolution and Human Behaviour*, vol 34, no 4, pp. 249–257.
- [4]. Workneh Kelbessa, (2001). Traditional Oromo Attitudes towards the Environment: An Argument for Environmentally Sound Development. OSSREA Social Science Research Report Series, No. 19. Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Enterprise.
- [5]. Debelo, Asebe R. 2012. Contesting Views on a Protected Area Conservation and Development in Ethiopia *Social Sciences* 1: 24–43
- [6]. Salviac, M. de 1901. *An Ancient People in the State of Menelik: The Oromo, Great African Nation*. Paris. (As translated by Ayalew Kanno from the original French edition in 2005)
- [7]. Dessalegn Fufa. (2013). Indigenous Knowledge of Oromo on Conservation of Forests and its Implications to Curriculum Development: the Case of the Guji Oromo. Addis Ababa University
- [8]. Alemayehu Haile, Boshi Gonfa, Daniel Deressa, Senbeto Busha and Umer Nure. (2006). History of the Oromo to the Sixteenth Century. Second Edition. First Impression. Finfinnee: Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau.
- [9]. Firdissa Sadeta. (2007). The Socio-economic impact of road transportation in Horro Guduru. Unpublished MA Thesis Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Addis Ababa University: Ethiopia.
- [10]. Lemessa Mergo (2014). Indigenous forest management among the Oromo of Horro Guduru, Western Ethiopia. *Ethiopia. j. soc. Lang .study* 1(2), 5- 22 E ISSN: 2408-9532
- [11]. Kanno, Ayalew. 2008. *An Ancient People, great African Nation: The Oromo* as Recounted by Martial De Salviac Translation from the Original French edition. Finfinnee: Reprinted with permission by Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau.
- [12]. Bassi, M. (2007) *The Borana Conserved Landscape, Southern Ethiopia: “Strengthening Community Conserved Areas-Lessons, Needs and Recommendations for Policy and practice”*, Kure Mountains, Turkey.
- [13]. Gadaa Melba. 1999. *Oromia: An Introduction to the History of the Oromo People*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Kirk House Publishers.

Misganu Gabayo*. “Oromo Traditional Attitudes towards Natural Resource protection; the case of Abbay Choman and Horro districts, western Ethiopia (Forest, Wildlife and Soil in focus).” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(9), 2020, pp. 36-41.