



African Parks Network

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Dear Mr. Jerome Fenoglio (Editorial Director of Le Monde),

I am writing to you regarding the article "*Centrafrique: La guerre au nom de la nature*" by Joan Tilouine, published by Le Monde on Friday 8th May. The article raises some significant concerns which call into question the professional integrity of the journalist. The entire article shows extreme bias through its systematic omission and distortion of facts, its ubiquitous partiality, egregious inaccuracies and unsubstantiated claims. This is deliberately misleading in order to misrepresent African Parks and our work in Chinko in the Central African Republic, which is unethical journalism we would not expect given the high editorial standards for which Le Monde is known and respected.

Upon publication of the article, even the accompanying photographer, Thomas Nicolon, communicated with us, expressing his discomfort with the unbalanced and negative nature of Tilouine's account. In the interest of integrity, and in providing a truthful account of African Parks and Chinko, I feel it absolutely necessary to address some of the many falsifications and misrepresentations. The below excerpts of the article are just a few examples:

- The article accuses African Parks of the following: "*AP is allowing itself to enforce in Chinko the Central African law within its strictest interpretation*"; "*conducts judicial police investigations*"; *uses "uninhibited force"*; and "*forceful methods, which have caused deaths, arrests, incarcerations and a lot of misunderstanding*"; and "*militarized conservation*"

These statements are without fact and are therefore libelous. Our public-private partnerships are based on carefully constructed legal agreements for park management, which are concluded by self-determining sovereign governments. It is entirely within their right to ensure good governance for the protection of natural resources and the rights of their citizens through such arrangements. African Parks' model is to professionalize park management, to uphold the country's laws, and to protect the country's natural resources for the benefit of local people and wildlife. It is not to "militarize conservation"; and Tilouine was provided examples of several parks under African Parks' management where rangers are unarmed.

Stability, safety and security are foundational requirements for sustaining natural ecosystems. Equally, they are necessary for people to enjoy their human rights and for attracting public and private investment, generating jobs and stimulating enterprise. Even amidst the most challenging of conditions, our teams uphold the highest level of discipline, policies and procedures. In the case of the Central African Republic, this includes compliance with the United Nations Security Council regulations.

- Tilouine states "*The AP system has attracted bankers, philanthropists and sometimes unscrupulous businessmen, attracted by the returns on investment and the opportunity to remedy their image*"

African Parks does not operate for profit; to allude that we do is false and disingenuous. No individual providing funding to African Parks benefits financially in any way. The author fails to disclose that all revenue generated by African Parks, whether by tourism or other initiatives, together with donor funding, goes to the conservation of the parks and the communities they support, all of which is evidenced by independent and publicly available audits.

- Tilouine states *“AP was forced to withdraw from Ethiopia in 2007 after causing large displacements of communities deprived suddenly of their land in Omo Park in the southwest of the country”*

This statement is factually incorrect and again libelous. While African Parks left Omo National Park in Ethiopia in 2007 due to complex reasons, we were never involved in any way with the relocation of a single individual from that park. This is a falsehood that has been repeated to support an agenda that pits conservation against the rights of people. African Parks puts people at the centre of the rationale for conserving these areas, especially local people. This is fundamental to long-term sustainability, and is core to our model. Any scrutiny of legitimate literature describing our model, including in our annual reports, would support this premise. In addition to creating significant local employment (over 96% of our staff are locally recruited), four of the 17 parks we manage have at least 93,000 people legally living within or moving through those landscapes. These local people often have legal rights to use the natural resources, which are protected by African Parks from illegal use by external syndicates.

- *“...It was after a gala dinner in the presence of Nelson Mandela on the theme of natural parks that the billionaire (Paul van Vlissingen) imagined a new business model for conservation. This provides for the virtual privatization of protected areas, combined with a form of commodification of nature through very high-end tourism and a portfolio of botanical resources”*

The account of the creation of African Parks, an excerpt provided above, is inaccurate and offensive. Firstly, African Parks was initially founded by a group of southern African conservationists and Paul van Vlissingen was asked to support the approach financially. Secondly, it was at a private function that President Mandela solicited the support of Paul van Vlissingen in the development of protected areas, leading to the expansion of what is Marakele National Park in South Africa today. This initiative is separate and distinct from Paul van Vlissingen’s support to African Parks. Lastly, privatisation of protected areas involves the transfer of ownership of the park from the State to a private individual. African Parks does exactly the opposite – Governments and communities are the beneficiaries of professionally managed protected areas, leveraging philanthropic support. Monetisation of ecosystem services through sustainable tourism (both domestic and international) is promoted by development and conservation agencies around the world to help fund their protection. Last year, over half of the paying tourists that visited parks managed by African Parks were local residents of their countries.

Despite accurate information being made available to Tilouine, his article does not capture a true account of our model, which is adapted in consideration of national and local contexts. Both Government and local communities are represented on all park governance boards who are involved in management decisions, including Chinko.

Nor does it capture the progress and sensitivity of the transhumance engagement efforts undertaken to establish grazing routes outside of Chinko and alleviate pressure on the protected area, falsely stating *“the organization considers itself at war with all those who threaten Chinko forest”*, another unsubstantiated and harmful accusation. Instead, the author mischaracterizes the nature of Chinko’s transhumance efforts and deliberately distorts what transpired with a herder group:

- *“Tomorrow, if they have not left, they will be criminals chased by an armed commando of AP, rangers trained by former members of European Special Forces. The herders leave the place without resisting, afraid of the resurgence of this helicopter which intrigues them so much.”*

This is a further illustration of deliberate manipulation of the truth, and the malevolence of the reporting. Factually, this herder group had already agreed to navigate around the park following peaceful discussions with unarmed transhumance sensitization officers. These officers are local people employed by Chinko, who are familiar with Fulani culture and livestock management. They contacted the herders by foot, also sharing maps and leaflets showing the best routes to take around the park to observe the park boundary and follow the law. Rangers or foreign individuals do not participate in these exchanges. It is ironic that Tilouine requested this visit to the herder group, which was organized by park management whose amicable engagements with them facilitated their granting permission for the meeting. Tilouine chooses to omit that the helicopter was made available for his transport solely for the purpose of this requested meeting, instead misrepresenting what transpired to portray the use of force. Furthermore, following the sensitization exchange, the cattle herder named in the article, Zacharia, said *“thank you for the visit, thank you for the tea and sugar, may God bless you”*. The entire group said goodbye before everyone departed.

This is part of a transhumance sensitization strategy based on a policy of non-violence, which, over the dry season of 2019 – 2020, saw our unarmed sensitization teams interact with hundreds of heavily armed cattle herders, employing peaceful dialogue to help maintain respect for the park boundaries. This has been a remarkably successful strategy resulting in an area of 23,800 km² being kept free of hundreds of thousands of livestock achieved without conflict with people. Underlining the success of this strategy, of these hundreds of passive engagements, on only one occasion in February this year was an armed law enforcement intervention required to remove an illegal camp and livestock from the park, after this particular group refused to respond to sensitisation attempts on CAR law. While the camp was destroyed, there were no further repercussions for the group who had departed from the reserve.

- *“The anti-poaching manager, a retired sixty-something from the Belgian army who will only give his first name, Mario, immediately takes action... He rushes into the helicopter, followed by ten rangers, to confront these “hard heads” which will eventually vanish in the depths of the forest.”*

This is another false statement. Ten rangers did not board the helicopter, and the Head of Law Enforcement named did not partake in a mission as described here. Reporting that this happened is fictitious and is being used to create a negative and false impression.

Not only does the article make multiple unjustified and unsubstantiated claims, Tilouine includes quotes from Rosaleen Duffy and Mordecai Ogada, neither of whom have ever engaged with African Parks or have any understanding of our model, seen our work, or are familiar with our standard operating procedures and policies. Ms. Duffy’s quotes *“One has the impression that, for these conservationists,*

Africa is an ungoverned and lawless space, where anyone can settle down and do what they please” and *“AP fits in a long history of forced and coercive conservation in Africa, and extends a form of colonial tradition”* are slanderous. These comments insinuate that sovereign governments are unaware and incapable of presiding over their own actions, and are disrespectful of the host governments who have invited the support of African Parks. As such, we find them offensive in the extreme.

The journalist also selectively uses quotes from unnamed sources, raising serious questions as to their validity, to level unfounded criticism at African Parks, including the below:

- *“Around the reserve, local populations feel aggrieved and complain, while hoping to benefit from AP favors”*, with no names or references provided in substantiation
- The titles of *“predatory NGO”* using *“mercenaries”* for whom *“violence is erected as a system of management”*, in an undisclosed letter the author claims was sent at the end of 2018 to the government of Bangui by civil society associations, which are left unnamed
- *We are now trying to change its approach, which must not only focus on preservation but also integrate local economic development projects. Except that, the specialists of conservation do not know how to do it”*;
- and *“AP realized that it had no control over its guys at Chinko. Relations with local staff remain tense”*, which are provided by an unnamed diplomat.

The imbalance of the article is further exemplified by the glaring omission of the significant support that communities in and around the park have received over the years because of African Parks’ work. For example, the author excludes any mention of a significant event that occurred in 2017, whereby 380 Internally Displaced People (IDP) fled to Chinko to prevent being slaughtered due to regional, ethnic violence. They were protected by Chinko’s rangers for almost 15 months, being provided with food, water, shelter, healthcare and even employment. In June 2018, they voluntarily relocated back to their villages with our full support, which included ongoing security to protect their lives. Forty-five of these IDPs, who are Mbororo cattle herders, are now employed and trained by Chinko to serve as transhumance sensitisation officers, mentioned above, who serve as ambassadors for Chinko who help other herders observe park boundaries. Their voices among others are also missing from this piece.

The entire article fails to mention the very purpose of protected areas and their importance to humankind, and hence why effective management is necessary. Ironically, this is despite Tilouine describing the devastation of the environment in Sudan, the loss of the land’s productivity forcing Sudanese herders down to Chinko, the elimination of species like elephant, and the significant conflict arising between the herders and local communities who now compete for resources. Contrary to Tilouine’s suggestion that this landscape *“... has been surveyed for centuries by hunters, gatherers and nomads who live on its resources”*; the presence of Sudanese cattle herders is a much more recent phenomenon, occurring as they seek more fertile grazing lands across the national border in the CAR.

Operating in some of the most destabilized and conflict-prone places on the planet is not without its challenges. But we as an organization, our boards and our partners, are committed to ensuring that some of Africa’s most vital landscapes are ecologically, socially and financially sustainable in the long-term – and that they benefit both people and wildlife. This is based on principles of sound management, full accountability and absolute integrity.

We ask that you consider this formal response as our exercising the right of reply.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrea Heydlauff". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'A'.

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