



Good news on the World Bonobo Day

Surveys confirm critical importance of Salonga National Park for bonobos, forest elephants and other emblematic species in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Between 2015 and 2018, a group of conservation and research institutions surveyed the 36,000km² vast Salonga National Park (SNP), Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This largest rainforest park in Africa consists of a northern and a southern sector, separated by a 45km wide ungazetted corridor. The surveys were performed by ICCN (Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature), Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich (LMU), Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig (MPI EVAN), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM). Despite finding high levels of poaching throughout the park, the surveys confirm Salonga as the DRC's stronghold for around 15,000 bonobos and 1,600 forest elephants.

Bonobos are a great ape species endemic to the DRC. To date, the total number of bonobos in the wild remains unknown, as surveys have only taken place in about 30% of the total bonobo range. Within this surveyed area, the IUCN/ICCN Bonobo Conservation Strategy 2012-2022 reports a minimum bonobo population of 15,000-20,000. For SNP, previous bonobo population estimates were based on survey results published in 2006 and 2008, and reported between 7,000 and 20,000 bonobos. The recent 2015-2018 surveys confirm and improve these findings: combining data from all involved organizations, we estimate Salonga National Park to hold around 12,600 bonobos (range 9,500-16,800). Including the around 10,000 km² park's corridor, the estimated average number of bonobos reaches 15,000. Despite historically high poaching pressures, SNP remains the bonobo stronghold for the country, and is identified as crucially important for the conservation of this species.

In 2004, the CITES-MIKE program (Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants) estimated that SNP held between 600 and 2,400 forest elephants. Again, these older estimates are confirmed and improved by the recent 2015-2018 survey findings: we estimate Salonga to hold around 1,400 forest elephants (range 900-2,300). Including the Park's corridor, the estimated average number of forest elephants reaches 1,600. The new estimate still falls within the limits of the MIKE estimation from 2004. This is encouraging, given the drastic decline of Central Africa's elephants over the past decades. The status quo of elephant abundance in SNP could be due to increased protection and improved park management over the past years, with increased patrol intensity, coverage and efficacy. However, the status quo may also be due to or influenced by "compres-

sion”, meaning that elephants from outside the park have shifted their range to inside its borders, as the Park is now better protected than the surrounding landscape.

In 2017 and 2018, in the southern sector of the Salonga National Park, a collaboration between ICCN, MPI, LMU and WWF surveyed large mammals, butterflies and flora, using multiple and innovative data collection methods. By applying a recently developed distance sampling-based camera trap methodology, it was possible for the first time to establish baseline data for species that are cryptic or rare such as pangolins, aardvark, golden cats, water chevrotains and Congo peafowl.

The distance sampling with camera traps has resulted in the first ever abundance estimate for the elusive Congo Peafowl (*Afropavo congensis*), which occurs only in the lowland forests of the DRC: there are around 25,000 Congo peafowl in Salonga’s southern sector alone. The IUCN Red List (2016) preliminary estimate of up to 15,000 individuals will need to be revised upwards.

Using the current baselines, future trends in the abundance and in the distribution of various wildlife species can be assessed, and the impact of conservation initiatives evaluated. The different data collection methods (distance sampling using both line transects and camera traps, recce walks) and differing survey intensities can be compared, hence contributing to the development of the most efficient future monitoring and conservation strategies.

All the surveys undertaken by the various conservation and research institutions quantitatively assessed the type, intensity and distribution of human impact. Human signs, roughly one sign per km walked and mostly related to poaching, were found throughout the entire park, especially near its borders. The poaching pressure on the park is likely to grow in the future as other wilderness areas in the landscape become increasingly depleted. Moreover, the surveys only provide a snapshot of the status of many endangered species, and continuous long-term monitoring will be required to make sure that Salonga National Park remains a refuge for such species. In order to protect the remarkable wildlife in this largest rainforest park in Africa, ICCN and WWF jointly manage the Park and work towards improving the livelihoods and the participation of the local population in safeguarding Salonga National Park.

The Director General of ICCN, Pasteur Cosma Wilungula stated: ‘It fills me with pride that the various conservation and research partners came together to establish up to date baseline data on flagship and more elusive species, and the threats they face for the largest rainforest park on the African continent, allowing park management to closely monitor and evaluate our conservation efforts.’

Within the framework of Financial Cooperation, KfW, on behalf of the German Government, supported the biomonitoring of the southern block of the Park. USAID-CARPE and the European Union (EU-EFD) supported the surveys in part of the South, and in the Northern sector and the Corridor. The work was carried out under the co-management between WWF and the Congolese Nature Conservation Authority (ICCN) responsible for all National Parks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Infobox Background

Salonga National Park was created in 1970, and is the largest forested protected area in Africa. It covers 36.000 km² exceeding the size of Belgium and was known for its richness and abundance of wildlife. Forest elephants and bonobos were a common sight. Over the last decades this has changed dramatically. Bush meat hunting and ivory hunting have decimated the numbers of large and small mammals. To provide updated information on the status of the Salonga National Park, the park management aims to consolidate the value of the biodiversity of this Park as a stronghold for emblematic and often threatened fauna and flora in the central Congo basin. From a practical point of view, the information presented here allows the Congolese Nature Conservation Authority (ICCN) and its partners to critically evaluate current conservation strategies, test the effectiveness of specific interventions and evaluate the integrity of the park.

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