

Creation of the Lossi Gorilla Sanctuary by the inhabitants of Lengui-lengui forest village in the Congo: why and how?

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SUMMARY

Since 1992, a study on the way lowland gorillas cope with human presence was jointly initiated by Conservation and Rational Utilisation of the Forestry Ecosystems in Central Africa (COFAC), the Ministry of Forestry and Water Resources of the Congo and the local population of Lossi Forest in the Congo. This pilot experiment was characterized by the local population's involvement in management of the gorilla sanctuary, to enable it benefit from the financial spin-offs of this type of ecotourism and to build infrastructure (clinics, schools, etc.) for the grassroots communities. In effect, the local population, for whom land is of paramount importance, agreed to cede their ancestral land to create a gorilla sanctuary for ecotourism.

After the successful completion of the pilot project, which lasted for three years, the villagers wrote to the Ministry of Forestry Resources to ask that this zone be classified as a sanctuary.

The author of this abstract, an anthropologist by profession, was subsequently employed by COFAC for more than four years to assist the villagers in this exercise. This involved regrouping the beneficiaries into an association and drawing up its statutes and internal rules, as well as those of the sanctuary, in order to legitimize any agreement entered into by the local population so that it will be adequately prepared to manage the sanctuary.

This pilot project is the first of its kind in the Congo and has enabled the government to enact a decree (Decree No. 2001–222 of 10 May 2001) for the creation of this protected zone at the initiative of the local population. Through the benefits from tourism accruing from this project, the inhabitants of Lengui-lengui have understood that a live gorilla is more profitable than a dead one.

The conservation of the biological diversity of the forests of the Congo Basin remains an important stake. In effect, this massif forest, which is second in size only to that of the Amazon, contains abundant biological diversity because of its varied ecosystems. The forests cover 60 percent of the total surface area of the Congo (342 000 km²).

Since 1992, the COFAC programme, which is financed by the Commission of European Communities, has worked in six protected zones in six Central African countries (Cameroon, the Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic and Sao Tome and Principe) to ensure a sustainable management of the ecosystems through partnerships adapted to each sociocultural context.

In this article, the author discusses the advantages, obstacles and lessons learned in the collective management of natural resources. In the case in point, this was accomplished through the gorilla species (*Gorilla gorilla*) pilot project for ecotourism, which it is hoped will ensure self-development of the populations originating in the Lengui-lengui village in the Congo.