



CONGO

Odzala-Kokoua

National Park

13,500 km²

African Parks Project since 2010

Governing body: Fondation Odzala-Kokoua

Government Partner: Ministry of Forest Economy,
Sustainable Development and Environment

European Union (EU), Swedish Postcode Foundation,
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS),
WWF-Netherlands and WWF-US
were major funders in 2017



Odzala-Kokoua

PATRICK DARCIS | PARK MANAGER



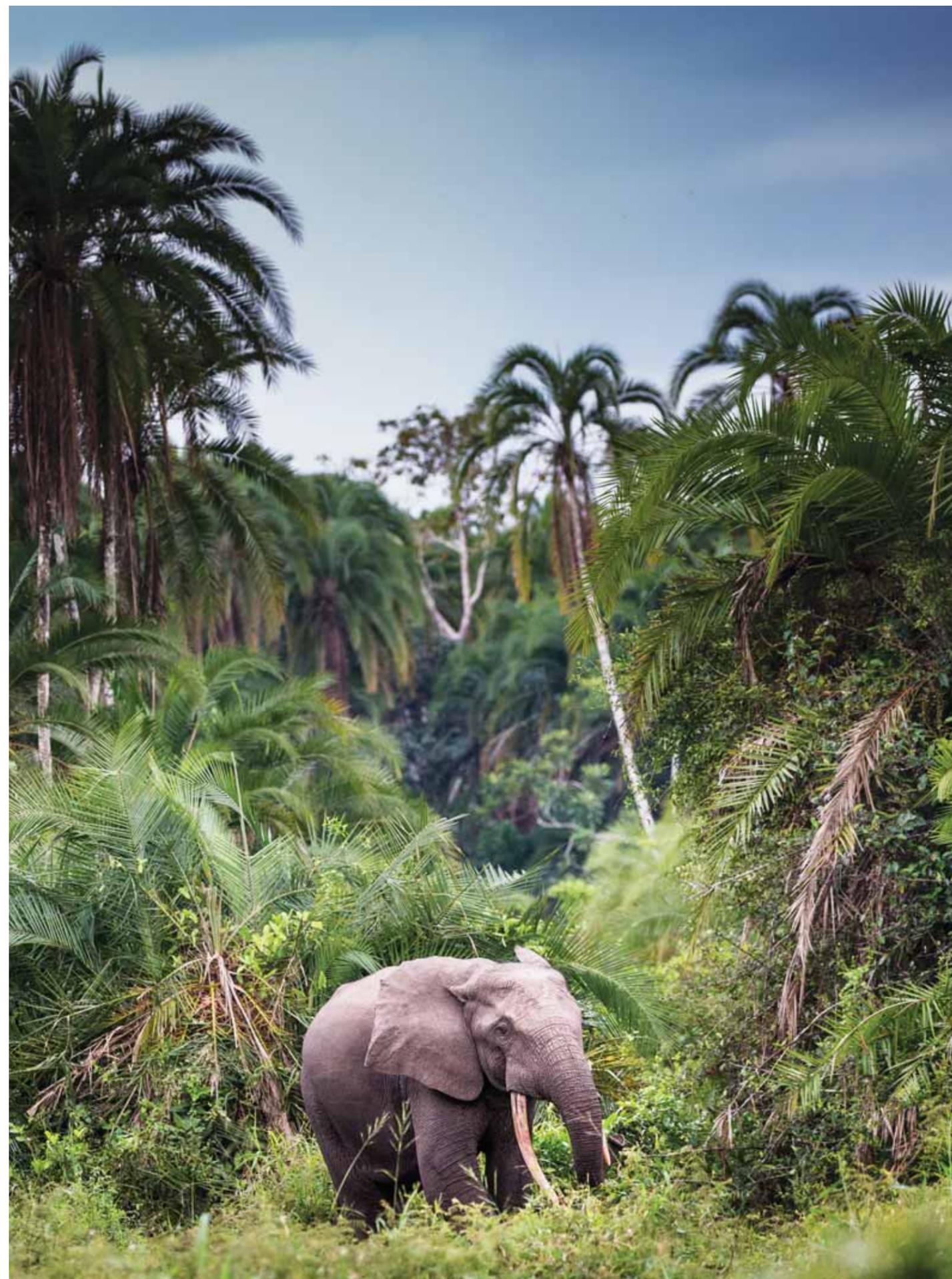
CONGO— Odzala-Kokoua is one of Africa's oldest national parks, designated in 1935, and having received a Biosphere Reserve status in 1977. Covering an expansive 13,500 km² area, Odzala lies in the heart of the Congo Basin. It is the second largest rainforest in the world, spanning more than two million square kilometres across six countries and accounting for 18 percent of the world's remaining rainforest. The biological diversity and endemism is extraordinary here, especially considering that humans have occupied the area for over 50,000 years. Today, the basin provides clean water, food and shelter to more than 75 million people. But not all is well under the canopy of this breathtaking landscape, as Odzala has had its share of ups and downs. Conservation efforts were very limited during the Congo Civil War from 1997 to 1999; several Ebola outbreaks threatened the gorilla population and led to the park being neglected, and victim to high levels of poaching for several years; and tourism was all but non-existent, with approximately only 50 visitors or so in 2010.

African Parks entered into a 25-year long agreement in 2010 with the Ministry of Forest Economy, Sustainable Development and Environment to protect this globally important park. Bushmeat poaching here has been and continues to be a major threat, with almost 36,000 snares removed in the last year alone which is a major concern for Odzala's western lowland gorillas, of which significantly 20 percent of the remaining global population are found in the park. Forest elephants are also of key concern. Elephant and gorilla surveys were completed in 2017, and our preliminary survey results revealed a possible reduction of both species compared to results in 2014. While surveying forest elephants is exceptionally challenging given the habitat, and some of this variation over the years may be due to movements as well as survey methodologies, the trends for both gorillas and elephants are concerning and could be a result of poaching both inside and outside of the park. Odzala is a vast wilderness, but the threats are many, and the survival of Congo's elephants and gorillas, and the long-term future of this historic park depend on our intervention.

BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

We deployed a large-scale camera trapping monitoring programme with cameras installed at 15 baies, or forest clearings, and in forested sites along the national road for key species. Initial results have helped determine two important elephant migration routes, and a diversity of species were identified, including a male and a female leopard. Twelve GPS collared elephants were tracked over the year. Thirty-three new forest baies were identified, with some of them showing high levels of wildlife presence and activity. However, our preliminary elephant and gorilla

survey data revealed some distressing information of a possible 30 percent decline for each species compared to results from 2014. A key priority from a biodiversity perspective is to determine whether the perceived decline in the elephant and gorilla populations is accurate or whether it is a result of the high variability in the data. If the former, it will be imperative to fully understand the underlying reasons so that all necessary actions can be taken. The threat of poaching is, however, constant and an internal think-tank on strategies to address this problem was held in 2017 and results will be implemented in 2018.



A critically endangered forest elephant bull in Odzala in Congo. © Scott Ramsay/Love Wild Africa



Odzala's eco-guardians in the Congo conduct patrols along the extensive waterways throughout and around the park. © Marcus Westberg



Dr. John provided healthcare to over 900 people around Odzala. © Marcus Westberg



More than 800 students received an education and learned about conservation in Odzala. © Warren Smart

We continued our research collaboration with the German Primate Center and the Czech Institute of Vertebrate Biology on gorilla health within the park. The multi-year habituation programme for the second gorilla group progressed well over the year. The long-term vision for this programme is to habituate several gorilla groups to help increase tourism potential and revenue to go back to local communities living around the park. Sadly, though, the silverback from the first habituated gorilla group died due to natural causes when fighting with another male, and his death caused the group to disintegrate. Our research into the local bushmeat trade and practices continued and helped to identify 14 commercial bushmeat traders in the area.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

We implemented three types of patrols over the year: mobile, fixed position and intelligence-gathering; and data collection followed the SMART model. Seventy-two rangers, or eco-guardians as they are called in Odzala, were employed, carrying out 8,818 patrol man-days. They confiscated 53 illegal firearms, 15,977 bullets, and 36 ivory tusks weighing 126 kg. Over 36,000 snares were removed, 32 tonnes of bushmeat were seized and 136 poaching camps were destroyed. Sadly, 42 poached elephant carcasses were found. Additionally, skins and live animals including several primate species, were also confiscated and were rehabilitated in order to be able to be released back into the wild. Thirty-seven poachers were arrested and 36

were sent to the regional High Courts. Our team organised a conference in the northern sector of the park, with 32 Police Officers in attendance to discuss the park's activities and aspects of oversight and protection of Odzala. We trained 28 new eco-guardians with the Congolese army, who also helped to arrange previous training sessions in operations for the eco-guardians.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

With 70,000 people living around the park and 10,000 living inside, community engagement and development is a critical need. At least 20 community projects on agriculture and husbandry were implemented and monitored, with US\$30,000 being provided by the Odzala-Kokoua Foundation Community Development Fund. The cocoa project is faring well, as 30,000 of the 40,000 seedlings that were planted two years ago in four villages are producing fruits and yielded the first harvest. Several local communities requested assistance from the park staff to help with preventing poachers coming into their villages, and to stop them from entering inside Odzala. In the northern sector of the park, local communities voluntarily dismantled their snares and turned them in to park staff for a small financial reward in order to reduce the bushmeat trade from in the park. The community team ran an extensive human-wildlife conflict awareness campaign following a rise in conflict with gorillas on the cocoa

20%
of the global population of western lowland gorillas live in Odzala

farming project plantations. With a focus on prevention and mitigation, the team visited 20 villages to discuss challenges and present the park's insurance scheme, and the park paid out US\$25,000 in compensation for damages incurred by local villagers from elephants, gorillas and buffalo. More than 800 students were supported by Odzala, along with one wildlife club comprising 265 children. A hospital was supported, along with one mobile clinic that was funded by the park; the latter served over 900 people who previously had no access to healthcare.

PARK MANAGEMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Several renovation projects were undertaken over the course of the year, with two bungalows being built and 90 percent of the work being completed on three new houses, an armoury, four offices and two storage containers. The water distribution system was improved, a wood storage area built, and fencing material to help reduce wildlife conflict was brought in and will be installed in 2018. A six-tent camp was built in the northern part of the park for eco-guardians while out on patrols. A 1,5 km road was upgraded to reach the Lobo Research Center, which is the base for all research conducted in the park; and 6,000 bricks were made to construct additional buildings there in 2018.

TOURISM

To help generate needed revenue and deliver benefits back into the surrounding communities, a Tourism Development Plan was created and endorsed by the Congo Conservation Company (CCC) and the Congolese Ministry. The CCC managed three lodgings (Mboko, Ngaga and Lango Camps) and a total of 1,138 bed-nights were sold to tourists over the year, almost six times more than in 2016; and revenue generated amounted to US\$12,500.

OBJECTIVES FOR 2018

- Revamp the law enforcement strategy to prevent elephant and gorilla poaching
- Develop an effective communication strategy with the communities
- Deploy a social mapping team to better understand local communities
- Activate a human-wildlife conflict team
- Implement camera trap studies in important haies to monitor wildlife populations
- Intensify research and prevention of the bushmeat trade; coordinate with WWF and WCS for actions in Northern Congo