

UN protects 'wild heart' of Central Africa

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The new World Heritage Site protects unique bais -- forest clearings that attract gorillas and other wildlife. Credit: Thomas Breuer

A Central African protected area that straddles three countries and teems with gorillas, elephants, and chimpanzees has been named a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organization, UNESCO.

Called the Sangha Tri-National Protected Area complex (known by its French acronym TNS) the site consists of a 25,000 km² (10,000 square-mile) contiguous area across the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), Cameroon, and the Central African Republic and marks the first [World Heritage site](#) that spans three nations. The core of the TNS is formed by three contiguous national parks connected by the Sangha River. The United Nations [World Heritage](#) Committee made the announcement on July 1 in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The TNS already benefits from long-term technical and financial support from the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#) (WCS), [World Wildlife Fund](#) (WWF), a UK-registered trust fund called the TNS Foundation (FTNS), UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, the UN Great Apes Survival Partnership (GRASP), and the governments of the U.S., Germany, France and Spain, along with private donors.

The World [Heritage Site](#) declaration marks the culmination of a vision dating from 2000 when the Governments of the Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic, through signing of the TNS cooperation agreement, agreed to work together to assure the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources of the Sangha Tri-National Protected Area complex .

Timothée FOMETE, Executive Director of the TNS Foundation, said: "The TNS recognition as a World Heritage Site comes as a reward to a multi-partnership approach fostered by the Foundation within the framework of the Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC). This Decision raises the profile of TNS as well as expectations on the urgency of an integrated conservation and development approach; with the support from the three country government and donors, the Foundation will continue to contribute to the sustainable financing of this beautiful World Heritage site."

James Deutsch, WCS Director of Africa Programs, said: "The TNS is the wild heart of the Congo Basin Rainforest. It contains some of the last great populations of African forest elephants, [gorillas](#), [chimpanzees](#), and other endangered species. We applaud the World Heritage Committee for acknowledging the area as a global treasure and congratulate the governments of the [Republic of Congo](#), Cameroon, and Central African Republic for their foresight. As everywhere in Central Africa, this global treasure is under threat from unsustainable resource extraction, including the illegal ivory trade, and we hope that the TNS's listing will re-energize

global efforts to save it."

According to Stefanie Conrad, regional representative of WWF for the Central Africa region; "This inscription is the culmination of over a decade of work by many dedicated people, ranging from protected area managers, central governments in the three countries, researchers, community leaders, private sector and financial partners to make the TNS a truly functional trans-boundary managed world class forest landscape. This World Heritage status will introduce the TNS to the rest of the world and lead to increased support for the continued protection of the area's globally important biodiversity and for the people that depend on it."

The TNS has one of the lowest human footprints in equatorial Africa. Its habitat ranges from tropical forests, wetlands, and many types of natural forest clearings known as bais – some of which attract multiple gorilla groups simultaneously, while others host thousands of parrots. The bais are exceptional hubs for social and genetic exchanges for wildlife. Nowhere else do 100-plus forest elephants so frequently congregate in a given area, often with other large mammals such as bongo, sitatunga, forest buffalo, and giant forest hogs.

Unlike many other protected areas, the TNS is not a relict fragmented forest, but continues to be part of a much larger intact and ecologically functional landscape. This is increasingly rare and significant at a global scale.

The new World Heritage Site is made up of a core 7,542 km² or 2,911 square miles area consisting of Dzanga-Ndoki National Park in Central African Republic, Lobéké National Park in Cameroon, and Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park in Congo. An additional 17,880 km² (6,903 square miles) buffer zone is managed for selective logging many of which have Forest Stewardship Council certification.

The buffer zone of the TNS supports a rich cultural heritage through its local communities and indigenous peoples (forest hunter-gatherers, river peoples). The integrity and richness of the TNS tropical forests are key resources for sustaining the cultures and livelihoods of these peoples.

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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