

# NPS Technical Assistance to Gabon, central Africa

## Trip Report

November 29-December 4, 2004

### Technical Assistance Team:

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## I. Summary

In support of President Bush's Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) initiative, NPS staff conducted a USAID-reimbursed workshop on the draft parks legislation for Gabon's newly created national park system, at the request of the U.S. Ambassador and Gabonese President Bongo. NPS coordinated this workshop with the Gabonese Government and the US Embassy in Libreville, Gabon.

The workshop included over 60 participants and served as a public hearing on Gabon's draft parks legislation. Changes and edits were made to the existing text and the new text was made available at the end of the two day workshop. Comments on the new draft are being solicited by Parks Gabon, also known as the National Council on National Parks (CNPN). CNPN hopes to have the parks legislation passed by Gabon's National Assembly by March 2005.

NPS also was invited and attended a meeting between CNPN and Gabon's Environment Ministry, including its Minister and senior officials responsible for overlapping areas of park management. Topics included the draft parks legislation, aerial parks surveys, coastal fisheries patrols and establishing linkages between the US and Gabon's National Forestry School.

The NPS team also made a field trip to Loango National Park, located along the southwest coastal region of the country known as the Gamba complex, prior to the workshop, which yielded considerable insights about ranger and guide training, trail maintenance, ecotourism facilities and law enforcement protection efforts and needs in the park.

Finally, surplus NPS ranger uniforms and boots were officially donated and delivered to the CNPN at the closing of the parks legislation workshop.

## II. Background

President Bongo established Gabon's first thirteen national parks by decree in August 2002. A visit by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, and a later visit by top US Department of State, Interior and Agriculture officials laid the political groundwork for future US financial support and technical assistance for Gabon. While much of this funding will be funneled through the USAID Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE) in support of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, some is being transmitted through the NPS international program in the form of this and another technical assistance mission on concessions management.

Gabon's new national parks were created in a similar manner to many U.S. national parks – many were forest reserves created before the establishment of a national parks agency.

Assistance by the NPS to Gabon has been a foreign policy priority voiced by both the USAID and the US Department of State, and was directly requested by the Gabonese President.

### **III. Evaluation Factors**

The NPS has established a number of evaluation factors to guide its international activities and assess the benefits and merits of such work.

#### **Established relationship with a country; usually a formal agreement**

The NPS team operated under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed in 2002 between the NPS and Gabon's CNPN, as approved by the U.S. Department of State.

#### **Demonstrable Results**

See section IV below.

#### **Significant potential for capacity building in the country**

NPS advice was solicited throughout the course of the visit on a range of park management, legislative and training issues. Gabonese authorities made many requests for training that would build their national capacity for parks management.

#### **Urgent and compelling need**

Two years have already transpired since the official Presidential decree establishing Gabon's first national parks in September 2002. Both the national park system and the 13 individual national parks require effective legal frameworks before successful ecotourism, conservation and management can be established. Gabon would like to pass this parks legislation by spring 2005, in advance of the Gabonese presidential election campaign season that will overshadow all other domestic activities. Additionally, for the Lope and Minkebe nominations to be successfully considered by the World Heritage Committee, management plans must be in place. Finally, Gabon is a model of stability in central and west Africa and an Administration priority for support in the region.

#### **Shared natural or cultural features**

Gabon and the US have in common many natural area features, including coastal parks, protected areas close to population centers and national parks that were created out of forestry reserves.

#### **Issues of common concern**

Deforestation, wildlife conservation, endangered species, national park management and World Heritage site nominations are among the many areas of common concern. Gabon is home to 80% of all of Africa's gorillas and chimpanzees and the center of snail biodiversity in Central Africa. Two national parks are being put forth for nomination to the World Heritage Convention in 2005 – Lope and Minkebe – and the NPS will need to know about the status of these nominations to advise the U.S. Permanent Representative to UNESCO when the issue comes before the World Heritage Committee.

#### **Important to U.S. foreign policy**

Secretary of State Powell announced the creation of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) in September 2002. The U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development have both pursued the active participation of the NPS in the CBFP, which includes

Gabon among the six central African nations within the CBFP. USAID has dedicated, and Congress has approved, \$53 million to the three year effort to assist the Congo Basin nations.

### **Potential for effective follow-through**

Potential remains extremely high for effective follow-through, due to the enthusiastic support of the U.S. Ambassador to Gabon, the USAID program manager for CARPE (Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment) and the Government of Gabon. Gabonese officials, including Environment Minister Doumba and CNPN Permanent Secretary Adiahenou, have requested follow-on activities by the NPS.

### **Discernible benefits to U.S. parks and NPS**

Innovative ways to manage parks in a nation ‘starting from scratch’ provides NPS staff, particularly management (Deputy Director Murphy, deputy policy chief Fagan) and supervisory (i.e., Superintendent Soller) with new perspectives on park management and visitation that can be beneficial in designing future NPS policies and procedures.

### **Cost-effective**

There is no cost to the NPS – all project and travel funds are provided by a reimbursable agreement between USAID and the NPS. Time required out of the office is held to the minimum necessary to achieve goals of the activity.

### **Cost sharing with another country or partner(s)**

The USAID and NPS signed a Participating Agency Support Agreement (PASA) in September 2004 to work together to deliver workshops and technical assistance on parks management and concessions management. USAID is providing all funding, while NPS provides in-kind contribution of technical expertise, linkages and donation of surplus equipment.

### **Is NPS the best agency to do the project?**

Yes. Nearly every nation on earth has approached the NPS for technical assistance and advice on the establishment or maintenance of a national park system. Gabon has no prior experience with national park management and specifically requested NPS assistance, through a letter from the Gabonese Ambassador to the U.S. to the Director of the NPS. NPS has the most extensive park system on the planet. USAID and the State Department have also requested NPS assistance. Ergo, the NPS is the best agency to undertake this project.

## **IV. Demonstrable Results**

- The NPS coordinated a 2-day **public hearing and workshop** on the draft Gabonese park legislation, facilitated by the CNPN Permanent Secretary.
- More than **60 attendees** participated in the workshop, including all 15 park conservateurs, local and international NGO representatives, and officials from the Ministries of Finance, Tourism, Defense and Environment.
- NPS’s visit to Libreville facilitated a **trilateral meeting** between the NPS, the CNPN Permanent Secretary and the Minister of Environment and his staff.
- The CNPN-Environment Ministry-NPS meeting also served as the U.S. **Ambassador’s** first meeting with Minister Doumba.
- **Needs assessment** at Loango National Park – NPS was able to travel through the Gamba complex with the Loango NP Conservateur, meet the Forestry brigade rangers working under his command at the park and observe the level of inexperience among the locally trained eco-guides during an excursion into the Petit Loango section of the park.

- Discussions with CNPN regarding next steps elicited a request for NPS technical assistance on **concessions management**. It was agreed that NPS will deliver a workshop on this topic in the spring of 2005.
- NPS conveyed a more realistic expectation of the ability of national parks to address **poverty reduction**.
- Deputy Director Murphy explained that U.S. national parks are created “**in perpetuity**,” in reference to Article 14 of the draft Gabonese park legislation, which left this open to interpretation. This elicited the clarification from CNPN that Article 14 was only applicable outside the park, in the buffer zone.
- In reference to Article 24 of the draft Gabonese park legislation, Deputy Director Murphy made an intervention to argue for the inclusion of a mention of **cultural resources**, which was agreed to by CNPN.
- Deputy Director Murphy agreed to help Minister Doumba establish linkages between the Gabonese **National Forestry School** and similar American institutions.
- **Surplus NPS equipment donation** – transfer to the CNPN of the first three of a total 25 boxes of surplus boots, shoes and ranger clothing was accomplished at the conclusion of the legal workshop. [Embassy will ensure full transfer to CNPN]
- **Relations between CNPN and NPS were strengthened** at the leadership and staff levels – Deputy Director Murphy extended an invitation to Loango NP conservateur Augustin to visit the US as a management assistant at NPS headquarters and a local NPS unit.

## V. Key Findings

- The draft Gabonese **parks legislation** has been immeasurably improved, not only through NPS intervention and commentary, but through the many remarks by the park conservateurs, local and international NGO representatives and ministry officials.
- Dedicated **legal professionals** have been working on the draft parks legislation, but have not necessarily possessed adequate reference, background or experience in national parks policy, law or management to fully shape the desired law.
- **European Union** commitment to technical assistance and conservation in the Congo Basin and Gabon is long and broad-based and promises to extend at least through 2009.
- Substantial technical and bureaucratic **roadblocks** to successful ecotourism in Gabon remain, but are not insurmountable.
- Serious deficiencies in **eco-guide** abilities and park trail maintenance became evident during the excursion into Loango NP, but can easily be corrected with improved training and trail management assistance. (see addendum below)
- **Strong commitment** by the Gabonese environmental leadership to national parks was evident.
- **CNPN possesses energetic and flexible leadership** and had a cadre of capable and thoughtful managers among the fifteen conservateurs selected to oversee the national parks.
- **Diversification of the national economy** – must include the larger services and tourism industry, not only the establishment of the national parks and facilities for visitors to find accommodation and travel arrangements.
- **Rural economic opportunities** were in evidence through the use of young local men as ecoguides (despite their shortcomings, described below) and indigenous fishermen and eating establishments catering to the tourist trade.

## VI. NPS Technical Assistance Team Schedule & Meetings

The NPS team would like to acknowledge the incomparable assistance of the Regional Environment Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Libreville, for being the vital liaison with Parcs Gabon in arranging the workshop on civic engagement, as well as for creating the opportunities to visit the Mondah National Forest north of Libreville as well as to accompany conservateur Herve Ndong on a visit to Monts de Cristal National Park. Advice and insight tendered by the US Forest Service as well as WWF-Gabon was invaluable, particularly regarding next steps in the cooperative relationship between the NPS and Parcs Gabon.

The following represents an overview of the Team's schedule and officials that the Team visited with.

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Oct. 31 | Arrive Libreville; meeting with Embassy DCM Kathleen Dahnani; evening reception at Embassy REO's home attended by Embassy staff, and representatives from Parcs Gabon (Deputy Director Ntougou, Communications chief Ndjimbi), WWF, WCS & the European Union |
| Nov. 30 | Eco-guided tour (EU/WWF-trained) into Petit Loango section of Loango NP; return flight back to Libreville  |
| Dec. 1  | Formal meetings with: US Ambassador Walkley & Embassy staff; European Union Tourism Project Contractor; WWF country director; and CNPN Permanent Secretary and staff   |
| Dec. 2  | Legal Framework workshop/public hearing  |
| Dec. 3  | Breakfast meeting with WCS project leader; formal meeting with Minister of Water and Forests, CNPN and US Ambassador; meeting with CNPN, NGO's and EU; closing session of workshop – presentation of edited text of parks legislation                        |
| Dec. 4  | Return to USA.   |

Meetings were held with the following Gabonese Government, EU and NGO representatives:

- **Emile Doumba**, Minister of Water and Forests
- **Rene Adiahen**, Permanent Secretary, National Parks Council (CNPN)
- **R. Barrie Walkley**, U.S. Ambassador to Gabon & Sao Tome
- **Fabien Sordet**, European Union forestry expert
- **Juan Marti Pique**, European Union forestry expert
- **Eki Waitkuwait**, European Union detailee to the CNPN
- **Bridget Carr**, WWF country director
- **Lee White**, WCS country director

During the trip, the following individuals were also contacted on various issues:

- **Samuel Luechli**, US Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission
- **Matthew Cassetta**, US Embassy Regional Environment Officer
- **Barbara Martin**, US Embassy Administrative Officer
- Ministers/Deputies/Staff, Ministries of Water and Forests (E&F), Finance & Tourism; CNPN
- **Nicole Muloko**, WCS
- **Nicolas Hubert**, Conservation International
- **Nicaise Moulombi**, local Gabonese NGO
- **Bas Huijbregts**, WWF Gamba coordinator

- **Rombout Swanborn**, Dutch ecotourist company manager
- E&F Field Brigades, Gamba, Sette Cama
- Owners, Sette Cama Safari Lodge

## Addendum

### **Ecoguide training and performance assessment:**

It was represented to us that the indigenous ecoguides had been through training recently sponsored by the EU. During our hike, the ecoguides became disoriented and lost. Our group had to backtrack and was stranded on the beach for over an hour. It was obvious from this incident that the guides had not received adequate training. Had our party been a group of tourists rather than a group of park professionals, this could have been a dangerous and even tragic situation.

Some examples of obvious shortcomings:

- The ecoguides had neither maps nor compasses or GPS;
- They possessed no emergency equipment: no cell or satellite phone;
- They carried no extra food;
- The trail they followed was not marked with trail signs or any sort of directional marker;
- They gave no orientation to us before we left other than what wildlife we might see;
- No safety instructions were given; what to do in case we became separated, etc.;
- We were given no instructions as to what we should carry with us other than rain ponchos;
- No liability release forms were signed; no instructions about liability and insurance.