

NPS Technical Assistance to Gabon, central Africa

Trip Report

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Technical Assistance Team:

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I. Summary

Supporting the President's Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) initiative, NPS staff conducted a USAID-reimbursed workshop on civic engagement for Gabon's national parks agency. NPS coordinated the workshop with Parcs Gabon, also known as the National Council on National Parks (CNPN), and the US Embassy in Libreville, Gabon. Workshop participants included all 15 park conservateurs, (superintendents), Parcs Gabon management staff, European Union (EU) technical assistance specialists seconded to CNPN, as well as representatives from the Gabonese Ministry of Tourism, WWF, WCS and a private lodging concessionaire.

NPS staff met with NGO's to discuss recent conservation developments prior to the workshop. Embassy-Libreville's Regional Environment Officer hosted a reception for the NPS team, inviting representatives from Parcs Gabon, WCS, WWF, the Embassy and the EU. The NPS team leader conferred with Parcs Gabon regarding the selection of candidates for next spring's planned US workshop for four Gabonese parks staff and the four candidates were announced at the end of the workshop.

The NPS team made two site visits, one a half day hike along a signed interpretive trail in the Mondah National Forest north of Libreville, managed by the Forestry Ministry, and another a full day tour of Monts de Cristal National Park, located two hours northeast of Libreville, accompanied by the park's conservateur and education specialist.

II. Background

President Bongo established Gabon's thirteen national parks in August 2002. Secretary of State Powell's visit, and a later trip by top U.S. Department of State, Interior & Agriculture officials, laid the groundwork for US financial support and technical assistance to Gabon. Gabon's 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. NPS assistance to Gabon has been a foreign policy priority voiced by both USAID and the State Department, and was directly requested by the Gabonese President. The high degree of biodiversity of flora and fauna found in Gabon, amidst the largest remaining stands of African tropical rainforest, is threatened by intense pressure and ongoing extraction of timber, oil & gas and mineral resources.

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 operates under a five year 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

- The NPS coordinated a 2-day **workshop on civic engagement** for Parcs Gabon, including sessions on partnerships, concessions, transboundary park management, human-animal conflict and stakeholders. A session on problems and solutions induced all the conservateurs to speak about problems encountered in their park units and possible or realized solutions for overcoming them.
- More than **30 attendees** participated in the workshop, including all 15 park conservateurs, local and international NGO representatives, an official from the Ministry of Tourism, and the owner of the Sette Cama lodging concession near Loango NP.
- Parcs Gabon and NPS conferred and agreed in principle to the **selection of four national park conservateurs** – Solange Ngouessono (Mayumba), Herve Ndong Allogho (Monts de Cristal), Jean-Jacque Tanga (Birougou) and Sostene Ndong Obiang (Minkebe East) – to participate in a two week workshop in the U.S. in Spring 2006 that will provide more detailed training and course work on parks management issues at 2-3 national park units and training centers.
- **Needs assessment** at Monts de Cristal National Park – NPS traveled through the park with conservateur Herve Ndong and his education specialist, met the Forestry brigade rangers working under his command at the park and observe the level of civic engagement between the park, staff of the hydroelectric plant, the sand and gravel pit and the local villagers.

Significant potential for capacity building in the country

High. Parcs Gabon (CNPN) invited indigenous representatives of various NGO's, as well as local concessionaires and all 15 park conservateurs to participate in the civic engagement workshop. Lively discussion generated by the Parcs Gabon staff reflected greatly on their understanding of the purpose of national parks while illustrating the vast number of issues they are struggling to manage in the process of establishing their own park agency. The NPS team fielded innumerable questions about subjects and material presented to the workshop participants. Loango NP's conservateur reported during the workshop on his June 2005 visit to the US that was arranged by the State Department and NPS to several US national park units, sharing insights and experiences with his colleagues. Finally, Gabon is a model of stability in central Africa and an Administration priority for support in the region.

Urgent and compelling need

Three years have transpired since the Presidential decree establishing Gabon's first national parks in September 2002. The national parks law has yet to be passed by Gabon's national legislature and both Lope or Minkebe failed to be designated as World Heritage Sites at the annual meeting of the World Heritage Committee. Pressure for mineral exploration inside the parks continues unabated, and illegal timbering and rampant wildlife poaching go unchecked.

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. Human-animal conflicts, though featuring different species, provide for mutual consultation on lessons learned.

Issues of common concern

Deforestation, wildlife conservation, poaching, mining in the parks, endangered species, national park management, World Heritage site nominations and indigenous community access for resources and cultural purposes are among the many areas of common concern. Gabon is home to animal species iconic of the African continent – elephants, gorillas, chimpanzees, buffalo, hippopotamus and humpback whales.

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 support of the U.S. Embassy in Gabon, the USAID-CARPE program (Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment) and Gabonese Government. Parcs Gabon director Adiahenou was eager to announce the selection of four conservateurs for the two week workshop being arranged by NPS in the US. Motivated Parcs Gabon staff have already contacted NPS with specific technical questions, since the conclusion of the workshop in Libreville.

Discernible benefits to U.S. parks and NPS

Innovative ways to manage parks in a nation ‘starting from scratch’ provides NPS staff, particularly management and supervisory with new perspectives on park management and visitation that can be beneficial in designing future NPS policies and procedures. In addition, renewing and reiterating the purpose and challenges the NPS has faced over time serves to strengthen NPS staff commitment.

Cost-effective

There is no additional 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. The list of challenges faced by Parcs Gabon reads like the history of the U.S. National Park Service, as the Gabonese undertake the establishment of legislation, park administration, infrastructure, access, skills training, concession management, and community support. 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. Nest Steps for NPS-Parcs Gabon Collaboration

USAID has provided funding to support a two week intensive training program for four conservateurs in the U.S. in the Spring of 2006. Four Gabonese conservateurs were tentatively selected and announced at the conclusion of the November 2005 workshop on civic engagement. NPS/OIA is working on the timing of the workshop with Embassy-Libreville as well as with Parcs Gabon and has begun contacting NPS units about hosting the group for various portions of the training tour. A training curriculum tailored to the needs of the Gabonese park managers will be developed by the project coordinator, the 2005 NPS training team and Embassy-Libreville.

V. 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 a National Forest as well as a 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 is an overview of the Team's schedule and officials that the Team visited with.

Oct. 31 Arrive Libreville; meeting with Embassy DCM Dhanani; evening reception at Embassy REO's home attended by Embassy staff, & representatives from Parcs Gabon (Deputy Director Ntougou, Communications chief Ndjimbi), WWF, WCS & the European Union

Nov. 1 Self-guided morning hike in the Mondah National Forest; workshop preparations

Nov. 2-3 Workshop on Civic Engagement at CNPN headquarters

Nov. 4 Field trip to Monts de Cristal National Park

Nov. 5 Return to USA.

During the trip, the NPS team met or consulted with the following individuals on various issues:

- **Rene Adiahen**, Permanent Secretary, National Parks Council (CNPN)
- **Omer Ntougou**, Deputy director, Parcs Gabon (CNPN)
- **Katherine Dhanani**, Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy-Libreville
- **Eki Waitkuwait**, European Union detailee to the CNPN
- **Bridget Carr**, WWF country director
- **Lee White**, WCS country director
- **Matthew Cassetta**, US Embassy Regional Environment Officer
- **Glen Fetzer**, US Embassy Political Officer
- Field Brigades, Monts de Cristal National Park