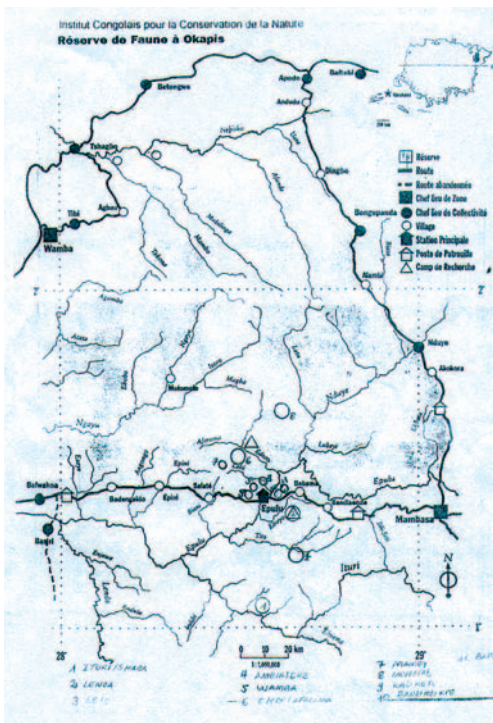


Conservation in the Face of Armed Conflict - the effects of political instability on the management of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve

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A World Heritage Site since 1996, the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (RFO, from the French for 'Okapi Faunal Reserve') is situated in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), encompassing a forest area of 13,700km².



The reserve is part of the larger Ituri Forest, with its rich fauna and flora. This biological wealth includes approximately 5,000 okapis, 4,000 elephants, 2,000 leopards, forest buffalo, water chevrotain, three species of crocodile, 13 different primates plus a wide variety of birds and insects.

The floral diversity is high, comprising swamp, mixed and M'bau forest (the last dominated by *Gilbertiodendron dewevrei*), plus secondary forest where there has been deforestation.

Geographical features include rocky hills and salt licks as well as the large Epulu, Ndoye, Nepoko and Ituri Rivers.

Some 30,000 people - pygmies and other forest tribes - inhabit the reserve, living mainly upon agriculture, hunting, fishing and gathering. Throughout the year ceremonies and rites take place, relating to matters such as circumcision, marriage, the birth of twins, the death of a

clan member and other significant cultural or personal events.

Since its creation in 1992, the reserve has had to be managed in the face of three major threats: shifting slash-and-burn agriculture, elephant poaching and gold and colombo-tantalite (coltan) mining. Coltan is a temperature-resistant conductor of high importance to the electronics industry.

The Congo Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN), along with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Gilman International Conservation (GIC) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), has put into operation several management practices directed at reducing those threats. Gilman International Conservation has aided the ICCN and supported the overall operation of the reserve. This has included organising patrols, paying bonuses to wardens and guards, providing fuel and maintaining equipment such as communication systems. Further assistance has involved conveying UNESCO funds for law enforcement monitoring, organising military and management training and setting up alternative programmes such as agro-forestry and cane rat domestication.

As well as delivering environmental education, local schools have been given teaching materials, health centres provided with support, water sources constructed and tools donated for the maintenance of roads in remote areas.

The WCS has conducted essential research into the area's fauna and flora. With support from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, it has also participated in the construction of the Bukulani patrol post. Moreover, the society is involved in the vital work of including local communities in conservation efforts, particularly through establishing a system of sustainable agriculture.

All these efforts led to improvements in the situation on the ground throughout the reserve between 1999 and 2001. More than 20 guns were confiscated, several poachers were arrested and more than 500 traps were destroyed. Patrols evacuated approximately 3,000 gold and coltan miners. Educators conducted public awareness campaigns and travelled four times to villages in the most

remote areas of the north, in Wamba, organising public meetings, video shows and conferences, in schools and with local administrators.

Unexpected problems rose in July of 2002. Two rebel groups, known as the MLC and the RCD/ML (what these acronyms mean is not really important in our context), transformed the reserve into a battlefield. Accusing each other of responsibility, both parties played their part as the reserve's administration fell apart, security deteriorated and the threats to wildlife multiplied once again.



Talks with rebel groups have helped conservation work at the Okapi Reserve return to 'something like normality'

Looting soldiers harassed the population, taking away all their belongings. Poverty levels have risen as a result. For the first time, more than 3,000 pygmies and 12,000 Bantus fled from the reserve, walking a distance of 200km to the vicinity of Beni. Never before have pygmies left the deep forest.

The reserve administration was greatly affected. All the guards' guns and equipment were confiscated, forcing them to quit their patrol posts and stop surveillance. It has been reported that mining has restarted in the central area around Bandisende, while the bush meat trade (in monkeys) and elephant poaching are on the increase on the eastern side of Nduye.

Previously confiscated items (200kg of ivory, 300kg of coltan) were stolen. The dispensary lost all of its equipment and medicine, worth US\$10,000, while GIC lost both materials donated to the ICCN and its own. The ICCN lost office supplies, rations, bikes, radios and other field equipment estimated at US\$15,000. GIC's losses included household items, mechanical and carpentry tools, office supplies, agro-forestry tools and seeds, to the value of US\$32,000.

Recalling the sad memories of the Congo peacock and 16 cane rats that served Mobutu regime soldiers for dinner in 1996, three chimpanzees and 34 cane rats got eaten.

Although the official report on the WCS's losses is not yet available, they are known to include seeds designated for farmers, solar power equipment and the resources of its library.

Major efforts to tackle the situation started in 2002, but fatal consequences accompanied the search for a solution.

UNESCO initially wrote letters to the belligerents, but with very little impact in the field. Gilman International Conservation, together with UNESCO, then requested a meeting between the RCD/ML and the reserve's administration in Beni. Tragically, this ended in the death of conservationists Karl Ruf (GIC), Jean Nlamba (UNESCO) and Kambale Saambili (GIC) in a traffic accident on their way back to Kampala.

In May, 2003, Dr Terese Hart of the WCS led the RFO delegation from Beni to the site. They made a preliminary assessment of the situation and contacted MLC soldiers in Bandisende and Bukulani.

In June, 2003, Gilman International Conservation sponsored a trip to Isiro for a meeting at MLC headquarters, along with other administration officials. Mrs Rosmarie Ruf took part, alongside the reserve's Warden and the Wildlife Conservation Society administrator. The delegation obtained an official statement authorising the RFO staff to resume their work, plus formal permission for the Garamba Frankfurt/Gilman plane to use the EpuLu airstrip.

While so far, at least, conservation work at the Okapi Wildlife Reserve has returned to something like normality, the presence of MLC soldiers in central and eastern areas of the forest is causing a lot of skepticism.

There can be little hope of successful conservation in the face of armed conflict. The RFO survives only because of its dedicated staff, supported by Gilman International Conservation and the Wildlife Conservation Society. There is need of intensive awareness campaigns among the military, including the addition of conservation to the curriculum of national military training centres.

The investigative tour made by educators from May 10th to June 15th, 2003, during which the participants travelled widely, making contacts in villages throughout the reserve, should serve as a basis for future conservation activities.