

CENTRAL AFRICA REGIONAL PROGRAM FOR ENVIRONMENT

CARPE I

FINAL REPORT

September – December 2001

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INTRODUCTION

We would like to express our gratitude to USAID for their continual financial support for our joint program in central Africa. At the end of Carpe I, the Dzanga-Sangha ecotourism activities reported in this supplementary report are still on-going. Therefore, WWF has requested a no-cost extension authorization in order to complete these activities. The report covers the extension period from September 1, 2001 through December 31, 2001.

Quick background on DSP

The Central African Republic, a landlocked country of 623,000 km², is dominated by open and grassy savannas and dry forest, except in its most southern reaches. It has two main forested areas in the southwest and southeast of the country, containing large tracts of evergreen, semi-deciduous, or transitional humid dense tropical forests. This zone covers approximately 37,500 km²; but with reductions for cultivated areas and swamps, the total exploitable forest is about 27,000 km².

The southwestern forests, where the DSP is located, representing the country's last stronghold of undisturbed lowland forest habitats, have a much greater diversity and concentration of wildlife than southeastern counterparts. Southwestern forest vegetation types include dense forest, monodominant stands of *Guilbertiodendron dewevrei*, *Raphia* marshes and secondary vegetation. This forest is part of the Western Congo Basin Moist Forest, considered a target region for conservation efforts. Although threatened by mining, forest exploitation, and poaching, CAR's southwestern forest remains relatively intact thanks to a great extent to ten years of conservation efforts under the auspices of the Dzanga-Sangha Project.

As briefly mentioned above the DSP, located in the southwestern corner of CAR is home to high populations of forest elephant (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*), western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) and other characteristic flora and fauna of Western Congo Basin Moist Forest. The forest also shelters the BaAka pygmies, an indigenous hunter-gatherer population whose traditional livelihood is directly linked to the forest and its plant and wildlife resources.

AN OVERVIEW OF ECO-TOURISM AT DZANGA-SANGHA

The ecotourism potential of the DS project area is well documented. The existence of Forest clearings or "bai" facilitates the viewing of forest elephant, forest buffalo, sitatunga and with some luck bongo and giant forest hogs. During a walk on a forest path or road, visitors can observe innumerable species of birds as well as monkeys and sometime forest duikers and other more elusive animals. An equally important attraction is the opportunity to participate in the daily activities of the BaAka pygmies including net, spear, or cross-bow

hunting, the collection of medical plants, and tracking wildlife in the forest with tourist center guides.

In order to promote the tourist industry for both revenue generation (50% of park entry and visitor fees is recycled into park management, 40% contributes to community development projects, and 10% is deposited into a national “forestry fund”) and employment opportunities for the local population. Over time the project has invested in basic infrastructure – a hotel, (government owned but managed by a private company), tourist center, viewing platform at one Forest clearing – as well as publicity, technical assistance to groups and individuals involved in the organization of tourist activities (hunting, river trips, dances, etc.) as well as local crafts people and entrepreneurs. Project leaders are also continually exploring the means to diversify tourism activities. For example, for over three years, an expatriate expert has been working with C.A.R assistants as well as indispensable BaAka trackers on the difficult habituation of lowland gorillas. The opening of this program to tourists is expected to generate new interest in the area. See below.

The number of tourists visiting DS has fluctuated over the years, often due to economic and political instability. For example the decrease between 1996 and 1997 was due to internal civil unrest related to a series of mutinies in the capital city. Tourist numbers since 1996 are as follows:

Nights	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001 (3months)
International Tourists	113	243	477	716	667	78
Foreign Residents & Consultants	125 9	712	103 5	591	428	70
Nationals	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	90	10
Totals	247	955	585	1307	1185	158

However, the growing interest in the sub-region through promotion by international conservation groups and tourist agencies is hoped to offset some of the previous negative press associated with the region.

CARPE Eco-tourism Activities

In November 2000, WWF-US informed the Dzanga-Sangha Project in the Central African Republic (CAR) of an estimated \$38,000 in CARPE funds available for ecotourism related activities. Through April 2001, this one-time funding was used to promote the activities described below.

Tourism Guide Book Development:

As a means of diversifying tourism activities two consultants—a writer (an Ornithologist) and a wildlife photographer –visited the project site for three weeks in early 2000 with the goal of obtaining material for future tourist guide book. The draft text, in French, was completed in September 2000. However, a large percentage of tourists came from German as well as English-speaking countries. The CARPE Ecotourism funding supported the hiring of a consultant in March 2001 to translate the French version into English. As text exists now in all three languages: French, German and English, a layout of the book will be finalized in upcoming months with the book being available for tourists before the end of 2001.

Tourist Guide Training.

Over time, the Dzanga-Sangha Project has recruited and informally trained a group of tourist guides and trackers. The knowledge of many of these guides and particularly the BaAka pygmy trackers is impressive, however they lack the ability to communicate their knowledge and observations to tourists. It was hoped that with the use of CARPE Ecotourism funds, a qualified trainer could be identified with guides and trackers in order to improve their ability to share information with tourists. Unfortunately this activity has been delayed due to difficulties in finding qualified consultants (French-speaking, knowledge of tropical forest ecology and biodiversity, well versed in communication tools and methodologies for tourism).

Infrastructure Improvement:

1. The Tourist Center:

In 1996, the Dzanga-Sangha Project in support of the burgeoning tourist market constructed a tourist center. However, with time, project staff members concluded that the building was under-utilized primarily due to what was perceived as flaws in its design:

- ◆ Wood-slat windows hindering the entry of light. It was difficult if not impossible to read the existing interpretative panels during much of the day.
- ◆ Windows with screens, leading to an infestation of mosquitoes
- ◆ Aside from the flawed window design, electric lighting was insufficient and provided little additional light on overcast days or in the evening.

Furthermore after five years of exposure to a tropical climate, the Center was in need of some general maintenance including a new coat of paint, roof repair, etc.

With CARPE ecotourism funds, the Center has gone through a major overhaul including the replacement of wood-slat windows with glass and screening, roof repair, paint, and screen doors. Spotlights have been ordered and will be installed as the last step in the remodeling of the tourist center. Due to improved lighting, the center was used in April 2001 for a technical meeting of the Sangha Trinational partners representing the countries and protected areas of Congo/Nouabale-Ndoki National Park, Cameroon/Lobeke National Park and Dzanga-Sangha.

2. Mongambe Camping site

Most tourists, during their stay at Dzanga-Sangha, spend at least one night in the forest camp, rising early in the morning in the hope of viewing gorillas and other forest wildlife. The camp of preference is Mongambe, formerly a research site. However, the existing infrastructure had begun to decay in recent years. CARPE Ecotourism money permitted the rehabilitation of the site including the construction of new toilet and bathing facilities (although modifications have been made on the original design due to chronic destruction by elephants probably due to their attraction to soap residue!), new thatching for the various open-air buildings, and simple furniture for dining, etc.

3. Viewing Platform

Dzanga-Sangha is world-renowned for Dzanga Bai, a forest clearing that draw impressive numbers of forest elephants due to mineral-enriched soil (and probably for social interaction reasons) as well as bongo, forest buffalo, giant forest hogs, African gray parrots, sitatunga, and other characteristic fauna of the surrounding forest. The large size of Dzanga Bai as well as the high number of the elephants at a close range precludes observation on the ground. As a result a viewing platform was constructed in 1993 permitting tourists and researchers to observe almost the entire extent of the Bai in a secure situation.

The Park and Reserve shelter numerous other forest clearings with its own unique attributes. With the aim of enlarging the number of the clearing viewing options for tourists, two new Platforms (the basis of Mongambe I and Mongambe II) are being constructed with CARPE Ecotourism money. Both are located in the vicinity of the Mongambe Camping site. Tourists will now be able to move from camp to one or two of the viewing platforms, potentially increasing their number of days in the forest.

Due to logistical and technical limitations, the local building contractor constructed the viewing platform at his workshop. This work has been completed and the remaining step involves transporting the viewing platforms in manageable parts to the two forest sites for reconstruction.

Gorilla habituation program

CARPE funds had also leveraged some money to carry out this gorilla habituation project. Therefore it is deemed necessary to report on progress made in this arena.

During this last quarter of 2001, the monitoring of the gorilla continued on a regular basis. The movement of the group Munye was maintained on very relatively small area close to the camp, allowing the survey team to see them almost every day. The habituation level of this group of gorillas is such that one can approach them within a distance of 20 meters without pushing them to run away or reacting aggressively. The observation quality depends a lot on the type of the vegetation where the contact with the gorillas took place. In certain conditions, such as the Bai, saline or the Guilbertiodendron, the visibility is better even within long distances. However it is not the same thing within area most frequented by the gorillas, Marantacea zones, where the view is limited to few meters.

The control of the second group has also become more regular. The Motorola radio that the team has benefited from have greatly allowed the team to maintain contact during the survey over the different sectors and signal the position of the gorillas' traces.

In October, the project Team inaugurated the first pilot phase of tourism with the arrival of the first group of tourists followed by other groups in November and December. Visitors can join the team in the afternoon from 12:30 p.m. through 5:30 p.m. Conditions for tracking these species are exposed at Doli Lodge. When possible a meeting is organized with the visitors to introduce them to the rules, limitations, and risks of tracking. As an example, only two visitors are allowed to go out with the afternoon team. Participation to the tracking does not guarantee the vision of the gorillas. When tourists are planned for the afternoon, the morning team limits its job at tracking the gorillas' path without necessary locating them or seeing them. This is just to avoid disturbing them.

During this first phase, the program team's main objective is to test the program, specially in identifying the gaps and points for improvements, to verify the demand and the visitors' satisfaction level, to evaluate their impact on the gorillas and judge the efficiency of the cautionary measures adopted.

About the first three months of the opening of the tourism season, we can draw these preliminary conclusions:

- The demand exists; all of the visitors who arrived in Bayanga wanted to participate in tracking the gorillas without complaining about the price (\$70 or CFA 40,000/person).
- Exceptionally, all visitors (more than 30 people) were able to be in contact with the gorillas, with different viewing conditions.
- The visitors' satisfaction level was very high, due to the vision of the gorillas or the tracking in its entirety.
- The gorillas seemed not stressed or under pressure, however this needs to be verified by the reaction analysis at the arrival of visitors and should always be maintained under control.

The results of this first phase were positive and encouraging, nevertheless some minor gaps exist and can be improved.

Assistants to the habituation, guide trackers, need again to improve their English knowledge. The project is working on this with the hiring of Ms. Angelic Todd, a British researcher and Volunteer of Dzanga-Sangha Habituation Program who has been leading these English classes at the Bai Hokou camp.

At present, the demand has exceeded the offer. Already for these first months some of the visitors were putting pressure on the team to increase the number of visitors every day. The best strategy is not to increase pressure on one group of gorillas, it could lead to a level where they can no more tolerate the presence of visitors and ruin the results so far obtained. It's much more productive to invest as much as possible in the habituation of the second group of gorillas. This will increase not only the number of visitors admitted every day, but will allow limiting the pressure on gorillas.

The issue of poaching is becoming more urgent at this time where the gorillas are contributing to generate revenues for their protection. Despite it seems difficulty to combat/fight poaching activities, in some cases experiences can help guide to preventive actions. For example, on December 1, 2001, gun shootings seemed not to stop around the saline and the camp, which are regularly visited by the gorillas. During big holidays such as Independence day (December 1st) or New Year holiday, it is foreseen to have more poachers' presence in the project zone. It is therefore important that the project gets itself organized.

Equipment

CARPE Ecotourism funding has facilitated the bolstering of tourist-related activities through the purchase of important equipment:

- ◆ Gorilla Habituation Program : shoes, uniforms, improved radio communication, field books, GSP
- ◆ Tourist Guides and Trackers: binoculars, GSP, camping equipment, life preservers
- ◆ Tourism Unit Leader: computer and printer.

CONCLUSION

The CARPE Ecotourism funding has helped the Dzanga-Sangha project improve its interpretative center facilities, improve the Mongambe camp which houses visitors in the middle of this dense tropical rain forest of Bayanga. The number of visitors would have increased dramatically if it were not for political and economic instabilities. In 1999 the total number of tourists equaled 1,307 whereas in 2000 it was 1,195. Year 2001 would have been a prosperous year if it were not for the May attempt coup that lead the country again into insecurity.

USAID's support through CARPE has tremendously helped the Dzanga-Sangha Eco-tourism The Project acquired the equipment necessary for its functioning (shoes, uniforms, radios, GPS binocular computer and printer).

Once again all our gratitude to USAID through the CARPE program that provided opportunities to field projects to make the difference in biodiversity conservation. We are eagerly looking forward to CARPE years 8-20.