

# Expedition to National Parks of the Gabonese Republic

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It's nearly midnight at Languoe bai (water hole: like "bayou"), deep in the remote central African rain forests of Gabon. We are perched alone on a rickety 3-story observation platform camouflaged high in the canopy of trees bordering the bai. It's an ancient and obviously popular watering hole located more than 100 miles, and a half day hike and drive, from the nearest village. In the soft light of a full moon we are watching the bulky forms of several dozen elephants jostling for positions in the bai, drinking highly mineralized waters important for their diet. After a day or more of somewhat solitary feeding in the forest, this is a venue for elephant socializing.

The chorus of frog mating calls and quiet murmur of splashing water is frequently shattered with dinosauric trumpeting and thundering grunts which echo across the valley. Occasionally these outbursts are accompanied by a flurry of oversized activity, often with the arrival of a big bull elephant. But most often the source of all the commotion is inexplicable to us. Meanwhile a symphony of insect mating calls fills the air, lightning bugs sparkle intermittently in the marsh grass and a strange pattern of lights flitters in the bushes adjacent to the bai – later identified as fluorescent bugs of some kind.

Small groups of elephants, usually mothers with well behaved kids, come and go throughout the evening on a handful of well worn forest paths. One of these paths leads through the trees below our platform, and during the night we can sometimes hear the preposterously quiet footsteps of elephants just 30-50 feet away.



Earlier in the day, researchers from the Wildlife Conservation Society had brought us to the bai and spent many hours talking about their work here. In one of the most ambitious wildlife conservation projects in the world today, WCS has helped the country of Gabon protect 10% of its landmass in national parks. It is estimated that Gabon is home to more than 40,000 forest elephants, 10,000-15,000 gorillas, and large numbers of other species including chimps, mandrills, etc. Languoe bai is a one hour hike from a WCS research center within one of Gabon's seven new national parks. It has been a long and exasperating trip to get here from New York.

A Gabonese researcher named Modest sits nearly every day in the top floor "penthouse" of our platform keeping track of animals visiting the bai. In the past year he has identified and named more than 1000 elephants, and he is able to recognize them within minutes using a stack of hand-written index cards. Via his broken English and my broken French, he tells us about his work. He talks about Sabo, a giant bull elephant, who arrived recently after an absence of nearly a year. He notes which groups arrive when, who they come with, and any changes in the groups. Just now he mentions that a young bull named Josh had wandered in for an infrequent visit. He told

us the story of the death of a baby elephant in the bai recently, apparently the result of a jealous mother. This guy is passionate about his work.

Other WCS researchers talk about their studies of gorillas, mandrills and other species. The overall tone is one of cautious optimism as protected areas such as these new parks create hope in the face of a long list of complicated environmental threats. Nearly all of these threats stem from recent human civilization pressure on habitats that have supported wildlife for thousands or even millions of years.

The scene in the bai feels weirdly prehistoric, and gives us the sense of a glimpse into the ancient nature of the rain forest system. Prompted in part by discussions with WCS researchers, it also raises, in a disturbing way, some issues about the historic importance of our times.

Clearly, the past century was one of the most remarkably dynamic periods in world history. We have witnessed the revolution of travel technologies (air, land, sea, space), communication technologies (television and radio), energy sources (nuclear, hydrocarbon), lifestyles and living standards, global trade, military technology, urbanization, education, genetic science and human biology, healthcare and longevity, and many other forces impacting the nature and quality of life on earth. Some of these changes have had a markedly positive impact on our world, although the distribution of benefits have been highly skewed towards the developed world. Other changes seem ominous, dangerous.

The dark and dangerous side of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included devastating warfare, unsustainable population growth, development of weapons of mass destruction and unprecedented human damage to our natural environment. It's an ugly line of thinking to tackle late at night, deep in the rain forest, watching the fantastic scene below us.

We go to sleep thinking about this, soothed by a couple of local Castell beers, and armed with a two way radio to connect us with civilization in the morning.

### **Gabon, WCS and the new National Park System**

Gabon is a country the size of Great Britain, located in west Africa on the southern Atlantic Ocean between Congo, Cameroon and Angola. With a population of a little over a million people, it has one of the lowest population densities in Africa. Industry is primarily oil, mining and timber – all industries often associated with environmental concerns. Gabon's forests are some of the oldest, richest and most important in Africa and the world, with several forest refuges dating back to Pleistocene times. And its wildlife is exceptional. The country has an ancient human history, with tribal villages dating back thousands of years. Today almost three quarters of the population is urban, mostly located in Libreville, its capital. The human footprint in rural Gabon is light: reportedly the lightest in Africa.



The impetus for our trip was the new national park system started by Gabon with the help of WCS. Comprised of 13 separate parks, the new system covers approximately 11% of the

country's land area and was established in 2003 by President Bongo – at a relatively small cost - \$30 million. The driving force behind creation of the new parks was a “mega transect” of Gabon and central Africa by WCS biologist Mike Fay, who we met for dinner in New York in November 2005. Fay and his colleagues spent a year and a half walking 2000 miles across Gabon and the Congo, documenting the importance of the forest and its wildlife, and the expanding “human footprint” on the area. The results of the mega transect were published in National Geographic magazine in 2004, and they included a compelling case for conservation.

Bongo apparently surprised everyone in his government when he announced the new park system. In particular, the establishment of the parks caused some important logging and timber concessions to be revoked. Gabon, like most African countries, has plenty of corruption, including vast wealth creation for Bongo and his close cronies. So the parks pinched a few pocket books, presumably including the Bongster himself. Corporate governance in Gabon essentially means bargaining with Bongo. Observers we talked with believe that Bongo was motivated in part to build a lasting legacy after 40 years in office. Just prior to our arrival he was re-elected to another (and final?) 6 year term, winning roughly 75% of the vote. I had thought that Bongo might be a candidate for a public leadership profile at the Kennedy School, in leadership-starved Africa, but listening to a few stories torpedoed that idea.

WCS is a 100+ year old non-profit based in New York. It operates the Bronx zoo and for many years has operated wildlife conservation projects internationally. Most of its endowment supports the zoo and administration. International programs now cost about ~\$50 million annually and are funded by outside sources including government agencies such as USAID but also foundation and private funds. The Gabon program is roughly \$5 million annually.

### **Long Journey to Gabon**

We flew to Libreville, Gabon on Air France from New York with an all day stop in Paris where Ariel Sharon's stroke dominated the news. Dr. Lee White, head of WCS operations in Gabon, met us at the airport. After a shower and stop at the walled barbed-wired WCS Libreville compound, we hit the road for the unmitigatedly long drive to Lope National Park. This was supposed to be a short charter flight but a shortage of avgas as well as maintenance problems with the charter plane caused an unfortunate change in plans. The full extent of the misfortune became obvious as we hit bumper-to-bumper, grid-lock traffic even before leaving Libreville. This was followed by an absurdly and uncomfortably long drive on rough roads. What we hoped would be a short flight turned into nearly 10 hours of driving to the geographical center of the country.



At 8 pm, driving down rain soaked jungle paths, puddles 2 feet deep, thick underbrush raking the car on both sides, bouncing widely, we came to the end of the first leg of the trip: the tiny Station d'Etude des Gorilles et Chimpanzees (SEGC) at Lope National Park. It had been 36 hours on the road, including two all-night flights from New York. We had dinner with Lee and his talented wife Kate who, among other things, is a mandrill expert and botanical illustrator. Just to top everything off, we then experienced one of the longest, most spectacular and violent lightning storms of our lives, including direct hits on the property.

## **Journal: Lope**

It's now day four of our trip to Gabon. Our major activity at Lope was mandrill tracking. We drove through a beautiful patchwork of savannah and forest to a gallery of trees along side a small river. Along the way we spotted a herd of bitatunga, rain forest cattle that are sort of a smaller friendlier version of cape buffalo. Kate and another researcher climbed onto the roof of our truck with radio monitoring gear to see if they could pick up signals from collars worn by several animals in large mandrill group. After several stops along a picturesque ridge line we detected signals in a line of tall trees down a sloping field in front of us. While the radio signals showed they were there, we saw no sign of them even with binoculars. We slowly moved closer, and the signal strength grew stronger. Finally, at first almost imperceptibly, and then more visibly, branches started to shake and sway in dozens of trees. Soon the trees were full of activity, branches bending wildly, and we began to catch glimpses of mandrills descending acrobatically from sleeping perches high in forest canopy. Kate told us they were getting a late start, presumably after a wet, cold night of nasty thunderstorms.

Mandrills live in large groups. Kate estimated this group to include almost 800 members, comprised of females and juveniles. Females typically have a single offspring every two years, starting at age 4 and continuing to age 12 or more. It's a hierarchical society, with dominance passed through mothers, with rare exceptions. Males are solitary by age 5 and join the large groups only briefly for mating every year. As in many species, fighting among males for dominance can be viscous, and Kate told us some stories about horrific injuries they have seen from dominance battles.

We decided to set ourselves up in a makeshift blind at a location where the mandrill group would cross a stream in a small clearing. Kate put up the camouflage material and we waited, cameras ready. By now the mandrills were traveling mostly on the ground, and there was little action in the trees to help us track their movement. The first mandrill we saw was a large male, doing advance work for the group. He stopped in a small clearing opposite us, just 30-40 feet away on the far shore of a narrow stream. For a brief moment, he posed on a branch for photos. His bizarrely colorful striped face, looking like a spectacular African ceremonial mask, turned directly toward us. The expression and body language conveyed more of a sense of curiosity than danger. An alarm call would send the whole group scampering back up the river. But as Kate had predicted, the camouflage worked for us. Soon a comical parade of hundreds of mandrills was passing through the clearing: mothers with little babies clinging to their chests; juveniles chasing each other acrobatically through the trees; somber males. Many stopped and looked our way. A few seemed to hear the faint sound of our camera shutters clicking away above the murmur of the stream between us. But curiosity never turned to alarm and in just 10 minutes later the last of the group past by, concluding our mandrill experience.



After lunch we did a three hour forest walk with Kate, winding through purported gorilla country on elephant paths. Manganese and spot nosed monkeys clamored away in the trees high above us. But the fruit trees where we hoped to find gorillas were deserted.

After the hike we showered and drove to a nearby village called Baka to see a local dance ceremony facilitated by a WCS staffer heavily involved in local community and cultural issues. A documentary film team from the National Geographic Society was staying at the WCS camp and joined us for the dance ceremony.

Baka is a tiny shanty town in a beautiful setting of rolling hills along side the imposing Agoué River. Arriving in the enchanting light of African dusk, we were guided by a lively procession of young kids to a small riverside clearing where several dozen villagers immediately sprang to life in ritual dancing and singing, lubricated we found by local palm wine and cheap vodka. A ring of colorfully dressed singers and drummers surrounded a dancer hidden within in white-sheeted wooden frame structure vaguely resembling some sort of anteater or wingless bird. African music can be mesmerizing; the passion and authenticity was charming. We were told that these were songs and dances handed down for many generations in this village, and now nearly lost as the young generation looks elsewhere for culture, preferring city life in Libreville to villages like this.

### **Journal: Langoue**

Another long drive to Langoue Park; for hours we endure the hard bumpy roads, eventually reaching a dilapidated riverside logging camp with rows of metal prefab and peeling plywood buildings set in a grassless, treeless gravel pit. We unload our bags into a small boat and cross the wide Ogoué River to the village of Ivindo, a logging-oriented rail town where we are met by a WCS staffer and a car to drive to Langoue Park. They talk about the possibility of traveling to this location by train from Libreville to facilitate tourism.



Several hours later we reach the end of the marginal road we've been navigating, put on our backpacks and hike 2 hours to Langoue research camp, arriving at dusk. The hike was a welcome break from all the bumpy rides.

Lee White regales us with facts and stories as we walk to the observation platform at Langoue bai. Example: elephants defecate roughly 17 times per day. We are asked to taste the fruits that elephants, chimps and gorilla gorilla eat. Cola fruits loaded with caffeine. Some kind of forest mango. Diosperus mannai with its nasty hair on the outside that must be carefully rubbed off. We learn about the dispersal patterns of these seeds in the dung of various animals. Some of the stories are nearly preposterous, with survival of a species depending on an improbable sequence of events.

At the observation deck, 35 year old Modest is quietly slapping sweat bees and identifying elephant visitors to the bai. These elephants are nearly family for him somehow. He is a man of quiet passion



We had several great walks through the forest at Langoue. Being in a rain forest of this kind is a unique sensory experience. There are 50 shades of green. Highlights of every other color. White and yellow mushrooms. Red and blue flowers. Brown and orange fruits and seeds. A mosaic of sunlit patches of underbrush from rays filtering through the forest canopy 30-50 meters above. The rich smells of composting leaves, mixed with the unique fragrances of hundreds of plant types, and embedded in a blanket of sultry forest air. Sounds worth listening to. The warning cries of birds. Monkeys moving through the trees ahead of us: shaking branches, and watching. Occasional elephant murmurs. Insects chirping their mating calls. Our own sounds. The silence, the noise, the smells, the sights – are all strange and captivating, keeping our senses lively, in a state of high alert, vaguely dangerous.

Over dinner, during forest walks and in the bai we talked about a broad range of conservation related issues. Logging is an important industry in Gabon and central Africa. Loggers take only about 5% of the forest biomass, often apparently targeting the Akoume tree. But the road building and expanded human presence had lots of bad side effects on areas previously inaccessible to people and therefore safe for wildlife. There are also erosion issues which impact rivers. The soil here is relatively poor, a mixture of sand and clay. Root systems are surprisingly shallow, often just 5-8 feet deep. So road building and removal of a few trees can lead to geometric levels of damage. But it is the human impact of the bush meat trade and poaching that most bothers our guides.

### **Journal: Loango**

After two nights at Langoue we hiked out early one morning. It was a short drive to meet a charter flight waiting for us on a jungle airstrip near Ivindo. Our flight took us from central Gabon to the coast. For more than an hour we traced the ribbons of several large rivers flowing through vast unbroken expanses of rain forest. Finally the rivers widened into mangrove-lined lagoons and marshlands that stretched as far as we could see in both directions. And then Gabon's legendary coastal beaches came into view, separated from the lagoons by spits of sand and narrow islands with a distinctive patchwork of fields and forests. Near the mouth of one of the lagoons was a small collection of buildings that Lee identified as the Loango lodge. The plane banked sharply and we landed in a field adjacent to the lagoon, our tires sinking deeply into soft sand.

Ed, head guide at Loango, met us at the plane to take us to the lodge via truck then boat across the chocolate brown waters of the lagoon. Fish jumped beside our boat as we docked at Loango. The change in weather from the rain forest climate of Langoue was a gigantic relief. A cool, dry, insect-free breeze blew across the water. Very nice to be out of the jungle.

Loango is possibly the headliner of the new Gabon national park system. It covers 600 square miles including 80 kilometers of pristine beaches bordered by a vast system of environmentally important lagoons bordered with extensive mangrove areas. Elephants, hippos, cattle and Nile

crocs roam the beaches. Humpback whales migrate close to shore. The lagoons and estuaries are loaded with game fish: barracuda, tarpon, jack, etc.

On tour with Ed and Lee we were briefed on the ecology of Loango. The *Cykoglotas* tree plays an important role in forest establishment on these fragile sandy oceanside soils. Lee believes the tree originated in Brazil and seeds floated to this coast from the Amazon, following the counterclockwise currents of the south Atlantic. Ed described the process of forest evolution from scrub brush where birds deposited seeds, to 30 meter trees with fruit to support a low density wildlife population. We saw ancient shell piles from early inhabitants of what was once the tribal kingdom of Loango. We heard about the slave trade in this area several hundred years ago. Ed complained about illegal trawler fishing just off the coast, and the government's unwillingness to enforce fisheries conservation plans. And he complained about enormous quantities of "sea trash" which drifts onto these beaches from the rivers and ports of more populated sections of west Africa.

We walked the beach. Leatherback turtle nests, created at high tide the previous evening, dotted the coast – some already scavenged by predators. Apparently this desolate coast is an important nesting site for these turtles which can weigh up to a ton and spend most of their lives (up to 50 years) in the open ocean, feeding on jellyfish. They lay more than 70 eggs in a 12-15 inch deep hole carved with their flippers, then cover and conceal the area with enormous quantities of sand. Ghost crabs raced across the beach, from the surf's edge to hundreds of holes in the sand. A purplish orange sunset colored the sky, with bright pinpoints of gas plumes on offshore oil rigs dotting the horizon.

The Loango visit helped to put the uniqueness and importance of Gabon in perspective for us. This is one of Africa's least populated countries, and the home of some of the continent's most important natural resources from a wildlife perspective. It is the home of ancient, intact rainforests, adjacent to other important forests of central Africa. It is home to vast coastal marshlands. It has significant rainfall and water resources. It enjoys relative economic and political stability, thanks in part to mineral resources. This combination of factors, and possibly others, makes Gabon unique, and is the impetus for WCS activities here.

Lee mentioned that the US government has become more attentive in Gabon recently, including a recent visit by General Wald, to top DoD Eucom guy - with whom I've spent some time. Another sign of the perceived importance of the country. And several US oil companies are quite visible here (Marathon, Hess, etc) – with something like 20% of US oil imports coming from the region.

## **Libreville and Home**

Our flight back to Libreville from the little town of Omboue near Loango took us over hundreds of miles of desolately beautiful coastal wet lands to Port Gentil. Offshore, the flares of oil rigs dotted the horizon. And in the wide rivers that converged at Port Gentil, giant booms of logs were being towed to shipping facilities, past the rusty skeletons of old tankers. On Saturday morning we say goodbye to the WCS gang and head home, beneficiaries of this remarkable experience, and committed to tell our story to others.