

Introduction

Ivindo National Park covers just over 3000km² of mixed species closed canopy tropical forest in central Gabon. A permanent conservation presence was established by WCS at the site in 2001 shortly after a spectacular bai, Langoué, was discovered during the Mega-transect expedition (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ngm>). Initial observations made by Mike Fay, which suggested that the site was of outstanding importance for gorilla and elephant conservation, have been confirmed by a longitudinal monitoring program at Langoué Bai for the past six consecutive years. During this time, 1023 different forest elephants have been positively identified. In addition, 44 gorillas, 10 buffalo, and 18 sitatunga have also been identified. A permanent research and monitoring presence at the bai ensures complete protection of the clearing and also serves as a basis for monitoring these populations over time. Four GPS collars were deployed on forest elephants in Langoué Bai in 2003, the data from which demonstrate that the Langoué bai elephants may move at least 45 km away from the bai and frequently leave the confines of the national park (Blake 2003).

An important aspect of the elephant population observed at Langoué Bai is the age-sex structure. Langoué appears to be one of the few places in Gabon where bull elephants with huge tusks can still be found. Despite a large elephant population estimated in 1989 to be over 60,000 (Barnes et al. 1997), there appears to be a dearth of big tuskers (Blake pers obs. Fay and White, pers. comm.). Dr. Mike Kock, a field veterinarian for WCS with extensive experience throughout eastern and southern Africa, stated that the bulls at Langoué had some of the largest tusks of any elephants he had seen in Africa. This is good evidence that the area has been naturally protected from hunting, while observations of naïve populations of gorillas, primates and ungulates that show no signs of fear on meeting human beings, support this conclusion.

However, lack of human presence in large expanses of the park has to date been a lucky accident, and as the human population continues to access deeper into the forest for bushmeat and for ivory, active management of the national park, including anti-poaching measures are critical to successful conservation management. The *Conseil National des Parcs Nationaux* (CNP, Gabonese National Parks Council) and WCS now have the infrastructure, the on the ground experience, and the support of local authorities and local people for the park and as of late 2005 were in a position to raise the bar for park management activities. To this end CNPN, WCS and its partners developed a park protection plan of the forest and solicited funding from the USFWS to support anti-poaching activities in and around the park. This report describes activities and accomplishments over the first 6 months of funding from USFWS.

The goal of the project is “*To stop illegal killing of elephants in Ivindo National Park through support for a professional eco-guard team*”.

Two activities were proposed to achieve this goal: active ecoguard patrols and training in MIKE style law enforcement monitoring (LEM). In the remainder of this report we summarise progress made to date.

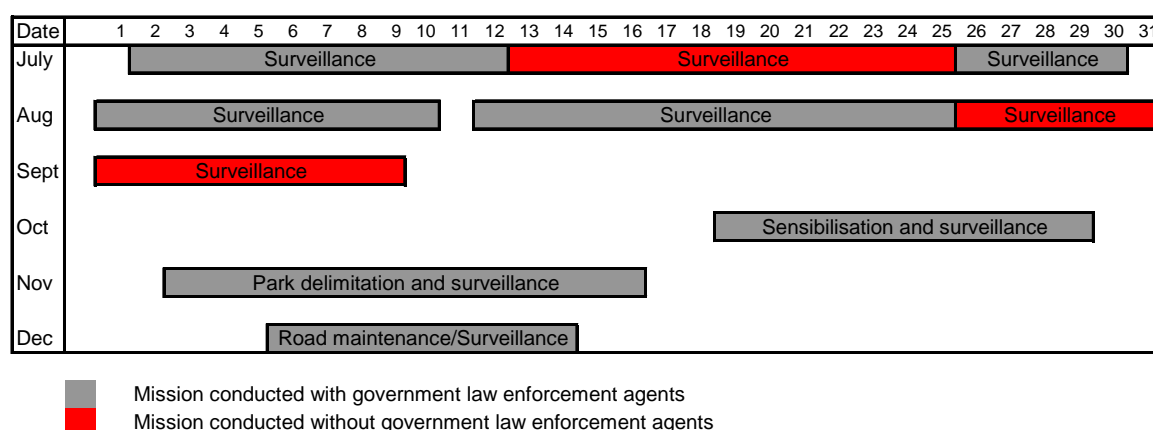
1. Active anti-poaching patrols

A total of 10 anti-poaching missions have been completed during the reporting period (1 July-31 Dec 06). During this time the eco-guards were active for 113 patrol days. Modal patrol size was 6, and ranged between 4 and 7 individuals. In July and August, eco-guards were on patrol for close to 100% of days, and between September and December just less than 50% of days involved active patrols (Table 1). Eco-guards were accompanied by government law enforcement agents (the Park Warden or national police) on just two missions (Table 1), with the remaining missions being completed by the eco-guards alone. This severely restricted the eco-guards efficiency, since they remain powerless to apply the law under current Gabonese law. When patrolling alone, their authority is restricted to sensibilisation (environmental education) and passive interactions with poachers. This has been a considerable source of frustration throughout Gabon, and particularly in Ivindo (see discussion).

No arrests of poachers, including elephant poachers have occurred; rather when encountered, poachers are informed of the legal status of the park, protected species, and hunting laws. Captured animals and illegal guns are confiscated. Twelve blue duikers, 2 water chevrotains, and 1 red river hog have been confiscated to date. No elephant poachers have been encountered nor have seizures related to elephants yet been made.

Management of the eco-guard team has been compromised by institutional problems within the Government of Gabon. The Conservator of the Ivindo National Park directly manages the guards, and their reporting passes through that person. Institutional issues between the Gabonese National Parks Council and the Direction of Wildlife and Hunting (DFC) have led to the appointment of a new conservator for the park, who is recognised by the DFC, but not by the CNPN. At the same time, the CNPN continue to support the former conservator, though this person is no longer legally recognised. The same situation has occurred in several other national parks in Gabon, and until the hierarchy is organised and respected through the adoption of a new law defining national park management structures, roles and responsibilities, day-to-day management of field staff is difficult.

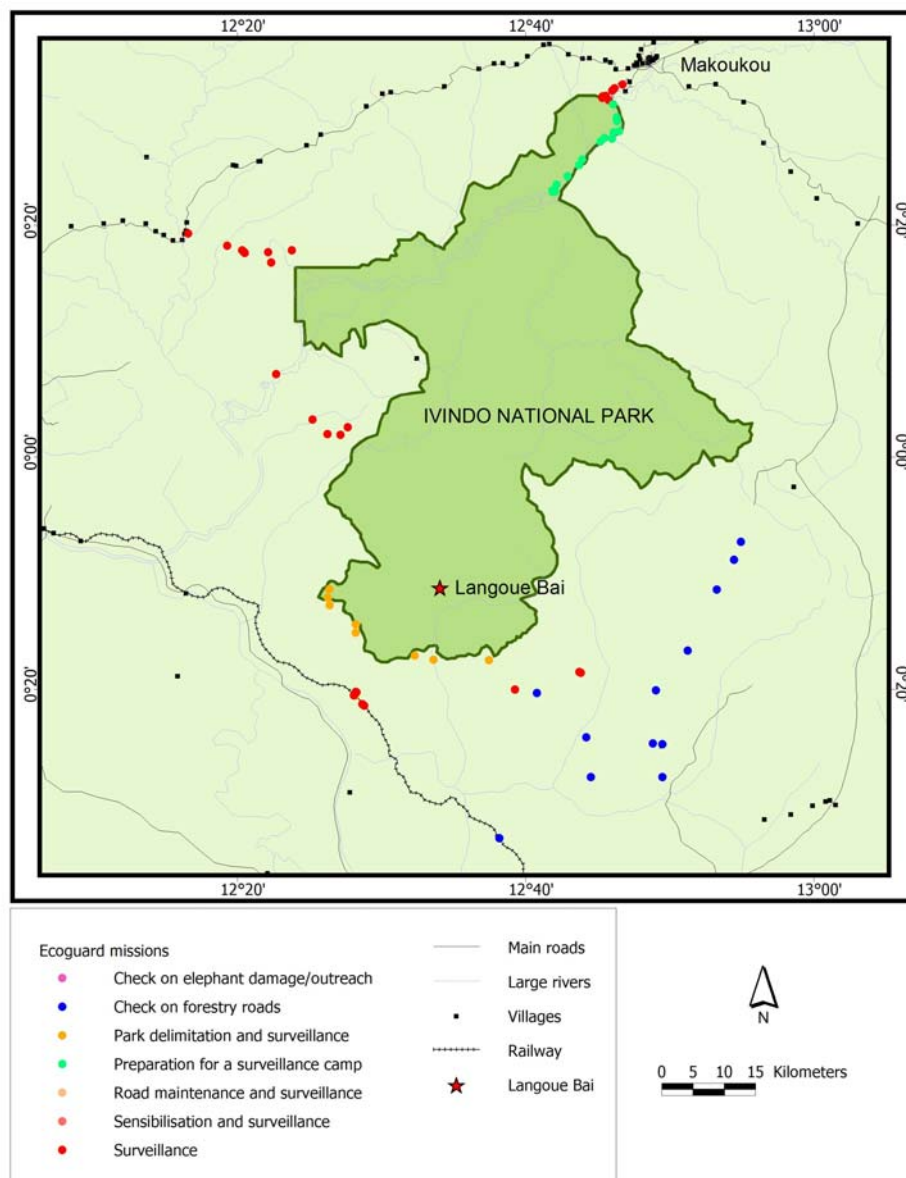
Table 1. Summary of time spent on ecoguard patrols



Geographic distribution of anti-poaching activities

Guard patrols have concentrated in the peripheral areas of the Ivindo NP with the exception of the area immediately around the Ipassa Research Station near Makoukou (Figure 1). The reason for this is because monitoring and tourism expeditions in the national park have consistently shown that there is very limited sign of poaching within the national park, while in the surrounding forest poachers are known to be active. Missions have therefore concentrated in areas where hunting pressure is highest.

Figure 1. Distribution of ecoguard patrols



2. Training in MIKE style reporting

This second proposed activity has not yet taken place. This is due mostly to a rather dysfunctional park management system in Gabon currently caused by considerable ambiguity within the Gabonese administration regarding roles and responsibilities of

institutions and individuals. This has hampered implementation of many park related activities including training, management, and research. In the second half of 2006, the responsibility for national park management was supposed to have been transferred from the National parks council (CNPN), under the direct authority of the President, to a newly created National Parks Agency, under the authority of the Ministry of Water and Forests. This hand over should have seen the CNPN appointed Park Warden replaced by a new Warden appointed by the Minister, and indeed this hand over officially took place in the latter half of the year. Unfortunately, due to rivalries between institutions within government, the CNPN did not acknowledge the new appointments, and maintained their “old” wardens in place. This created a management impasse that continued until the end of the reporting period. Since the warden is directly responsible for management of park eco-guards, the decision was taken to wait until clear authority was restored before going ahead with the training together with the warden. The training should go ahead early in the New Year with the new warden.

Conclusion

The ecoguard team is motivated, and have been operationally active on over 50% of days during the reporting period. Surveillance patrols have covered several hundred kilometres on forest trails and roads around the periphery of the Ivindo National Park. No elephant poachers have been encountered during the reporting period. The effectiveness of the eco-guards has been limited by several important factors. Firstly, dysfunctional management by CNPN has provided limited direction and supervision of the guards. Second, government law enforcement agents have participated in just two of the ten missions conducted. Ecoguards still do not have any official status in Gabonese law, thus anti-poaching missions need to be conducted in collaboration with the national police, gendarmerie, or Ministry of Water and Forests staff. Third, a training session in MIKE LEM methodology has not yet occurred, which would have improved the quality of patrolling, collecting data, and reporting on anti-poaching efforts.

Priorities for the coming 6-months are as follows.

1. Involve national law enforcement officers with eco-guards on anti-poaching missions.
2. Maintain regular field patrols
3. Train eco-guards in MIKE style LEM techniques
4. Improve informant networks
5. Improve targeted coverage of anti-poaching patrols

References

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