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OKAPI

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Okapi Conservation Project
2005 Update

GIC president John Lukas has made three trips into the Democratic Republic of Congo this year to review operations and to assist in planning activities within and around the Okapi Wildlife Reserve with Project Staff. The following is a summary of the state of the Project activities undertaken this year.

GIC's Okapi Conservation Project is responsible for providing all the funds and infrastructure needs of 85 ICCN (Institut Congolese por Conservation de la Nature) guards and administrative staff that mitigate human / wildlife conflicts and protect the Reserve's natural resources from over exploitation.

The training of two senior leaders at the Southern African College of Wildlife Management in South Africa for 10 months in 2004 is really paying off with Conservator Mapilanga and Assistant Conservator Somba on site in Epulu since November of last year. With improved field techniques and greater discipline, the guards are making significant head way in eliminating mining, poaching and illegal agriculture within the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Morale is very high due to a combination of regular payment of performance bonuses, new field equipment and patrol leader training.

Guards in the Reserve now have new bicycles to help them patrol.

Illegal poaching of elephants inside the Reserve is now under control.

Illegal mining is mostly under control, except in a small section of the western areas of the Reserve. Elephant poaching inside the Reserve is under control, but poaching outside of the Reserve is driving elephants into the Reserve and into contact with local farmers. GIC has just been awarded a UNESCO grant to support the ICCN and local military personnel in a joint operation to clear the northern area of the Reserve of the remaining poachers.

Presently, there are five permanent patrol posts supplemented by two newly established rotating tented posts that move to where they can be the most effective. Warden Mapilanga made an inspection of the northern region of the Reserve and negotiated an agreement from a local chief for a location to establish a guard post to serve this presently unprotected area.
All the guards are better paid and better motivated, resulting in more days in the field and much better protection for the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. The goal is to have the entire Reserve under ICCN control by the end of 2006.

Guard with new satellite phone.

The Project has just purchased four satellite phones for ICCN, enabling patrols to text message their GPS location along with a short message from anywhere in the Reserve. The base operator in Epulu can call the patrol teams in an emergency, resulting in a much quicker response to threats to the Reserve. To our knowledge, this is the first time that this technology is being applied to a protected area in Africa.

The Project is sponsoring two ICCN staff for computer training in Beni and has also provided two new laptop computers. In August, a new health clinic was officially opened in Epulu to serve the needs of all Reserve staff and their families. The new solar-powered facility is well constructed and contains rooms for specialized treatment, birthing and a lab, as well as showers, toilets and special facilities for Mbuti Pygmies. The clinic is open 24 hours a day with a nurse always on duty. This new facility is critical in supporting and improving the health environment in the Epulu community.

The new health clinic has a nurse available 24 hours a day.

Okapi Conservation Project

The staff of the Project based in Epulu provides all the administrative, education, community assistance and okapi program support for the entire Okapi Wildlife Reserve. The Project staff consists of 77 skilled positions and 50 Mbuti Pygmies who collect leaves for the okapi at the Station. A new storage building was just completed to establish a food bank for all ICCN and Project personnel. Basic food supplies are in short supply and very expensive in Epulu. The Project will buy food and supplies in bulk, transport them to Epulu, and allow staff to draw against their salaries. In this way, they will pay less for their food and basic needs, as well as be assured that basic supplies are available when needed.

The Project is presently supporting two staff members in computer training, one in medical studies in Beni and one student from the local community of Bandaka studying biology at the University of Kisangani.

Agroforestry

With the extension of new plant nurseries in Nia Nia and Byokote, there are now six nurseries around the Reserve providing plants, seeds, tools and training to farmers interested in trying new techniques that increase crop yield and reduce the need to convert forested land into agriculture. Over 140 farmers are now collaborating with the Project's agronomists.

Demonstration gardens are very popular with the local people.

Three demonstration gardens in the most populous towns of Epulu, Mambassa and Wamba are very popular with people requesting plants and training on how to grow new varieties of crops in rainforest soils. The police officers in Mambassa are volunteering to assist in cultivating the crops to show their support for this important program.

Education & Community Assistance

The Education Team now has three permanent bases in the three largest towns; Epulu, Mambassa and Wamba, in addition to making regular trips around the Reserve by motorbike to meet with all communities along the boundary of the Reserve.

Educators have staged seminars in large towns and presented audio-visual programs in many villages. Utilizing the powerful medium of theater, educators perform plays about poaching, new crops, or needs of wildlife; all of which are very popular ways of getting the conservation message across to the local people. Radio spots are purchased in local towns to also help get the conservation message to a broader audience.

Educators utilize plays to teach local people about various issues.

To assist the community in improving their quality of life, which suffered greatly during the recent civil war, the project is providing health centers in ten localities with medicines and supplies such as mattresses and linens; over 20 schools with basic supplies; and 15 local community administrations with office supplies. The Educators have developed a new primary school curriculum, "Health and the Environment" which is being introduced this fall into several schools around the Reserve. The Project is continuing its efforts to provide clean drinking water to all villages around the Reserve by constructing six new sources this year. All of these efforts improve communication with, and invoke support from local communities for the need to protect biodiversity that continues to thrive in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve.

Alternative Protein Sources

The Project continues to provide cane rats to farmers interested in raising this local delicacy for personal consumption. About 20 farmers in Epulu are participating in this program. A new cane rat breeding facility has just been completed in Mambassa. The purpose of that facility will be to try and interest local entrepreneurs into making a commercial operation of raising cane rats. Only at the commercial level will the production of cane rats offer a significant alternative to bush meat in local markets.

Cane rats, above, considered a delicacy, offer an alternative to bush meat in local markets.

Tilapia fish farming in ponds continues to interest local people. Three ponds are functioning in Epulu and our Educators get regular requests for information on fish farming. Once a farmer commits to building a pond, the Project will pay for the transport of tilapia fish from a source over 300 kilometers away and continue to provide advice on their care and management.

Tilapia fish provide a good source of protein and produce well in fish ponds.

Karudi, an okapi released into the forest from the Station, has been tracked by Mbuti trackers for over a year.

Okapi Breeding and Research

All 15 okapi at the Epulu Station are doing well and are in excellent health. The Mbuti Pygmies provide leaves from over 35 different species of forest trees to the okapi daily. The male okapi "Karudi", released back into the forest over a year ago, continues to be followed by two Mbuti trackers who monitor his movements and record what plant species he is eating.

Recently, Karudi's tracks were accompanied by those of another okapi. This is his first recorded interaction with a wild okapi. His home range has stabilized in the primary forest near Epulu. Collecting his fecal material has allowed the staff to monitor the prevalence of internal parasites that he is exposed to and which species normally infect a wild okapi.

Funding Needs

Draft budgets for 2006 have been prepared and reflect a marked increase due to inflation in the DRC, rising fuel and transportation costs, and increasing needs of the workers and local communities. The old Lister generator we purchased in 1986 is on its last leg and a new one will need to be purchased soon. A Swiss electrician has volunteered to install the generator and rewire staff offices and houses at no charge. Since peace seems to be holding, we will attempt to bring in a container of much needed equipment and supplies from the United States next year.

The Project and ICCN Staff have made great progress over the last 18 months reaching and involving most of the 30,000 people living around the Reserve in finding solutions to the problems that affect both people and animals in this remote part of Africa.

Any help you can give will enable us to continue to fund this remarkable project which, for over 18 years, has involved local communities in the struggle to save the last home of the okapi and all the remarkable diversity of the Ituri Forest for future generations.

For more information, contact info@GIConline.org

Photos by Reto Kuster and John Lukas