

OKAPI CONSERVATION PROJECT

FALL UPDATE 2011

Epulu, Democratic Republic of Congo




THE MISSION OF THE OKAPI CONSERVATION PROJECT is to conserve the okapi in the wild while preserving the biological and cultural dynamics of the Ituri Forest. The okapi is an endemic species of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and is the national conservation symbol of the country. As a flagship species, the okapi serves as an ambassador representing the incredible diversity of species found in the region.


The objective of the Okapi Conservation Project is to protect the natural forest systems of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR -13,769 km²) by supporting and equipping government wildlife rangers; providing training and infrastructure development to improve protection of wildlife and habitats; assisting and educating communities to create an understanding of sustainable resource conservation; and by promoting alternative agricultural practices and food production in support of community livelihoods.


Greetings from the Okapi Conservation Project in Epulu and at White Oak Conservation Center. We are pleased to be able to share news about the okapi and the Project with our partners and supporters. We plan to publish this newsletter twice each year, and of course will continue to send out the Project's Annual Report every year.



Okapi Global Conservation

 The joint international meeting of the Okapi SSP and Okapi EEP will take place in Jacksonville, Florida on November 9-11, hosted by the Jacksonville Zoo. The ICCN Director of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve JJ Mapilanga will be attending and discussing the challenges of conservation in the Ituri Forest. All attendees are invited for an afternoon at White Oak Conservation Center and a tour of our okapi management facilities, including dinner.

 We recently initiated the Okapi Conservation Project website with unique photos and information about okapi and the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. We are hopeful that the website will be a good source of information for people interested in okapi conservation work in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Be sure to visit at www.okapiconservation.org and give us your feedback.

 This year Cardiff University (UK) PhD candidate Dave Stanton, retrieved samples of feces containing okapi DNA randomly obtained during recent surveys of the wild okapi population in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Stanton will be analyzing the samples to get an understanding of the depth of diversity of the wild okapi population in the Reserve. There are plans to work with the Zoological Society of London and other NGO's to obtain samples from other parts of the okapi's range in the DR Congo. The study will serve to evaluate the population dynamics and densities of the okapi and provide a basis for monitoring and management of okapi populations in the DR Congo.



Don't forget to visit us on
Facebook page, blog and Twitter account, all dedicated to the Okapi Conservation Project.



There is still great interest by zoos around the world to exhibit okapi. As the Okapi EEP and Okapi SSP programs continue to grow we propose working together towards a global captive population of 200 okapi!

Congratulations to zoos with successful births in 2011:

• Frankfurt Zoological Society	Male calf	February
• Chicago Zoological Society	Female calf	April
• Wilhelma (Stuttgart) Zoological Garden	Male calf	May
• Rotterdam Zoo	Male calf	June
• New York Zoological Society	Female	June
• Antwerp Zoo	Female calf	July
• White Oak Conservation Center	Male calf	August
• San Diego Zoo	Female	August
• Dvur Kralove Zoo	Female calf	September
• San Diego Wild Animal Park	Female calf	September



Last year White Oak Conservation Center hosted Joel Sartore, author and renowned National Geographic photographer. Mr. Sartore helped organize a brief article in the October 2011 National Geographic featuring a photo of male okapi “Romakari” at White Oak Conservation Center. This most famous okapi was born in Epulu in 1989 and was transported to White Oak in 1991 where he currently resides and has sired 16 offspring and 11 second generation relations.

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/10/visions-now-next#/now>

Okapi Conservation Project Highlights

The Assistant Director of the Okapi Conservation Project is Marcel Enckoto (left in photo), a Congolese national born in eastern DR Congo. Marcel has been working for the Okapi Conservation Project since July 1990 after receiving his degree in Human Sciences (Linguistics and Psychology). He is married with 4 children, who go to school in Butembo, DRC. Marcel feels the okapi is important as a scientifically unique species and has worked nearly his entire life to ensure its protection. He enjoys speaking with and educating people, both nationally and internationally about conservation. “It takes great courage to tackle the big challenges of traveling around the Okapi Wildlife Reserve to teach about conservation while dealing with major issues like poor roads, poverty, political instability and persistent illegal activities. “



A Lifeline in the Bush



One of the OCP's responsibilities is to maintain Epulu's grass airstrip, our connection with the outside world, for project personnel, tourists, officials and dignitaries. It is also a lifeline in the event of emergencies, where critically ill patients can be flown to hospitals in larger nearby cities, or for evacuation in the event of dangerous civil unrest. The strip requires critical maintenance so that airplanes can safely land and disembark. A thankless job, this involves a work crew who cut by hand the incessant growth of the 1200m by 60m patch of grass, which the forest constantly tries to overtake. The crew also has to keep the airstrip clear of grazing goats and soccer playing children when planes are trying to land!

Okapi and Epulu

Located in the middle of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, the town of Epulu serves as the headquarters for the Institute in Congo for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN) and as a base for the Okapi Conservation Project. Epulu has been known as the center for the world's okapi since the early 1920's when American explorer and writer Patrick Putnam established a small menagerie, including captive okapi, which he showed to passing tourists. During Belgian Congo colonial times Epulu was established as a hunting and capture station, from which a number of live okapi were sent on to zoos in Europe and the US, introducing the world to this mysterious forest giraffe.



As part of the Okapi Conservation Project's Okapi Ambassador program, okapi continue to be maintained in large naturalistic enclosures at the Epulu Station. The animals are available for viewing to the various tourists and travelers who pass through on the Trans - African Highway which passes through Epulu - the only place in the DR Congo that okapi can be seen by the Congolese people. Averaging approximately 3000 visitors per year, of which 95% are Congolese, tour guides relate the story of the okapi and Epulu Station, and the current efforts to conserve the forest and the okapi.



Back at home, White Oak Conservation Center has also received okapi from Epulu, including three animals over the 24 year history of the Okapi Conservation Project. These animals provided many offspring to bolster the captive population, which has grown appreciably during this period. Our zoo partners provide significant donations towards our work in support of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. The okapi ambassadors at zoos around the world, all descendants of animals from Epulu, provide opportunities for millions of people to know and care about the okapi and its forest home.

Agro-forestry Update

The Agro-forestry team continues to work with farmers around the OWR. Gathering seeds and planting and transferring seedlings take up a large portion of their efforts. As nitrogen fixing leguminous plants, *Leucena* and *Calliandra* seedlings form the important basis for farmer's plots and are the first trees planted to restore the soil in preparation for planting vegetables and food items. Both can also be used for fuel wood as they grow larger. The team also distributed fruit tree seedlings for farmers, for a total of 7514 trees distributed and planted in the last quarter. African Mosaic Disease in cassava plants causes serious problems for subsistence farmers in the region who depend on the cassava as a staple. Our team is helping to distribute and study disease modified strains of cassava for farmers participating in the program and four community fields of disease resistant cassava were recently established.

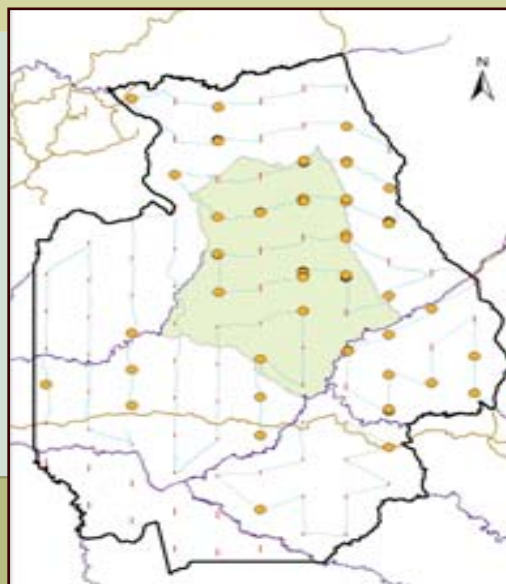


Okapi Wildlife Reserve - Institute in Congo for Conservation of Nature (ICCN)

The ICCN Okapi Wildlife Reserve is managed by ICCN Director J.J. Mapilanga with the help of Conservator Principal (Warden) Gishlain Somba. They oversee the 110 Okapi Wildlife Reserve rangers and manage the wildlife protection and security in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, research projects, community conservation programs, and work in close partnership with the Okapi Conservation Project.

How many okapi live in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve?

In 2011 wildlife populations in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR) were surveyed through a project organized by the Wildlife Conservation Society with support by a team from the Zoological Society of London working in the DR Congo. Most of the Reserve was surveyed through a series of foot transects, a significant and challenging accomplishment for the team. In addition to okapi, the team also looked for elephant, chimpanzees and other primates, antelope, and human sign and activities. One rarely has the chance to see okapi in the forest, so the surveys rely on tracks and scat counts observed along transects and then extrapolated to the OWR's entire 13,760 km². While this method is not as accurate as actual sightings, by using the same methodology as in previous surveys (1996, 2003) we get an appreciation of the changes in population densities for these key wildlife species. The survey report has not been completed but the map gives a preliminary indication of okapi densities in the OWR.



WCS okapi survey 2011. Bold dots indicate heaviest densities. The southern sector was not completely surveyed. The central area outlined in yellow is the core sector of the Reserve where no hunting or human use is allowed.



Unrest in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve

The pressure to exploit the natural resources of the DR Congo continues, with the high price of gold, diamonds, coltan, ivory and timber driving illegal activities. Reports of ivory being purchased in Kisangani for \$200 per kg for export provide ample motivation for poachers to risk their lives to enter the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Gold mining has become more lucrative and Chinese companies using motorized equipment are dredging and extracting on the Ituri River, which is the southern border of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Bushmeat has become a valuable secondary byproduct as crews extracting timber or gold, or pursuing elephant ivory, are also hunting antelope, primates and okapi.



This trade is driven in part by the extensive Asian influence in the DR Congo, and recent CITES reports indicate the problem is widespread across Africa, as the Chinese increase their economic relations with poor African countries. Like the DRC, these countries generally have poor infrastructure to protect their natural resources and rely heavily on western donor agencies and NGO's to support environmental protection initiatives.

The Okapi Wildlife Reserve has seen a significant increase in organized illegal mining and ivory poaching which has become a serious concern for the ICCN. In their efforts to maintain the integrity of the OWR, ICCN wardens and rangers have expanded their efforts, working with local populations and lobbying government officials to help control the illegal activities. This is a double edged sword as often times government and army personnel are involved in the illegal activities.

Because of the limited number of rangers on patrol in the vast OWR, ICCN often relies on mixed operations with the DR Congo Army to help with large or dangerous poaching or mining camps. The southwestern sector, adjacent to the potentially rich Ituri River gold deposits, has been a hotspot of late and several operations have been conducted there in the last year. These operations often result in firefights, arrests and even deaths both to poachers and rangers. The Okapi Conservation Project is pooling our resources with other NGOs to both support the operations and lobby for political intervention at the highest levels of the DR Congo administration.

Patrol Results



During the second quarter of 2011 Okapi Wildlife Reserve rangers made 179 patrols representing 377 ranger days covering 6,086 km, mostly on foot. During the patrols the rangers arrested 11 poachers and 13 miners and released 53 hunters and 39 miners. They confiscated 5 guns, 110 pieces of ivory, 56 shovels for gold extraction and picked up 1237 wire and nylon snares. While on patrol OWR rangers saw 9 okapi, 44 forest elephants and 17 chimpanzees.

Okapi Wildlife Reserve Infrastructure

The Okapi Conservation Project is initiating a second project for the construction of permanent ranger housing at the Zunguluka Patrol Post located on the main road of the eastern border to the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. This patrol post is a critical entry and exit point for all vehicle and pedestrian traffic through the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, as well as a base for forest patrols in the eastern portion of the Reserve. This project will construct housing for rangers and their families in support of their wildlife protection work in OWR. The project is possible through a grant from the US Fish and Wildlife Service African Elephant Fund – Wildlife Without Borders.



The staff working for the Okapi Conservation Project and ICCN continues to dedicate their lives to the important conservation work at hand. The Ituri Forest is a stronghold for okapi, elephants, chimpanzees and myriad other species, all dependent on the protection of ICCN. In addition to our support of the wardens and rangers working to protect the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, we continue to invest in the various programs of the Okapi Conservation Project working with communities in the region to create understanding and engage them in wildlife conservation activities as stewards of their forest heritage.



We are extremely grateful to the zoos participating with the Okapi SSP and the Okapi EEP for your unfailing support of these significant programs. With your help we are working to ensure the conservation of the okapi and to safeguard their incredible home in the Ituri Forest.

We would like to express our thanks to the zoos of the global okapi conservation community who have contributed to the Okapi Conservation Project thus far in 2011.

Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden
 Cheyenne Mountain Zoo
 Columbus Zoo and Aquarium
 Copenhagen Zoo
 Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association
 Houston Zoo, Inc
 International Animal Exchange
 Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens
 Koln Zoo
 Leipzig Zoo
 Lowry Park Zoo

North of England Zoological Society (Chester)
 Saint Louis Zoo
 San Antonio Zoo
 Sedgwick County Zoo
 Yokohama Zoological Society, Inc
 Zoo Miami
 Zoological Garden Dvur Kralove
 Zoological Garten Berlin
 Zoological Parc de Beauval
 Zoological Garden Wuppertal
 Zoological Society of San Diego

Theo Westenberger Estate
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 Barbara Jones
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Stacy L Myers
 Joy Kotheimer
 Julie Ream
 Tom Sachs
 Silicon Valley Com Foundation
 Cheryl Speer
 Donna Stevenson
 US Fish and Wildlife Service
 UNESCO
 Marsha Vaughn
 Kelly Vineyard
 Wildlife Conservation Network
 Wildlife Conservation Society

A sincere thanks to Okapi Conservation Project donors who provided significant support in 2011.



If you would like to support the work of the Okapi Conservation Project, please contact us at info@okapiconservation.org or write to us at White Oak Conservation Center 581705 White Oak Road Yulee, FL 32097

www.okapiconservation.org