

Understanding the role that protected areas play in the livelihood security of local communities is essential to ensure that local people are not left shouldering the costs of what is a public good, and to help maintain robust local and national constituencies for biodiversity conservation. To provide baseline data for a longitudinal study on the effects of newly established national parks on human livelihoods in Gabon we conducted a cross-sectional study that compared livelihood indicators between communities that do, and do not, use natural resources within protected areas. We interviewed 2,035 households in 117 villages at four sites, recording income, consumption, education, health indicators and social capital, and village characteristics such as distance to markets, distance to park boundaries, and land cover within a 5-km radius. Our results indicated that closed rainforest coverage was greater around park than control villages and that this difference was associated with a greater reliance of park households on forest resources. However, we found no systematic differences in most livelihood measures between park and control households. Instead, the relationship between household livelihood measures and proximity to parks varied in idiosyncratic ways between sites, suggesting that determinants of human welfare are highly localized and cannot be generalized to larger spatial scales.