

The challenges and opportunities of inclusive conservation in Salonga

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Credit: WWF DRC

Within the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in an area so remote that it can only be accessed by water or air, lies the Salonga National Park.

Extending over 33,350 km², Africa's largest forest [national park](#) is home to approximately 300,000 local and [indigenous communities](#) in the near vicinity, who share their home with 51 species of mammals, 129 species

of fish, and 223 species of birds. These species include forest elephants, bonobos, bongos, giant pangolins, and the endemic Congo peacock.

Despite being classified as a World Heritage site in 1984, Salonga and its incredible biodiversity is under intense threat today from poaching and trafficking, which in turn not only endangers its heritage status but also the lives and livelihoods of the people who depend on it.

Historical challenges and rising pressures

As majestic and magnificent as it is, Salonga is a landscape under threat. A brutal civil conflict has resulted in years of instability and the people living in the region face terrible socio-economic hardship with a lack of governance and services. The lands and natural resources they have long depended on are also reeling under the impacts of wildlife crime, threats of oil exploration and illegal logging.

Furthermore, tensions with the government ecoguards tasked with protecting Salonga against such criminal activity are also an all too real challenge. As a co-manager of Salonga National Park since 2016, WWF International commissioned a report from a local [human rights](#) group for the express purpose of assisting the government in holding any violent rangers to account. The investigative team reviewed substantial evidence relating to 21 allegations against rangers and/or military personnel and interviewed reported victims, witnesses, and accused. With even a single case of violation being one too many, especially for people that have been historically marginalized and discriminated against in the DRC, the findings of the recent report are distressing. While noting that the majority of these incidents occurred prior to WWF's involvement as co-managers i.e. before 2016, we have advocated for and fully support swift prosecution of any ecoguard involved in any way, and as such we have turned the report over to the authorities.

Is there then a solution, a way to protect both people and nature in Salonga?



School children in a village near Salonga National Park. Credit: WWF DRC

Inclusive conservation

As WWF and other conservation organizations make the call for an ambitious New Deal for Nature and People, including scientific targets that reverses nature loss, address the climate crisis, and deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals, we need to consider new approaches to conservation that support Indigenous Peoples and [local communities](#) to secure rights and access to their collective lands and territories.

To date in Salonga, these efforts are taking shape under the following actions:

- Creation and official validation of 172.807 ha community forests, providing land rights to local communities achieved. Three community forests (13.000 ha) by indigenous BaTwa and

further 250.000 ha of community forests in the park corridor in process of creation and validation.

- 350 CLD (comités locaux de développement—local development committees) as well as five CARG (Conseil Agricole Rural de Gestion—Rural Agricultural Management Council), three CLER (Comité Local d'Entretien Routier—Local Road Maintenance Committee) and 171 Organisations paysannes (Farmer associations) set up. Working on rural development activities with partner organizations. A key focus of these interventions has been on conservation agriculture—measures to intensify farming as an alternative to slash and burn cropping, mainly by supporting farmer field schools and pilot farms, facilitating market access, supporting extension and setting up seed banks and nurseries.
- Supporting the development of two community health centers for the BaTwa, supported cottage industries (i.e. soap making) and invested in literacy education for the BaTwa people.

We are currently in discussions with the Government of DRC on the principles under which WWF would be able to move forward as a conservation partner in Salonga National Park. Our engagement is conditioned on a mutual agreement to operationalize protections for human rights, including demonstrated commitment to systemic changes which would ensure that human rights are given the highest priority.

While these discussions proceed we are already engaged with the Government to identify and mitigate any risks for communities related to conservation activities in Salonga, we are also:

- Working with the government's l'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) to identify actions to reduce risks, including a mandatory guide of conduct to be signed by all ecoguards, offering training and mentoring on human rights for all ecoguards, and calling for the immediate sanctioning of any

- misconduct according to regulations in place in the DRC.
- Ensuring all the Salonga ecoguards undergo further training in human rights prior to being permitted to join patrols from Jan 2020 onwards.
 - Urgently rolling out a new and strengthened grievance mechanism to be available to all community members in and around the park and run by an independent human rights organization (still to be identified), an initiative welcomed by local communities in recent discussions with the local NGO.
 - Rolling out the [enhanced Environmental and Social Safeguards Framework](#) in Salonga as a priority. Steps include but are not limited to a ranger guide of conduct, as well as the actions noted above that have already begun.

With a recent biomonitoring assessment confirming relatively stable populations of elephants and bonobos -1,600 forest elephants and 15,000 bonobos—we want to ensure conservation also delivers positive impact for the people in Salonga who depend on its biodiversity the most. This is why we are looking to further improve our understanding of the local economy and market chains, promote and support GESI (Gender and Social Inclusivity) programming and help adapt the landscape governance model to ensure local communities have a larger voice and role in its management. It is not an easy feat but it is one we are wholly committed to and will remain so.

As we work to help secure the long-term future of Salonga for the well-being of people and nature, both locally and worldwide, we commit to make every effort possible to work together with partners and local communities to protect Salonga and the people who depend on it.

Provided by WWF

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