



African Parks | 8 May 2025

## **African Parks' Response to Conclusion of Independent Human Rights Investigation in Odzala-Kokoua National Park**

### **Background**

In mid-2023, African Parks was made aware of several allegations of human rights abuses allegedly carried out by seconded eco-guards against members of the Baka community in Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo. To gain a full understanding of these allegations, African Parks appointed Omnia Strategy LLP (Omnia), a specialist London-based human rights law firm, to conduct an independent investigation into the allegations, and any other potential incidents that may have occurred over the past 15 years. Omnia, in turn, instructed two specialist human rights barristers from Doughty Street Chambers (London), Tim Cooke-Hurle and Jelja Sané, who formed an integral part of Omnia's independent investigation team. After a thorough process, Omnia has submitted its findings and recommendations to the Board of African Parks. A statement from Omnia regarding this process can be found [here](#).

There is no place for any form of abuse in the name of conservation, and African Parks is committed to upholding the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples. The management of protected areas must ensure that ecological, social and financial elements are balanced. We, as humanity, are part of nature, and these natural systems will only survive into the future and continue to provide critical ecosystem services if they are managed in an integrated manner. As a conservation organisation, it is our responsibility to ensure this balance, while protecting the human rights of local communities.

### **Observations**

The Board of African Parks has reviewed Omnia's advice and endorsed the management plan and timeframes to implement the recommendations resulting from this process. African Parks acknowledges that, in some incidents, human rights abuses have occurred, and we deeply regret the pain and suffering that these have caused to the victims. Omnia's process also highlighted several failures of our systems and processes that were insufficient for the level of responsibility given to us, particularly in the early years of our management of Odzala.

We are committed to addressing the shortcomings that have been identified. Further, where sufficient evidence is available, we will take action against staff members implicated in incidents not yet known about, or that had not been adequately dealt with.

The Board is confident that the institutional improvements implemented over the past five years, along with those planned for the coming months – incorporating valuable recommendations from Omnia – will mitigate risks in the future.

## Context, learnings and improvements

The socio-political contexts and environments in which African Parks works, as well as the threats that these natural systems face, are extremely complex. For example, Odzala National Park is a 1.4-million-hectare ecosystem with over 30,000 people living in and around the park. It is located in a remote and under-resourced part of Congo, which itself ranks 122 out of 142 countries assessed by the World Justice Project. The park's resources are under continual pressure, as illustrated by the confiscation of over 860 illegal weapons, 239,000 rounds of illegal ammunition, and over 1,200 kg of elephant ivory over the same 15-year period.

Community development has been a central pillar of our work since inception. While we acknowledge that we can always do more, we have already implemented several critical improvements to enhance our engagement with local communities and strengthen our safeguarding mechanisms, and we will continue to review these to ensure they meet the highest standard.

Over the past five years, multiple improvements to our safeguarding processes have been put in place, both at a park level in Odzala and institutionally. In the coming months we will implement further initiatives to ensure a fully integrated, rights-based approach in everything we do. Some of these initiatives, which will be enhanced by the Omnia recommendations, are listed below. This list is non-exhaustive.

At the Odzala level, we are doing the following:

1. **Implementation of the Odzala Indigenous Peoples Plan:** In early 2024, African Parks appointed an anthropologist specialising in Autochthone Peoples to help develop an Indigenous Peoples Plan for Odzala, to ensure that Baka communities are better engaged and supported. Implementation of this plan has commenced. Furthermore, the anthropologist has been appointed to the Board of the Odzala-Kokoua Foundation.
2. **Strengthening and deepening partnerships with local Human Rights NGOs:** A second partnership has been concluded with a Congolese human rights organisation. This will increase the number of visits conducted to communities around Odzala and will bolster support and guidance to the park.
3. **Human Rights impact assessment:** An independent human rights impact assessment will be conducted to refresh the Environmental and Social Due Diligence undertaken in 2021, so that operations may be adapted or strengthened accordingly. This assessment will be updated and reviewed on a regular basis.
4. **Development of a remedy framework:** African Parks will ensure that a bespoke remedy framework is developed for Odzala, that outlines the principles for the provision of remedy in case of human rights breaches. This framework will guide all remedial actions.
5. **Review of access rights:** The review of access rights to the park, undertaken over the past two years, as well as designated zones for natural resource use, will be finalised in conjunction with the Congolese government and local communities.

At the organisational level, we are doing the following:

1. **Ensuring a full understanding of human rights risks across all parks:** We have conducted Environmental and Social Due Diligence assessments across six areas that we manage, and will do the same in the remaining areas by the end of next year. Going forward, any new protected area management partnership will be subject to this process.
2. **Embedding safeguards into everything we do:** An external human rights and criminal justice specialist has vetted all relevant policies and procedures (particularly related to Conservation Law Enforcement). Our [Code of Conduct](#) and [Human Rights Statement of Principles](#) have been updated. The revised Human Rights training curricula are being implemented, and refresher training is being done annually. Compliance with safeguard policies are audited as part of the existing biennial operational audits.
3. **Increased investment in safeguards:** A new senior position has been established to oversee Safeguards for the entire organisation. Going forward, all park-based Safeguards staff will have dual reporting responsibilities, including into this senior position, to enhance independence.
4. **Improved investigative capacity:** African Parks will be training up to 20 investigators across the organisation, including non-conservation law-enforcement staff, to ensure that these processes are handled more thoroughly and professionally. This includes improvements to the organisation's record-keeping systems.
5. **Appointment of an independent panel to oversee investigations into all serious grievances:** We are enthusiastic about the recent establishment of an Independent Panel of eminent African judges and human rights specialists from across the continent, that will oversee the investigations into all allegations of grave misconduct, which will be undertaken by our external Human Rights and Criminal Justice Advisor. This panel will also oversee the entire African Parks grievance mechanism and will advise the Board of African Parks on human rights matters. This mechanism, which will report directly to the Board, is already in its formative stages and will be fully functioning by mid-year. To improve transparency, a public report will be issued by the Board on an annual basis. African Parks anticipates that in the future, this mechanism could support other conservation actors or the sector more broadly.

## **In closing**

African Parks takes these matters extremely seriously. The board will monitor progress in implementing the above-mentioned initiatives at every meeting and will publicly report on them annually. We wholeheartedly embrace the opportunities these improvements offer as an organisation, in our ongoing journey of learning and pursuing operational excellence.

We would like to thank Omnia and Mr. Cooke-Hurle and Ms. Sané for the extremely thorough and professional process that was followed and for the practical recommendations made. Lastly, we would like to thank each and every community member, staff member, and

stakeholder who gave their time and input to this valuable process. We appreciate your patience and commitment to this important work. We are all the better for it.

End.

## **Supplementary Information.**

### **About Odzala**

Odzala is one of the world's largest remaining intact forest systems, and the Congo Basin is one of the two major 'green lungs' on Earth. Odzala's biodiversity is nothing short of exceptional, and the park is home to the largest wild population of western lowland gorillas in Africa and a significant portion of the continent's forest elephants. The carbon stored in Odzala (1.83 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>) is equivalent to 15 years of current CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the Netherlands. The system is, however, threatened by deforestation, agriculture, poaching (particularly for ivory), and mining. Most of these threats originate further afield, but local people living on the periphery are often being used by others to conduct such activities. To illustrate the poaching pressure, confiscations have included over 830 illegal or unlicensed weapons, 236,000 rounds of illegal ammunition, years, and over 1,200 kilograms of elephant ivory over the 15 years of management by African Parks, and over 89,000 kg of illegal bushmeat in just the past five years.

### **Inter-ethnic complexities in and around Odzala**

The population that lives in Odzala, and on its immediate periphery, consists of two broad groupings: the Bantu, who are by far the majority, and various Autochthone groups (some of whom are Baka), who are in a small minority.

The way of life of the Baka people in Congo varies - from families that still live in a relatively traditional nomadic way to those that have almost fully assimilated with Bantu people. In the furthest north of the country (not near Odzala), a small population of Baka still live primarily in a traditional way and have trading relationships with the Bantu. While these are mutualistic relationships, with a more modernised and consumerist way of life, the disparity between Bantu and Baka is being exacerbated. Around Odzala, the Baka have assimilated more into Bantu society, and the relationship is more balanced. Baka communities are sedentary around the park but still hunt and fish in the park and its periphery. In total, there are approximately 30,000 people living in 54 villages that the park engages with on a regular basis. Of these, 5 are entirely Baka villages, and 12 villages have a mixed population of Bantu and Baka.

### **Park zonation and use-rights**

Odzala is 1,354,400 hectares (approximately 100km wide and 130km long) and is divided into three zones: 1) a Transition Zone (10% of the park), 2) a Buffer Zone (25% of the park), and 3) a Core Zone (65% of the park).

Congolese law dictates the framework for how the park is managed and what activities are permitted. Specifically, local communities (both Bantu and Autochthone communities) have residential and traditional use rights in the Transition Zone. This includes harvesting flora, traditional hunting (including by using certain licensed firearms), fishing, and harvesting of honey, medicinal plants, fruits, wood, and other forest products. Furthermore, the Buffer Zone also allows for certain harvesting but with greater regulations on hunting. Specific

access into the Core Zone is also permitted, but on a case-by-case basis (e.g. traditional fishing by women, use for cultural practices).

Between June 2019 and December 2021, Participatory Mapping was conducted in the 33 villages on the immediate park boundary. Participatory Mapping is a collaborative process by community members of collecting, analysing, and representing spatial data, including features the community members perceive as important such as traditional land boundaries, watercourses, sacred areas, and livelihood activities. This ecological, social, cultural, and historical information from both Bantu and Indigenous groups contributed to the production of a map of how the Odzala communities use the forest and its resources. This map has enabled improved zoning of the park in order to promote conservation and sustainable natural resource use.