



## National Parks and Powerful Interests

*Preparing Gabon's Gamba Complex for an Uncertain Future*



- Ecotourism: A matter of the right contacts in the capital
- ‘We respect the wild animals, but they don’t respect us’
- ‘Happily we fight against all environmental problems’
- After Shell: cowboys, tourists or a ghost town?

Situated on the coast of the West-African Gabon, the Gamba Protected Area Complex offers the stuff nature documentaries are made of: elephants, crocodiles, gorillas, hippopotami and turtles abound and share the area with just a handful of people. Even by African standards its natural wealth is exceptional. But ‘nature protection’ is an elastic concept in Gabon. Oil fields in the heart of the area are being exploited and poaching around the oil town Gamba has soared as a consequence. A conservation project is attempting to save a gem in the face of powerful interests.

## Introduction

# Who is going to enforce the regulations?

At the World Environment Summit in Johannesburg in 2002, Gabon's president Omar Bongo made a surprise announcement. He told the world that Gabon would create 13 national parks, covering three million hectares - almost 11 per cent of the country's total surface area. Until that moment, Gabon had no national parks whatsoever, and only a handful of protected areas. WWF welcomed the decision and named it 'a rare occurrence in the history of conservation of Africa'.

In fact, WWF itself had played an instrumental role in the process that initiated the Johannesburg announcement. Together with a fellow international conservation organization, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), it had led a two-year field research program, in partnership with the local Water and Forests Services. This resulted in a joint proposal for the creation of a national parks system in Gabon, which was then accepted by the government. On the initiative of president Bongo, a National Council for the National Parks was created afterwards. Currently, discussions are ongoing on the future role and mandate of this council. Conservation organizations would like to see it evolve towards a parastatal, comparable to the Kenya Wildlife Service.

*Around oil town Gamba*

For the Gamba Protected Areas Complex – a collection of eight areas enjoying varying degrees of

protection – the announcement led to a much clearer situation. Henceforth the Complex will consist of two national parks, Loango National Park and Moukalaba-Doudou, with protected intermediate zones. 'The major challenge for the next period', says WWF's Gamba project leader Bas Huijbregts, 'will be to reach agreement with the government, the local population and the private sector on interior regulations for both parks and an appropriate protection status and zoning for the intermediate zones.'

In other words: the announcement of the creation of national parks in Gabon is welcome, but is really just the beginning of the process. Even when agreement has been reached on what will and will not be tolerated in the parks, it remains to be decided who will enforce the regulations. Presently, the few existing brigades are understaffed and lack funds, knowledge and motivation. Strategies to counter these problems have yet to be announced.

In the past years, the WWF project has provided assistance to the creation of community-based local associations in the fields of fisheries, ecotourism and environmental education. Local farmers are pleased with the construction of fencing systems to better protect the smallholder plantations against elephants. Some nice results have been achieved, but many

questions remain. Will the government support the establishment of effective wildlife brigades, with sufficient means and skills to perform their appointed task? What will happen to the national parks and the ecological corridor between them the moment Shell Gabon ends its operations in the heart of the Complex? Can people who need alternative sources of income be kept from poaching in the protected areas? Can multinational Shell be convinced that it has to take responsibility for the future of the area and for the people who came there following oil activities? How successful will efforts be to develop a sustainable form of community-based ecotourism in the Complex? And is it wise to stimulate these activities, considering the fragility of the area? With so many unanswered questions, WWF and its partners in the Gamba Complex face a challenging future in the coming years. ▲





## Ecotourism

# A matter of the right contacts in the capital

*“Do you want to see the hippos today, or shall we first concentrate on the elephants?” enquires Jean-Pierre Bayé, veteran WWF-employee in the Gamba area. It sounds like a question you might be asked when planning a visit to the zoo rather than a trip into the wild, but for the Loango National Park, Gabon’s oldest protected area, this is not an unrealistic question.*

Bayé, who grew up in the nearby village of Sette Cama, knows what he is talking about. As a boy, his father took him for regular trips into the wilds, teaching him everything there was to know about the exuberant nature and wildlife in the region. This proved invaluable for his later career as a WWF-ecoguard, tourist guide and environmental education officer. Apart from his exceptional knowledge, he impresses tourists by catching crocodiles at night with his bare hands. Bayé has also worked for the Gamba project as a researcher, helping take stock of



the wealth of fauna in the protected area. The most striking feature of the Loango NP is the enormous amounts of large mammals, especially primates, elephants and buffaloes. Also there are the plentiful and extremely diverse fish populations, as well as humpback whales and sea turtles that come to lay their eggs on the pristine beaches. The main reason for the abundant sea life is the interface between freshwater lagoons and the ocean currents. The lagoon is both the breeding ground for multiple species and a safe haven for fingerlings born in the Atlantic Ocean. Some 70 species of fish have been identified, and it is suspected that there are many more awaiting identification.

However, when preparing for our trip to the nature reserve, a problem arises. We can't leave immediately: 'If we go now, we will see no animals at all,' Bayé grumbles. The problem lies with a tourist trip into the same area that is organized by a French tour operator. This operator has stationed a pick-up truck in the Petit Loango area to drive tourists over the beach at low tide. The sight of the truck and the tourists drives animals away from the area for several hours (and also leaves permanent 'scars' in the fragile coastal savannas). Bayé and his colleague, *Eaux et Forêts* agent, Manacé Mba, are furious. 'Merde', they rage. The subject of their anger is this tourist operation in the area, set up some two years ago. WWF, WCS and many other stakeholders in the area have criticized his company's exploitation of the natural richness of the area at several occasions. A lodge has been built near the estuary, where sport-fishing possibilities are greatest. No construction is allowed within the protected area, but the Frenchman seems to have the right contacts in Gamba (where he also has substantial business interests) and, at ministerial level in Libreville, ensuring that he gets all the permits he needs. Several hours later, when we've finally taken off and

have arrived at the beach of Petit Loango, the open pick-up trucks approach at high speed, returning to the camp. The car is packed with tourists. Their waves are answered by Bayé's and Mba's angry glances. Returning by boat - after several encounters with elephants and hippopotami (a group of five, floating lazily in the water of the lagoon) - we pass the lagoon mouth again and see five or six speedboats lying at anchor with several non-African sport fishers aboard. For them, this is one of the best spots on earth. Here, world record catches in tarpon, shark, barracuda and red snapper have or can be set. Since no interior regulations for the parks exist until now, regulations for sport fishing are absent. This currently leads to competition between tour operators for the best fishing spots at the outlet of the lagoon, and between the sport fishermen and local subsistence fishermen. Also, best practices in sport fishing, such as catch and release, are still to be implemented. 'Especially during the weekend, you can see dozens of boats here,' says Bayé. 'Shell-employees also come here to fish.'



*Sport fishers in Petit Loango*

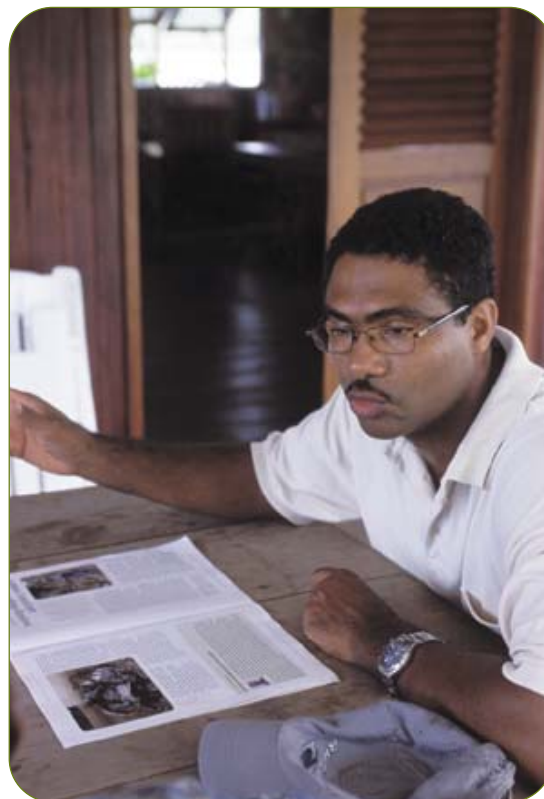


The next day we visit another tour operator in this area, Christian Omanda-Otando of Sette Cama Safari. An elegant, well-dressed Gabonese, he studied in Paris but returned to the region where he was raised to start a tourist agency. We talk with him on the terrace of his beautifully located new resort, at the lagoon near the limit of the reserve. 'I live in Libreville,' he says, staring out over the tranquil water, 'but I spend as much time as possible here in the Gamba Complex. Here I find my rest, everything is peaceful here.' Not everything though: this entrepreneur is also disappointed about the Frenchmen's activities, but even more so with his own government, 'which seems to prefer foreigners to the Gabonese.'

'The Ministry of *Eaux et Forêts* doesn't play by its own rules,' he complains. 'We asked for a permit to build a temporary camp in the region, but they said it was not allowed. Ok, we can accept that. Instead of the camp we've built this place. But a few months later this Frenchmen, who doesn't have a license from the Ministry of Tourism, starts building this lodge in the middle of the reserve. One bungalow after another.'

Gamba Vacances doesn't care about ecotourism at all, says Omanda-Otando. 'They are only interested in pleasing the tourists. With their speedboats they circle close around the hippos, five or six times days. These animals get so scared that they flee.'

Of course the real problem is not the Frenchman and his company, but the fact that someone with the right contacts and enough money is allowed to ignore the rules of the protected area, he says. The local *Eaux et Forêt* service seems unable to change that situation.



*Christian Omanda-Otando of Sette Cama Safari*

Confronted with this criticism, Madame Koumba, *Chef de brigade* in Sette Cama, says that she's aware of the situation, and that it's not the way that it should be. We meet the chef at her house, near the government office where visitors to Loango NP have to apply for an entrance permit. The present situation was created before she arrived here a year ago, Koumba says, and she cannot be held responsible for

### ***The richest tropical forest ecoregion of the continent***

The Gamba Protected Areas Complex is located in the richest tropical forest ecoregion in Africa. Actually the Complex is located in three ecoregions: the Atlantic Equatorial coastal forest, the Guinean-Congolese coastal mangroves and the Western Congolese forest-savannah mosaic. The ecoregions corresponding to the coastal forests of Gamba are Africa's richest wet land forests. The Gamba Complex borders the Atlantic Ocean with a 200 km long sandy littoral zone, comprising vegetated dunes and shifting coast line. Around the lagoons of Ngové (Iguela) and Ndogo the landscape is essentially flat, with many lakes as well as permanent and temporary open floodplains depending on the season. The variation in geological formations in the area has resulted in several habitats and the presence of a wide array of associated species.

In the northern and eastern sections of the Gamba Complex humid evergreen tropical forest confirm the biological richness of the area. Wooded and grass savannahs add to the habitat diversity. The Doudou Mountains, rising to approximately 700m are a centre of endemism. Biological research has uncovered an exceptionally rich flora and fauna. The presence of these different habitats, as well as their interconnections, serves to increase the biological diversity of the Gamba Complex and reinforces the uniqueness of this landscape.

it. The illegal practices are not her most pressing problem, however. 'I have worked for the Ministry for 17 years now, and I have never seen a situation as bad as this. I have no staff, just a driver and a secretary. We have two ecoguards, all of whose time is spent accompanying tourists. That's all. For scaring off the poachers you need security personnel. But I have none. I have no money, no petrol, no boats, only two pirogues, and no electricity. I've rung the alarm bell, and I've been to my superiors in the capital and demanded more staff. They have promised a lot of things, but nothing has happened. It's a hopeless situation here.'

If the government is not willing to pay for the things she needs to do her job, then WWF should help. 'But', she sighs, 'our relationship with WWF is not always as I would like.' That is confirmed by several WWF-employees, who are unhappy with what they see as the forest service's lack of initiative. 'The brigade sees us principally as a donor to who you go for money. But we cannot substitute for the government. It is unfortunately true that our

government doesn't support the wildlife brigades as it should, but in an area like Sette Cama, you don't need that many personnel to be able to efficiently control the whole southern part of the park. The only access to the park is by water. The brigade is built on the lagoon, so everybody passes literally under its eyes,' says one WWF-worker. 'The brigade doesn't even use the floating control barrier that we helped to build in the Ndogo lagoon, in front of the *Eaux et Forêt* post in Sette Cama. It is so sad, poaching and hunting in the reserve and in the protected areas are increasing again, there is no control at all.' But, adds one of his colleagues, 'the brigade is not the real problem. That lies higher up, right at the top of the ministry, where there are people who really do not seem to have any interest in the work their brigades and we are doing in the area here.'

Later, when we are back in the city of Gamba, we have a drink with Joseph Ngouwou, the newly appointed Eaux et Forêts counterpart of the WWF project in Gamba, who is also responsible for the situation in Loango National Park. For six years he

## The Gamba Protected Area Complex

The decision to classify 10 per cent of Gabon's surface area as national park has resulted in the accelerated development of both national parks foreseen in the Gamba Complex: Loango NP and Moukalaba-Doudou NP. The intermediate zones of some 30-50 km wide, also have a protected status. The total area of the Gamba Complex is 1,132,000 ha, which makes it the largest protected area in the country. Most of the Gamba Complex is uninhabited. There are 35 settlements in the total area, comprising in total no more than circa 2,000 people. Plantations cover only small areas in the direct neighbourhood of the settlements. The Moukalaba/Doudou Mountains area is completely uninhabited. The town of Gamba, with a population of some 7,000, is the only urban complex. Apart from the Gamba residents, most human pressure on the protected areas comes from the settlements bordering the area.

### NP Loango

The park consists of the former  $\frac{5}{8}$  and the former  $\frac{3}{4}$ , up to the border of the oil concession.

### NP Moukalaba-Doudou

The park consists of the former  $\frac{5}{8}$ , with the former  $\frac{7}{8}$  - and the former  $\frac{7}{8}$ .



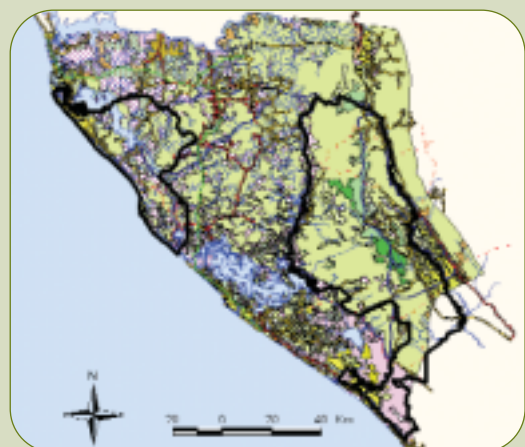


was himself *chef de brigade* in Sette Cama and he agrees that things have deteriorated since then. 'There has always been a problem of a lack of resources. You just can't do the job they expect you to do. But the situation is growing worse and we do have a credibility problem caused by these

uncontrolled tourists operations in the middle of the protected area. Local people are angry with that, and rightly so. They feel that they have been left in the lurch by the ministry and by WWF. I hope we can reverse that situation soon, although at the moment I can't tell you how we will approach this problem.' ▲

### ***One of Africa's largest tracts of protected land***

The Gamba Complex hosts a mosaic of ecological habitat types, including sandy seashores, freshwater lagoons, mangrove swamps, tropical forests (some undisturbed), gallery forests, secondary grasslands, and grassy savannahs. Most forest areas have been selectively logged. Logging is no longer permitted anywhere in the area. There is some agriculture around the settlements, but its effects on the area are minor.







WWF's Jean-Pierre Bayé in the classroom of the Billinge primary school

# ‘Happily we fight against all environmental problems’

*onjour, les enfants!’* As the WWF-delegation enters the classroom of the Billinge primary school in Gamba, some 30 children rise and return the greeting: *‘Bonjour messieurs!’* WWF-employee Jean-Pierre Bayé, *Eaux et Forêt* agent Manacé Mba and Peace Corps volunteer Jason Gray are here to give an environmental lesson, as they do twice a week in all primary schools in the city. To start with, everybody sings the so-called Ibonga-song, composed by Bayé himself.

*...So ladies and gentlemen, please help Ibonga for the future of the Complex of Protected Areas in the Southwest of Gabon. So on we go marching happily, this is why we walk proudly For we’ve decided to fight against all environmental problems...*



Today's lesson is on natural resources. What are they, what can you do with them? Soon the talk is about the Gamba area, where the children are growing up. With the help of a comic strip, Jason Gray gives a short introduction to the insects that live in the area while *Eaux et Forêt* agent Manacé talks about the dangers of poaching. 'Tourists from all over the world come here to see the large mammals. Where they live, all of these animals have been killed, they have to come here to see real elephants and gorillas. But when we do the same, hunt and kill our mammals, the tourists won't come anymore. We have to preserve nature, not for the white people, but for ourselves and our children, and also because we can earn money when tourists come here.'

Afterwards, we ask some of the children if they like these lessons. 'I like them very much,' Victor says, 'because we learn a lot and the lessons are more interesting than regular lessons.' Tatiana even mentions the occasion they all went out into the

Loango National Park on the yearly-organized expedition by the ecology club Ibonga and says it was her best experience ever. All the children repeat the message that no one should kill the elephants and other large animals.

The environmental message has been spread successfully throughout Gamba town and not only in primary schools. Everywhere in oil-city Gamba one can see murals, showing endangered species or scenes from the protected areas. Around half of the Gamba restaurants show signs on their walls from the campaign: *Resto sans Gibier* - identifying them as restaurants that do not have wildlife on the menu. It is clear that over the ten years it has been active in the Gamba area, WWF has firmly established its credibility with the local population as a consciousness-raiser and fighter against poaching. The local radio Mandji also spreads the message, by airing interviews each week on the protection of the Complex and the struggle against poachers. WWF



**Maroline Moutoula lives in Sette Cama.** We meet her one late-afternoon, while she is working together with her mother at the village's cultivated ground, which is across the water of the lagoon, opposite the village. Here she grows manioc and bananas. The women watch the two WWF-employees who have come to repair the solar energy driven electric fence around the communal plantation with an air of satisfaction. 'Until this breakdown, the system has worked perfectly', she explains. 'We had many problems with the elephants and hippos in the past, one day they completely raided our crops. That's over now. The only problem is that our men are too lazy to maintain the system, and than we have to wait for WWF to come.'



**Ulrich Mboumba is a fisherman based in Gamba.** He is also vice-chairman of the Association of Traditional Fishermen of the Ndougou Department which was created in 2002. With the support of the WWF and the Gamba Fisheries Brigade, the association aims to promote sustainable revenues for local fishermen within the fresh water systems of the Gamba Complex. 25 fisherman have joined so far. 'We hope to create co-operative facilities', says Mboumba, 'like the storage of ice, repair of outboard motors, but also defend our common interests.' These interests are threatened, the fishermen feel, by the commercial fishing in the lagoon, which is mostly carried out by foreigners from neighbouring countries like Togo and Senegal. 'These fishermen come here for two weeks or so, they work very hard, constantly fishing, with very large nets, and then they leave again, selling the fish in Port Gentil, or somewhere,' complains Mboumba. 'That's not how we work here. We don't want to see this illegal fishing in our lagoon,' says the vice-chairman of the association. 'The chiefs in the region support us, but there are other, more powerful people who hand over the permits to those fishermen. It's hard for us to compete with these powerful interests.'



also keeps its 'eyes and ears' on the bush market in Gamba, and with an extensive network of informants succeeds in effectively containing the bushmeat trade.

One of the most outspoken local fighters for nature conservation is the youth club Ibonga, which was initiated by the WWF's Jean-Pierre Bayé in 1999. The club organises education in schools, excursions, seminars and events. A yearly key event is the *Expedition Ibonga*, where a group of 25 to 30 students spend 14 days camping in Loango NP, with the assistance of Bayé and two ecoguards. The most active members of the ecology club are selected for this highly popular event. At present some 150 children are members of Ibonga.

In a conversation with a group of 6 boys and 2 girls from the club, all the familiar arguments for preserving the precious local nature come to the table. The evidence of generation gaps, of conflicting views with their parents or family, is particularly remarkable. 'My father was an active poacher,' one of them says, 'and I had to fight hard to make him change his mind. And of course, elephants and other large animals cause a lot of trouble, and people feel they have a right to kill them. But we have succeeded in convincing them that we should find other ways to tackle that problem.' Isn't it a bit strange, we ask, that children are educating their parents on this issue? 'Maybe,' Ibonga-member Joe Allogo says, 'but we have the opportunity to learn a lot at school, and here at Ibonga, and it's only normal that we pass this knowledge on to them. They have no problem listening to us.'



Later when we talk with a few school directors, members of the executive committee of the youth club, they comment on the important role Ibonga can play in the period of transition which is widely regarded as imminent. 'Oil has determined life here for several decades. Now this is going to change and people are scared about what will happen. The mentality is changing. The message is spreading that we have to take our future into our own hands. Tourism can become the alternative for oil. The Ibonga-members, with their passion and their

knowledge of nature here, can play an important role in this change of mentality and of attitude. It's the kind of organisation we need in a new Gabon, where people take responsibility for themselves.'



*Meeting with Ibonga club members*

**Jean Mbouity is chef de canton of Pitonga.** We first met him four years ago. Now he is 81 years old, but that's all that seems to have changed in his tiny, sleepy village near the border of the lagoon. 'Indeed', says Mbouity, 'not much has changed. We live an easy life here, which is good for human beings. A quiet life, not like in the city.'

Nevertheless there is a new school building. And these days tourists also occasionally stop by and visit the village for an hour or so, bringing in a little bit of cash. The problems with the elephants eating the villagers' manioc has not changed, the chief says. 'We respect the wild animals, like you people want us to do, but they do not respect us, he tells the WWF delegation. 'My wife is crying about the damage they cause, but what can we do? I would like to shoot those animals, but that's not allowed. Also, the fields are close to the school, and if we shoot the animals, the elephants or the buffaloes, all the children will protest.'

'We've told you several times that you have to concentrate your plantations, you can't defend so many different fields', says agent Manacé Mba in response. 'You have to cooperate, not every man for himself. Shooting elephants is no solution, there are over 10,000 of them here, so you have to find another solution. But we are offering you our help.'

Later, back in the boat again, the agent says: 'Often, the people in the lagoon are partially to blame themselves. They do not take responsibility and blame us for the problem of the elephants. We offered to help them build fences, but we often had to do everything ourselves. And when in a storm, a tree falls and damages the closures, they come to us, claiming the damage. But that's not how it works, they have to organise themselves.'







# Helping to stop the turtle egg plundering

The eggs fall like ping-pong balls. Shiny white, it's not hard to see them fall in the dark of the night. It's two o'clock in the morning and we're sitting on our knees on the beach by the Atlantic Ocean, watching a big leatherback drop her eggs. After half an hour or so, egg laying has been completed, some thirty eggs rest in the hole that the huge animal of some 1.5 m. length had dug earlier. After resting, the mighty arms start swinging and cover the eggs with sand. Then the turtleback slowly lifts itself up and shuffles back to the sea.

The two local research assistants and a French student, Julie, start making notes and mark the nest. All of them camp on this beach, some 10 km from Gamba, throughout the nesting season which starts in October and ends in April. Every night they count nests, tag the animals and observe hatching success and predation (by crabs, monkeys, mongooses and monitor lizards). On average they count 8-10 turtles

dropping their eggs a night, which is a lot. The beaches of the Complex serve as an important breeding area for marine turtles in Central Africa, most notably the leatherback, but three other species are also found here. For leatherbacks, these beaches down to the border with neighboring Congo, may be the most important nesting area in the world.

The presence of the two teams helps to stop the plundering of the nests by the turtles' biggest natural enemy, humans. 'Besides a few professional egg collectors, many villagers used to drive here to the beach late in the evening, wait for the animals to come and immediately after the turtles had laid the eggs, they would collect them and go home. That happens less and less thanks to the surveillance and the education which is being done by the project in Gamba.'



Gabon may have the largest gorilla population in the whole of Africa. In the Gamba Complex too, western lowland gorillas can be found nesting in the dense vegetation along the dunes which is one of the unique traits of the area. After the discovery of a group of some 5-10 gorillas in a 200 ha area of forest behind the Sette Cama Wildlife brigade, it was decided to start a process of 'habituation'. We asked two of the people involved in this process, Gabonese Christian Nzeingui and American ex-Peace Corps volunteer Julie Velichinsky why this was necessary. 'People here in Gabon don't know anything about gorillas,' explains Christian, 'it's not like in Rwanda or Uganda. And if you don't know these animals, you don't respect them. You might even hunt and kill them. We hope to show local people in the future more about these animals. And of course there might be ecotourism benefits too.'

But at present that's only a remote possibility, habituation of gorillas is a long and difficult process. Every day, Christian and Julie - together with two other colleagues - patrol transects defining assigned research zones, looking for fresh signs such as tracks, faeces, food remnants, nests, etc. All traces are recorded. During a direct encounter, when the trackers use grunting sounds to calm the gorillas, data on behaviour and diet are recorded. In six months, 99 encounters with the gorillas have been recorded. In the beginning every encounter with the gorillas ended with the animals fleeing rapidly but now half of the encounters end with the gorillas retreating at a slow pace, without any vocalizations, relate Julie and Christian during a walk in the forest.

They are now awaiting a visit from world renowned primatologist, Magdalena Bermejo, who successfully habituated three gorilla groups in Northern Congo, who will provide one month's training to the trackers and identify and train potential future trackers.



*Christian Nzeingui points at gorilla traces*





*In the neighborhood of Shell's Camp Vendo*

## After Shell: cowboys, tourists or a ghost town?

*Gamba's mayor is also the city's largest business man. He earns a good income from renovating the old houses of Shell-employees who have left Gamba because of the decline in activities in the area. Most of the houses are snapped up by local people, showing their confidence in the area's future.*

The *maire central* is also dreaming of a prosperous future for the area once oil exploitation has ended in the Gamba Complex. 'Oil might stop, but we will always have tourism,' Jean-Louis Guissiga argues. 'Our top priority is therefore to decrease the isolation of this area. Then we can exploit its large tourist potential.' The mayor is right to describe Gamba as an

isolated enclave. The city can only be reached - at prohibitive cost - by air and by an off-the-road sand track that is partially inundated during the rainy season. No other roads run through the Complex and there are no boat connections to places outside the area. Consequently Guissiga is calling for the immediate re-establishment of the old sea-connection with Port Gentil, and possibly, sometime in the future, for the construction of a road. 'Then it will be worthwhile building a large hotel here in Gamba,' he says. The introduction of trophy hunting for rich locals, expats, and foreigners is a good option for Gamba, he feels, following the example of the famous Zimbabwean Campfire project, which he visited some years ago with a WWF mission. 'We really need the money that comes from those kind of activities,



this will offer an alternative to local people. Because of the enclave-character of this city, life is very expensive. Probably three times as expensive as elsewhere in Gabon. Because of that, people are tempted into illegal hunting activities. With a well-developed management system for the protected areas, we might develop legal hunting activities that could bring in much-needed income.'

The mayor is a prominent member of the *Comité de Reflexion*, composed of local stakeholders who are trying to envision a future for the area post-oil. Considering Gamba's enormous dependency on Shell, this is no easy task. It's not only the direct and indirect employment that spring from the oil activities, the city also depends on the British/Dutch oil multinational for its roads, electricity, petrol and transport infrastructure (without Shell there would be no regular flights to the capital Libreville). Relative good public infrastructure in the area, such as schools, were build with local income tax from Shell employees and related contractors.

Clearly, it will not be easy to end this dependency and replace it by locally inspired activities. It could even be argued that it would be better for the conservation area if (part of) the inhabitants of oil town Gamba, once their *raison d'être* had left, would leave too. But this would be a hard message to get across. Still, WWF-official Bas Huijbregts would like to see the Comité also debate the possibilities outside the protected area. Not only from a conservation point of view, but also because he sees only a limited role for tourism in the area. 'Ecotourism does have an impact at the moment, and as WWF we have stimulated these activities. Other organizations, such as Conservation International and WCS, as well as a EU-funded project, also try to stimulate tourism in this exceptionally beautiful area. But the expectations of a future role for ecotourism here in the region are far too high. Tourism activities are only possible in a handful of areas in the Complex. Like some sport fishing in Sette Cama, walks on the beaches, river

tours, etc. Activities that are being practiced already, but which could attract more tourists. But that's it. The areas of Moukalaba and the Monts Doudou are hardly accessible, it's very difficult to build some infrastructure over there.'

In his view, the future departure of Shell-Gabon requires collaborative planning on their 'exit-strategy' and the future of Gamba town. Pro-actively helping the 'imported' people of Gamba to build a new life outside the Complex could be part of that strategy.

Although Shell's production has declined steadily over the last years, it has started to stabilize thanks to constant efforts and new technologies and discoveries. To demonstrate its continued commitment to the area, Shell Gabon points to the recent extension of the Rabi-field concession by a further 20 years, and the company's investments of over a hundred million dollars in 2003 in the area. 'These investments strongly augment our window of opportunity to jointly work with Shell, other operators and the government on the development of a sustainable future of the area', says Huijbregts.

However most people in Gamba are unconvinced of this commitment with the majority believing that Shell will be gone within five years, and that it will sell its concessions to smaller oil companies like Perenco or Ameranda Hess (which already have some activities in the area). These so-called 'cowboy-companies' specialize in the exploitation of remaining oil in nearly exhausted concession areas and have a poor reputation when it comes to respecting environmental regulations. 'These companies can only do a worse job here than Shell has done,' says the WWF's Bas Huijbregts, who'd rather see Shell stay in the conservation area.

'It is our intention to stay in this area as long as possible,' says Shell-Gamba's public relations officer Roger Ratanga (requests for an interview with the management of the company are turned down, only

### ***Oil city Gamba concentrates 75 % of the population***

The population within the borders of the Gamba Complex is concentrated in the city of Gamba (some 7,000 inhabitants). The city developed from zero as a result of the start of oil exploitation in the area, some 40 years ago. One out of four wage-earners is directly involved in the oil business, most others are indirectly involved.

The rural village population (presently 2,300 inhabitants, density: 0.2 inhab./km<sup>2</sup>), has steadily diminished, due to the national trend of rural exodus. The villages have regrouped in 3 areas, without real communication between them: the section of Iguela in the west, around Mourindi in the east and in the centre, around the Ndogo lagune, Gamba and Mayonami.



### ***Shell supports research of the Smithsonian Institution in Gamba***

'Out of our first research results, you cannot but conclude that oil exploration in the heart of the Gamba Complex leaves the ecosystems remarkably undisturbed. Not more than 100 m. away from the actual exploitation activities, you find pristine nature. And you have to realize that at some moment in the history of the exploitation of these Rabi-Toucan oilfields, 400 people were involved there.' Michelle Lee, director of the Gamba Complex Biodiversity Project, admits that she herself is surprised by these results. 'It seems to show that oil exploitation in a national park, if treated as an offshore activity, prohibiting any lasting effects, is possible without ruining biodiversity.' But, beware, she says, these are only preliminary results, research is continuing, for instance on the impact of roads. And of course, oil exploitation has had large environmental effects on the surroundings of the city of Gamba.

A few low buildings in Shell's Camp Vembo near Gamba house a remarkable partner of the oil giant: the Smithsonian Institution. At the time of our visit, some 10 Gabonese are busy in the research centre processing large numbers of insects, amphibians and reptiles - collected in the Gamba Complex - preparatory to classifying and storing them. In 2000, through a grant of US\$ 2.8 million, the Shell Foundation facilitated the Smithsonian to study the impact of oil and gas operations on several areas of high biodiversity value around the world for a five-year period. Gamba was selected as the first site to be studied.

However, the Institution has so far undertaken only a monitoring and assessment of biodiversity study. WWF project leader Bas Huijbregts comments that 'although these extensive taxonomic studies will provide a wealth of new information on the status of biodiversity of the Gamba Complex, it is not really clear how it will contribute to long term protection and management of the area, or how it will help Shell and the government in addressing all the issues linked to declining oil production and the future management of these biologically rich oil concessions. One could question why these large funds were targeted at scientific research, while much more pressing needs are identified.'



*A new open-air theater in Gamba will be used in the environmental education*

written questions are possible). 'We've been active here for 40 years now, and we do realize the dependency of this city on Shell. Consequently we feel that it is a major achievement that people here now want to think about a future without Shell. Previously they have always declined to do that. The creation of the national parks here is also a sign that things are changing. Everybody now acknowledges that in the future other means will be necessary to promote this area.'

The change in mentality that Shell's Ratanga sees with people now starting to think for themselves rather than expecting 'that Shell will solve all their problems,' allows the oil-multinational to join efforts for a sustainable development of the area. 'We've been doing a lot for the environment here, now it's time to start thinking about the socio-economic future of this area. But we won't take the lead here, instead we will be supporting the work of the *Comité de Reflexion*.'

In the meantime, talks are taking place about the establishment of a Gamba Partnership for Conservation between Shell, the Smithsonian Institute, the Wildlife Conservation Society (an American NGO that works in the northern part of the Complex) and WWF. Bas Huijbregts' aim is to secure a form of long-term financing for the conservation and sustainable management of the area, by means of a trust fund or other financing mechanisms. 'Today, more than ever, oil companies have to look at what they leave behind, and to accept a more holistic participation in development and profit-sharing. I think Shell is realizing that now.'



### ***The potential of ecotourism***

In April 2001, the WWF's Gamba project helped to create a local-community based ecotourism association, Cecotour PML. The objective of this non-profit association was to create sustainable employment for local people and to generate revenue for park management and local communities. Its philosophy is based on a 'rule of three': one third of the revenues generated go to the nearest Wildlife Brigade, one third to the village where the tourists spend the night and one third goes back to the association. In fiscal year 2002, Cecotour received about 30 groups of visitors. Cecotour has two paid staff and works with village collaborators and agents of the Sette Cama Wildlife Brigade. Presently the main target group is the expat community in the country. For most foreign tourists, Gabon, and certainly Gamba, is too expensive a destination. Air France does fly to the country four times a week, but fares are high. They are even higher for a return trip to Libreville-Gamba, the only way to visit the Complex. Regular eco-tourists are not amused when they are quoted prices of 330 dollar for a 40 minutes flight.

Christian Omanda-Otando of Sette Cama Safari says that Gamba as an ecotourism destination is almost impossible to sell. 'The costs of flying are outrageous. Thanks to the corrupting influence of oil. Oil companies pay whatever is necessary, it's not a problem for them if there are only a few people on the plane. To change that situation, I feel we could best start a ferry connection.'



## WWF's Gamba project: main goals, obstacles and results

The long-term development objective of the project is to safeguard Gamba's original and representative ecosystems, and maintain biodiversity in harmony with sustainable utilisation. The project's purpose is to establish efficient and equitable natural resource management systems for the Gamba Protected Areas Complex. During the first five years the following outputs were expected.

<b>Goals</b>	<b>Obstacles</b>	<b>Results</b>
Clearly defined management zones within the complex to be established	Slow process to get all stakeholders to agree	Two draft management plans proposed to the Gabonese government. Need for revision following the creation of the national parks and the establishment of the National Council for National Parks.
Internal regulations to be defined and strengthened in accordance with the proposed zoning	idem	Internal regulations strengthened
Effective management and protection systems to be established	No effective surveillance and law enforcement because of the weak structure of the Wildlife and Hunting Department	Steps taken on the route to an innovative public-private sector partnership for the long-term management of the Complex
Applied management-oriented research to be defined and initiated	After extensive first inventories, low level of long term ecological monitoring research due to inadequate funding levels	Two national parks created as a result of extensive socio-economic and biological studies
Formal and informal education concerning the need to manage natural resources to be improved	The wide range of stakeholders, from local villagers to the central government and private sector, each demand a targeted communication strategy tailored to their needs	Long-term local environmental education programme up and running, with involvement of local associations, radio and schools. Understanding and acceptance by oil companies of the protected status of their areas of operations and their consequent responsibilities
Rural development by means of alternatives that contribute to the conservation of the area to be identified and tested with communities	Lack of local experience in small business development and private initiative. 'Easy' dependency on oil sector	Creation of community-based local associations in the fields of fisheries, ecotourism and environmental education. Better acceptance of elephants through the installation of fences around plantations. Economic activities that contribute to the conservation of the Complex identified and tested

# To conclude

The future role of several of the main stakeholders in the Gamba Complex is still surrounded by uncertainty. The WWF's Gamba project is – successfully, it seems – seeking new funds now that the 5-year period of Dutch finance has run its course. Further uncertainty surrounds the government's intentions. After declaring the national parks, it has subsequently done little to put its resolve into practice. Also Shell Gabon adds to the uncertainty. The company has in many ways acted as a responsible enterprise, but refuses to discuss its future plans in the area (although Shell now seems to be ready to support a 'sustainable communities program' in the area).

The continuous uncertainty is a source of irritation to the local population, who feels insecure and abandoned. The WWF project has done a splendid job in sensitizing people to the need for conservation. However, this positive mood could soon evaporate should people begin to feel that they are getting nothing in return.

At present, poaching is more or less restricted to areas on the eastern periphery and around Gamba town. It could increase significantly with the forecasted decrease in oil activity and the subsequent growth in the numbers of unemployed and inactive people among the general population. The same could also happen with timber exploitation, which at the moment

occurs only around the Complex and occasionally within its limits, but on a relatively small scale.

As WWF sees it, oil companies, in particular Shell Gabon, have brought about significant social changes in the Complex, which have resulted in a negative - direct and indirect - impacts on the environment. Consequently it feels that Shell and other oil companies should participate in future financial mechanisms for the long-term protection and sustainable development of the Complex. Also, Shell should adopt responsibility for when it will sell out its assets to smaller, environmentally less sensitive operators. Understandably, the oil company is reluctant to be held solely responsible for the future of the area. And although it's a sensitive issue, there's also the question of the Gabonese government's responsibility. It has collected taxes from the oil exploitation in the area for 40 years, but has invested a negligible amount of that money in the area.

The only way of achieving the goals and objectives of the Gamba project is to collaborate with, and get support from, all major stakeholders in this very complex socio-economic environment. At the moment, such collaboration is just starting to happen. The Gamba project's failure to create this cooperation right from the start in 1997 is partly due to what seems to be a strategic error in the initial phase, where much emphasis was put on conducting a wide variety of socio-economic and environmental surveys, and little attention was given to the 'bigger picture'. On the other hand, the creation of the two national parks along the lines the WWF project has proposed, should be considered a big success; which seems to prove that, against all odds, nature conservation agencies can play an important role in redirecting unsustainable social, economic and environmental processes.

Without effective surveillance and law enforcement however, management of the Complex's natural resource base will be impossible. Capacity building of the Wildlife and Hunting Department is thus the key to success. The Gamba project is currently instrumental in developing a long-term management plan for the Complex in consultation with public and private stakeholders. Progress is slow but continuous. What is needed is a multi-actor partnership, including a significant contribution from the private sector, a clear commitment from the government as well as from international actors. Including WWF. ▲

## Funding

The Dutch government financed the WWF Gamba project for five years from 1997. Two separate smaller projects (a study of bushmeat and one on future possibilities of the protected areas) were financed by USAID. The Dutch financing ended in June 2002 and the project has subsequently experienced serious financial problems. Finding new funds to continue the activities has been a main focus of the project in 2002. The project staff was reduced by half. A bridging fund from WWF Netherlands brought some relief. The gorilla project is financed by WWF Denmark and WWF Switzerland. Significant new funding is in the pipeline: from the US government under the Congo Basin Forest Partnership initiative, from Unesco under their Central Africa World Heritage Forest Initiative, the Dutch Government, WWF Netherlands, US Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as from grants from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the MacArthur foundation and others.





### **Acknowledgements**

All texts written by Hans van de Veen of Bureau M&O - *Environment & Development Productions*

©WWF November 2003

Published by the DGIS-WWF Tropical Forest Portfolio based at WWF International.  
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Pictures: Bas Jongerius, Amsterdam

Layout and design: MMS Grafisch Werk, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Production: Bureau M&O, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



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