IUCN

COUNTRY BRIEF

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)

AFRICAN WILDLIFE INITIATIVE

KEEP NATURE STANDING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the world's most biodiverse countries, home to over 10,000 plant species and iconic wildlife like mountain gorillas, bonobos, okapis, and forest elephants. Its ecosystems include the vast Congo Basin rainforest, savannas, wetlands, and montane forests, many of which are globally significant. However, this biodiversity faces significant conservation challenges, exacerbated by socioeconomic instability. Poaching, habitat destruction, and illegal wildlife trade are rampant, driven by the high demand for bushmeat and animal parts. Armed groups further complicate conservation efforts, creating insecurity in remote areas and impeding law enforcement's ability to combat wildlife crime effectively.

Local communities, struggling with diminished livelihood opportunities, are increasingly turning to unsustainable practices such as hunting and slash-and-burn agriculture. These activities not only destroy vital habitats but also pose direct physical threats to wildlife populations. Disease transmission risks, particularly COVID-19, Ebola, and monkeypox, exacerbate the vulnerability of already fragile species populations. For example, cases of monkeypox have been identified since 2022, in areas near critical habitats for Grauer's gorillas and chimpanzees. These issues threaten some of the world's most threatened species, including Grauer's gorillas, Eastern chimpanzees, bonobos, okapi, and forest elephants.

In response, six conservation projects funded by the IUCN SOS African Wildlife Initiative have been implemented across key reserves and national parks, focusing on community engagement, anti-poaching initiatives, and ecological monitoring.

- In the **Itombwe Nature Reserve**, efforts to protect Grauer's gorillas and Eastern chimpanzees included engaging local communities as eco-guards, conducting anti-poaching patrols, and utilising Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool technology, resulting in the stabilisation of great ape populations, the removal of over 1,200 traps, and carrying out patrols covering 4,318 km².
- In **Kahuzi-Biega National Park** and Community Forest Concessions, conservation initiatives integrated species protection with socio-economic development, successfully increasing the local Grauer's gorilla population from 24 to 46 individuals. The Okapi Wildlife Reserve saw the reinforcement of patrol posts and restoration of supply lines to improve security for endangered species such as the okapi and forest elephant despite global supply chain disruptions.
- In **Virunga National Park**, anti-poaching patrols and ecological monitoring helped maintain habitat integrity and protect the mountain gorilla population during the COVID-19-related tourism suspension while also improving water access for 7,000 local inhabitants.

- In the **Lomako Yokokala Faunal Reserve**, efforts focused on bonobo conservation during financial challenges linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining ranger patrols, supporting bonobo guards, and implementing disease prevention measures, ultimately stabilising the bonobo population at 29 individuals and bolstering local security.
- Similarly, in **Maiko National Park** and surrounding community reserves, the Fauna & Flora International initiative enhanced law enforcement and biomonitoring efforts for okapi conservation, improving patrol effectiveness and fostering scientific knowledge exchange, with plans to publish key findings in a peer-reviewed journal.

To ensure the long-term effectiveness of these conservation efforts, several key recommendations have emerged, including:

- Secure long-term financial support through diversified funding sources, including public budgets, international donors, and innovative mechanisms like conservation trust funds.
- Strengthen the skills and capacities of conservation staff and local communities through targeted training, mentorship, and knowledge exchange.
- Carry out systematic species surveys to gather reliable data on populations, threats, and habitats to guide conservation priorities and actions.
- The importance of community-driven conservation models which include consultation and participation of communities, economic incentives for local stakeholders, and improved social security outcomes.
- Establish and maintain **robust, science-based monitoring systems** that can provide reliable data on the status and trends of species, habitats, and ecosystems.

The success of these initiatives in the DRC provides a replicable framework for global conservation efforts, emphasising resilience, adaptability, and the need for long-term engagement in wildlife protection.

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THE IUCN SOS AFRICAN WILDLIFE INITIATIVE: SCALING CONSERVATION ACTION FOR THREATENED SPECIES

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) envisions "a just world that values and conserves nature." Its mission is to "influence, encourage, and assist societies worldwide to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable." As a global authority on biodiversity conservation, IUCN operates through an extensive network of over 10,000 species conservation experts who guide the development and implementation of its strategy. Through initiatives like Save Our Species (SOS), IUCN supports evidence-based conservation action, strengthens civil society organisations (CSOs), and helps implement biodiversity policies that benefit species, ecosystems, and people.

Photo credit: © IGH

Africa is home to some of the world's most iconic yet increasingly threatened species, particularly large carnivores such as lions, cheetahs, leopards, African wild dogs, and Ethiopian wolves. These species face escalating threats due to habitat loss, poaching, human-wildlife conflict, and illegal wildlife trade. To address these challenges, the IUCN SOS African Wildlife Initiative was launched as a partnership between the European Union and IUCN. The initiative focuses on two primary objectives: strengthening CSOs working to protect biodiversity, species, and habitats and demonstrating the impact of conservation actions on threatened species and ecosystems, with a special focus on large carnivores.

The initiative operates through three core pillars.

- **Species conservation**, which involves monitoring and protecting wildlife populations while creating conditions for species to recover and recolonise their native habitats.

- **Habitat protection** that enhances protected area management, restores degraded ecosystems and tackles threats such as overgrazing and invasive species.
- **Community engagement** which ensures the participation of local communities in conservation action. Supporting communities to adopt alternative livelihoods like beekeeping, agroforestry, and ecotourism reduces communities' reliance on natural resources, while the promotion of coexistence measures supports the needs of those living near wildlife.

To achieve these goals, the initiative funds conservation actions that address human-wildlife conflict through community-based interventions, awareness campaigns, and compensation schemes. It also combats poaching and illegal wildlife trade via anti-poaching patrols, snare removal, and K9 detection units. Additionally, the initiative supports habitat restoration through afforestation, wildfire management, and sustainable pasture planning while strengthening law enforcement and policy advocacy to enhance species protection. Recognising the importance of local participation, it actively involves communities through capacity-building programmes, conservation employment opportunities, and education initiatives.

Since its launch, the initiative has provided funding through three calls for proposals (2017, 2019, and 2021), offering two types of grants. Threatened Species Grants support long-term projects implementing a programmatic approach to addressing critical conservation threats, with funding ranging from €25,000 to €450,000 per grant and Rapid Action Grants offering short-term emergency response funding between €25,000 and €100,000 per grant. These grants have been instrumental in driving conservation action across Sub-Saharan Africa.

The IUCN SOS African Wildlife Initiative awarded 91 grants totalling €10.8 million to 91 civil society organisations, with 70% of grantees being national organisations. As a result:

- Approximately **40 million hectares** of key wildlife habitats have been placed under improved management.
- **37 action plans** have been developed or improved for better species protection.
- Additionally, **30 projects** have mitigated human-wildlife conflict, fostering coexistence between wildlife and communities.
- Capacity-building efforts have trained **44,510 people** through workshops and policy events with **665,665 individuals** benefiting from direct employment and livelihood activities.
- **85% of grantees** reported improved organisational capacity, thereby strengthening conservation efforts across Africa.

The initiative has also helped amplify conservation awareness amongst the general public, with over **1,200 conservation stories** published across various platforms.

> The IUCN SOS African Wildlife Initiative strengthens civil society, protects threatened species and habitats, and empowers communities—placing 40 million hectares under improved management and reaching over 665,000 people through conservation-based livelihoods.

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO IN FOCUS

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the most biodiverse countries in Africa, encompassing vast tropical rainforests, savannas, wetlands, and mountainous regions. As a central component of the Congo Basin—the world's second-largest rainforest—DRC plays a vital role in global biodiversity conservation and climate stability. The country is home to more than 400 species of mammals, over 1,100 bird species, around 200 amphibian species, and numerous endemic plants and animals, particularly concentrated in the Albertine Rift region. Iconic and highly threatened species such as the eastern gorilla, bonobo, forest elephant, okapi, and African grey parrot reinforce the nation's global conservation importance.

Photo credit: © IGH

Despite this ecological richness, DRC faces numerous conservation challenges. Deforestation driven by agriculture, illegal logging, and charcoal production continues to erode wildlife habitats. Poaching and trafficking of wildlife, coupled with extensive mining for resources like coltan and gold, pose additional threats. Insecurity and armed conflict in the eastern provinces further complicate conservation efforts, often limiting access to critical areas. Enforcement of conservation laws and protected area boundaries is often weak due to institutional and financial constraints.

Nevertheless, DRC has made considerable progress in biodiversity protection. The country has designated over 70 protected areas, covering approximately 13% of its land area. Prominent parks such as Virunga and Salonga—both UNESCO World Heritage Sites—as well as Garamba, Kahuzi-Biéga, and Upemba National Parks form the backbone of national conservation efforts. Community-based conservation is also expanding, with increasing involvement of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in habitat protection, wildlife monitoring, and sustainable resource management.

The IUCN SOS African Wildlife initiative has played a vital role in supporting conservation efforts in DRC. To date, the initiative has awarded **€809,715** through six grants to civil society organisations (CSOs) operating in the country. These investments have led to the following outcomes;

1. Improved management of **3,885,300 hectares** of essential wildlife habitat.
2. Directly benefited **9,962 individuals** engaged in conservation and livelihood-focused activities.
3. Flagship species such as Grauer's gorilla, Eastern Chimpanzee, Okapi, Forest elephant and mountain gorilla benefited from protection.

Over 400 mammal species

Over 1,100 bird species

Around 200 amphibian species

SOS AFRICAN WILDLIFE INITIATIVE ON THE GROUND ACTIONS IN DRC

3.1 Conservation of gorillas and chimpanzees in the Itombwe Nature Reserve (2021 – 2022)

Implementation partner	*Itombwe Génération pour l'Humanité* (IGH)
Target species	▪ Grauer's gorilla (*Gorilla beringei graueri*) Critically Endangered ▪ Eastern chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*) Endangered
Project location	Itombwe Nature Reserve

PROBLEM

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Itombwe Nature Reserve in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo faced intensified conservation challenges, particularly affecting Grauer's gorillas and Eastern chimpanzees. The economic fallout from the pandemic severely impacted local communities, many of whom rely heavily on natural resources for survival. With widespread loss of income and limited access to alternative livelihoods, there was a notable increase in poaching and illegal activities within the reserve. These pressures were compounded by reduced presence of enforcement and conservation staff, as travel restrictions and funding limitations hampered operational capacity during the height of the pandemic. As a result, both Grauer's gorillas and Eastern chimpanzees—species already listed as endangered and vulnerable, respectively—faced heightened threats. Grauer's gorillas, with their limited range and already declining population, are particularly sensitive to even small increases in poaching and habitat loss. Reports from the field indicated not only increased snares and hunting activity, but also greater forest clearing for subsistence agriculture and charcoal production. These forms of habitat degradation led to fragmentation of critical primate territories, disrupted group cohesion, and reduced access to food sources. For Eastern chimpanzees, these pressures threaten social stability, reduce reproductive success, and increase the risk of human-wildlife conflict.

APPROACH

The project implemented several strategies, including the recruitment and training of 24 community eco-guards to increase patrol capacity. It also formed ten mixed patrol teams combining community eco-guards and official conservation agents. Daily anti-poaching patrols were conducted using Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) technology, and ecological monitoring of great apes was carried out through indirect signs like nests, footprints, and other indicators. Community engagement was also prioritised to foster local ownership of conservation efforts by recruiting and training community rangers in wildlife monitoring and patrols.

KEY OUTCOMES

Community-led conservation was achieved by actively involving local communities in conservation efforts as 24 community rangers were recruited and trained in wildlife monitoring and patrol, fostering a strong sense of ownership and responsibility. This approach led to improved collaboration and increased motivation among community members. Patrols covered over 4,318 km²—surpassing planned targets—and resulted in the removal of 1,218 traps and the dismantling of 63 hunting camps, significantly reducing threats to key species. Regular monitoring of great ape groups allowed for the identification of sub-populations and contributed to stabilising their numbers during the project period. Employing community members as eco-guards improved their livelihoods, with testimonials highlighting positive impacts on household well-being. Additionally, training and capacity-building programmes strengthened the eco-guards' skills and deepened their commitment to conservation work.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Key success factors included:

- The active involvement and collaboration with local communities;
- The effective use of SMART technology for patrol planning and monitoring;
- The integration of community eco-guards into conservation efforts, enhancing motivation and coverage;
- Clear communication and transparency about project goals with stakeholders also contributed to the project's success.

3.2 Socio-economic resilience and protection of Grauer's gorillas in the community forests on the northern part of the Kahuzi-Biega Park (2021 – 2022)

Implementation partner	*Forêt pour le Développement Intégral* (FODI)
Target species	▪ Grauer's gorillas (*Gorilla beringei graueri*) Critically Endangered ▪ Chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) Endangered The project directly affected 46 individual gorillas, representing approximately 0.67% of the global Grauer's gorilla population, estimated at 6,800 individuals, according to a recent WCS publication[1]
Project location	Northern part of the Kahuzi-Biega National Park and Community Forest Concessions (CFCLs) adjacent to Kahuzi-Biega National Park (PNKB)

PROBLEM

Grauer's gorillas face significant threats, including habitat destruction caused by slash-and-burn agriculture, poaching through direct hunting with 12-caliber rifles and the use of traps, and the risk of disease transmission, particularly from COVID-19. Several cases of COVID-19 have already been identified in the communities surrounding gorilla habitats, raising concerns about cross-species transmission. These threats, combined with ongoing habitat degradation, significantly reduce the available living space for Grauer's gorillas, pushing them further toward extinction. Furthermore, local communities in the region face limited livelihood opportunities, worsened by the socio-economic impacts of prolonged conflict, which has decimated livestock farming. This situation increases pressure on both the gorillas and the surrounding human population, as people turn to unsustainable practices like poaching and habitat encroachment for survival.

Photo credit: © FODI

1 (https://doi.org/10.1002/ajp.23288).

APPROACH

The project implemented a comprehensive approach to tackle the identified challenges. Conservation efforts included enhanced ecological monitoring and increased patrolling by forest monitors to curb poaching and prevent habitat encroachment. Monitoring activities in gorilla habitats were intensified, resulting in reduced human presence in those areas. To mitigate disease risks, the project distributed personal protective equipment and conducted community education campaigns focused on COVID-19 prevention.

For livelihood support, rabbit farming was introduced as an alternative income source, benefiting 130 households—38 of which were led by women. A rabbit breeding centre was also established to ensure the sustainable continuation of this initiative beyond the project's duration. Capacity-building initiatives trained community members in sustainable farming practices and wildlife monitoring. Additionally, awareness-raising campaigns were carried out to encourage conservation and sustainability, including the use of educational posters on COVID-19 and a documentary video highlighting the project's impact.

KEY OUTCOMES

The estimated population of Grauer's gorillas in the target area increased from 24 to 46 individuals, representing 0.67% of the global population. Habitat monitoring expanded to cover over 75% of critical areas within CFCLs, up from 45-50%. Direct employment for 33 individuals was created, boosting local economic resilience and reducing unemployment in the CFCLs. Rabbit farming improved food security and household income, and community behaviours shifted positively regarding COVID-19 prevention and conservation awareness.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Key success factors included:

- Community engagement, integrated livelihood support, collaborative partnerships with other organisations on the ground helped facilitate the implementation of project activities, and targeted conservation efforts;
- Active participation of local communities in conservation efforts through training on rabbit farming and the construction of a rabbit training centre, fostered ownership and accountability;
- Providing alternative income sources reduced pressure on natural resources;
- Support from organisations like IUCN enhanced technical capacity and visibility for the implementing partner, attracting new partners such as Rainforest Trust and IUCN Dutch National Committee;
- Focused ecological monitoring and habitat protection directly benefited species populations.

3.3 Rehabilitating and reinforcing strategic patrol posts in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (2020 – 2021)

Implementation partner	Wildlife Conservation Society
Target species	▪ Okapi (*Okapia johnstonii*) Endangered ▪ Forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) Critically Endangered ▪ Other species of conservation concern due to high levels of endemism, including the giant genet, aquatic genet, Congo shrew, and fuscous shrew. The Okapi Wildlife Reserve fauna displays high levels of endemism, with 16 species considered either strictly endemic or near-endemic. Ten additional species are considered near-endemic, including the owl-faced monkey, L'Hoest's monkey, the pied bat, Allen's striped bat, Misonne's soft-furred mouse, and Verschuren's swamp rat.
Project location	Okapi Wildlife Reserve

PROBLEM

Attacks on remote perimeter patrol posts within the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR), likely carried out by armed militia groups or poachers, significantly hindered operations. A particularly impactful attack in April 2020 required urgent measures to restore patrol activities and ensure continuity of operations. These challenges were compounded by global supply chain disruptions, which impacted the availability of essential equipment, such as protective gear, vehicle parts, and communication tools needed for patrolling. Local procurement was also hindered due to movement restrictions and COVID-19-related delays. These disruptions, along with labour shortages and increased pressure on resources within the reserve, made it even more difficult to maintain effective conservation efforts during the pandemic.

APPROACH

The project focused on rehabilitating key patrol posts (Zunguluka and Adusa) within the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR). Key activities included the construction of new buildings and the installation of lighting at the Zunguluka patrol post, as well as restoring food and operational supply routes to both Zunguluka and Adusa posts using motorbikes. Additionally, the project worked on advancing the judicial process for those involved in the April attack by maintaining regular communication with the Ituri provincial prosecutor to ensure consistent follow-up on the case. The project also facilitated regular engagement with the local Bandisende community, holding informal meetings at least once a month and formal meetings three times during the 2021 project period as COVID-19 restrictions eased. Lastly, perimeter forest fence work was carried out to reinforce the protection of the reserve.

Photo credit: © IGH

KEY OUTCOMES

The completion of a new integrated office-store and immigration checkpoint at the Zunguluka patrol post, along with the installation of lighting in the previously vandalised accommodation block, was a critical step in enhancing operational capacity for species conservation within the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. The restoration of supply lines to both Zunguluka and Adusa patrol posts using motorbikes ensured the continuous delivery of essential resources for field operations. Regular informal meetings with the Bandisende community, and formal meetings as COVID-19 restrictions eased, helped foster collaboration and support for conservation efforts. The security of the surrounding areas of the Zunguluka and Adusa posts was significantly strengthened, enabling successful operations that resulted in the seizure of illegally mined gold, a major threat to the reserve's biodiversity. The operational success of these patrol posts not only protected the reserve's resources but also played a key role in safeguarding the habitats of endangered species like the Okapi and Grauer's gorilla from illegal activities.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

- Emergency funding from IUCN Save Our Species was instrumental in restoring critical park operations, allowing the rehabilitation of patrol posts during a time of global uncertainty.
- The strategic location of the rehabilitated posts enabled effective operations against illegal activities, leading to significant gold seizures from illegal mining in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve.
- The project's success was also driven by leveraging local skills, creating employment through construction work, and maintaining regular communication with local communities, which fostered support for conservation efforts.

3.4 Support to maintain local capacities for monitoring and protecting mountain gorilla populations in Virunga National Park (DRC) during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 – 2021)

Implementation partner	Virunga Foundation
Target species	Mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*) Endangered Specifically, the population located in the Congolese part of the Virunga sector, representing approximately 25% of the global mountain gorilla population. The project area holds an estimated 330-350 individuals.
Project location	Virunga National Park

PROBLEM

The suspension of tourism activities in Virunga National Park, caused by COVID-19-related lockdowns, severely impacted park operations. With tourism being a critical source of revenue, the closure led to significant cash flow challenges, which in turn threatened to reduce the park's operational capacity and its ability to maintain visibility and enforcement efforts. This financial strain affected the park's ability to conduct patrols, provide staff salaries, and fund essential conservation activities.

The gorilla sector of Virunga National Park, home to the endangered mountain gorillas, faces a range of persistent pressures. These include the potential conversion of critical forest habitats into agricultural fields, as local communities rely heavily on land for farming. Additionally, forests are increasingly exploited for charcoal production, further contributing to habitat loss and fragmentation. Poaching remains a major concern, driven by illegal hunting and trafficking, posing a direct threat to gorilla populations and other wildlife in the park.

APPROACH

The project adopted a comprehensive approach to maintaining essential anti-poaching and monitoring efforts, ensuring the continuity of conservation activities even during the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key to this approach was the sustained operation of five patrol posts around the Mikeno sector (Jomba, Bikenge, Bukima, Gatovu, Gikeri), with 105 rangers deployed in the southern sector. The project emphasised local capacity-building by maintaining gorilla monitoring efforts through the involvement of local trackers and rangers. It also included targeted snare sweeps across 94% of the gorilla sector, alongside community outreach efforts to raise awareness about the importance of gorilla conservation, including sensitising poachers and villagers. Additionally, the approach integrated human welfare with environmental protection by supporting local communities with improved access to essential resources, such as water, through the construction of two reservoirs and a water point in Bukima.

KEY OUTCOMES

The integrity of the gorilla habitat was maintained with no conversion of habitat for cultivation or charcoal production. Local capacities for gorilla monitoring were maintained. Patrol efforts averaged 2,395 km per month during the project, exceeding the pre-closure average of 2111 km per month. Gorilla sightings remained consistent, averaging 420 sightings per month between June and October 2020, similar to the 398 sightings per month between January and May 2020. A total of 1275 snares were discovered and removed during snare sweeps. The habituated mountain gorilla population increased by eight individuals (from 151 to 159) between June and October 2020, a faster growth rate than the previous year. Access to water was improved for 7000 inhabitants of Bukima, reducing the distance to collect water from 7.5 km to nearby the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation patrol post, and 60 trackers kept their jobs.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

- Long-term involvement of the Virunga Foundation in the area, with over 99% of staff coming from Eastern Congo, including surrounding communities
- Maintaining patrol efforts and local monitoring capacities
- Direct intervention and snare removal efforts, including community engagement and sensitisation were key success factors.

3.5 Permanence of bonobo guards and ranger patrols at and around the expedition camp in the Lomako Yokokala Faunal Reserve (2021 – 2022)

Implementation partner	Royal Zoological Society Antwerp
Target species	Bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) Endangered
Project location	Lomako Yokokala Faunal Reserve

PROBLEM

The Lomako Yokokala Faunal Reserve (RFLY) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is renowned for its significant population of bonobos, endemic to the Democratic Republic of Congo. The estimated global population is between 15,000 and 20,000 individuals. The Lomako Yokokala Faunal Reserve is estimated to hold approximately 1,000 bonobos, representing 5-7% of the global population. The project focuses on the "Tolende" bonobo community, consisting of 29 individually identified bonobos. A specialised eco-tourism project was being developed to showcase these endangered primates. However, the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted these plans, leading to the cancellation of all scheduled tourism visits in 2020. This not only delayed the expected return on investment but also compounded financial difficulties for the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN), which struggled to maintain essential ranger presence in the reserve. As a result, the protection of bonobos and their habitat was at risk. In response, the Royal Zoological Society of Antwerp (KMDA), through its Antwerp Zoo Foundation, collaborated with ICCN to secure funding that would ensure the continued presence of bonobo guards and maintain minimum patrol efforts. Additionally, measures were needed to prevent disease transmission from humans to bonobos, a further threat to the species' survival.

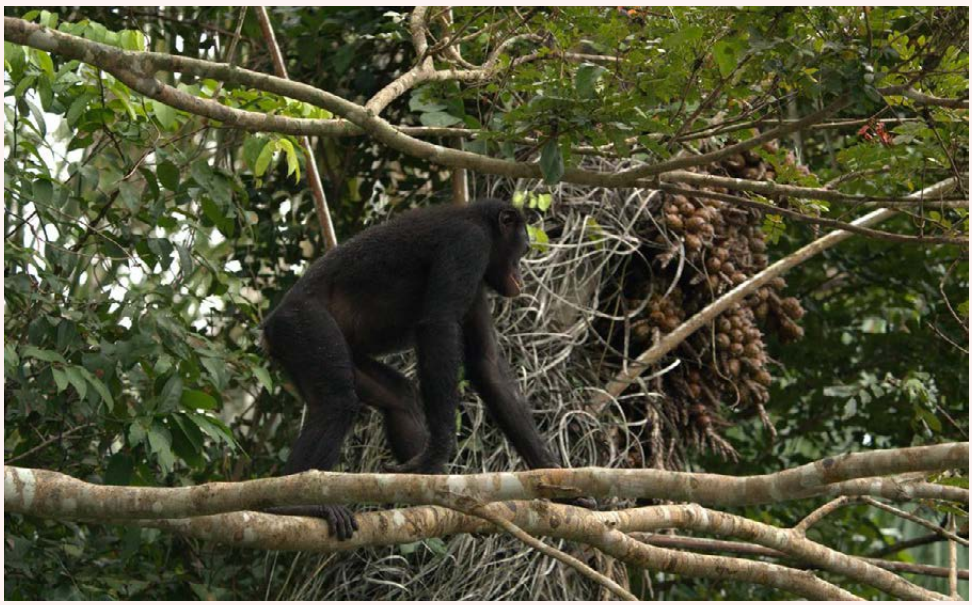

Photo credit: © Jabruson/ Arcus

APPROACH

To address the challenges posed by the pandemic and financial constraints, the project implemented a three-pronged approach. First, it provided emergency support for ranger patrols by offering logistical assistance to ensure consistent anti-poaching efforts. This was critical in maintaining the security of the reserve, particularly during the heightened vulnerability caused by COVID-19. Second, the project focused on ensuring continuous support for bonobo guards, ensuring the ongoing presence of dedicated personnel who monitored the habituated bonobo community. This support was essential for the well-being and safety of both the bonobos and the guards. Third, the project took proactive steps to prevent disease transmission by implementing basic medical checkup protocols. These measures minimised the risk of disease transmission between humans and bonobos, safeguarding the health of both species and contributing to the overall success of the conservation efforts.

KEY OUTCOMES

The project achieved several key outcomes that underscore its effectiveness in addressing the challenges of bonobo conservation during the pandemic. Regular ranger patrols and bonobo guard activities continued uninterrupted, ensuring the security of the bonobos and wildlife within the Lomako Yokokala Faunal Reserve. As a result, the Tolende bonobo community maintained a stable population of 29 identified individuals throughout the project period, a significant achievement considering the challenges posed by the pandemic. Additionally, the project successfully mitigated the increased threats resulting from the pandemic, preventing an upsurge in poaching and habitat encroachment. Collaboration with local communities and the ICCN was strengthened, fostering a more coordinated conservation effort. Furthermore, the project enhanced the visibility and credibility of the Antwerp Zoo Foundation as a leading actor in bonobo conservation, ultimately leading to additional funding from the Province of Antwerp.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Several factors contributed to the success of the project.

- Strong collaboration was a cornerstone, with effective partnerships between the Antwerp Zoo Foundation, ICCN, and local communities playing a pivotal role.
- Targeted support was another key factor, as providing essential resources such as food, materials, and salaries to rangers and bonobo guards ensured their continued effectiveness.
- Adaptive management was also crucial, allowing strategies to be adjusted based on ongoing monitoring and intelligence from the field, such as adjusting patrol itineraries.
- Community engagement was vital, recognising and supporting the role of local communities as key stakeholders in bonobo conservation.
- The project's rapid response to the urgent need for financial support created by the COVID-19 pandemic was instrumental in maintaining conservation efforts during a critical period.

3.6 Supporting the long-term survival of Okapi in Eastern DRC through coordinated and sustainable local conservation approaches (2021 – 2024)

Implementation partner	Fauna & Flora International
Target species	Okapi (*Okapia johnstoni*) Endangered
Project location	Maiko National Park

PROBLEM

The long-term survival of okapi in Eastern DRC is threatened by several critical factors. Inadequate law enforcement coverage within community reserves and Maiko National Park (MNP) leaves these areas vulnerable to illegal activities. Poaching, indicated by the presence of snares and gun cartridges, illegal mining, and the presence of armed groups further exacerbate these threats. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive data on okapi distribution, abundance, and threats, particularly in the southern sector of MNP and areas west of MNP. Limited awareness and community support for okapi conservation also hinder effective conservation efforts.

APPROACH

To address these challenges, the project employed a multi-faceted approach. Enhanced law enforcement was achieved by strengthening patrol teams with equipment such as GPS, smartphones for data collection, compasses, and power banks, and providing training to increase protection in MNP and community forests. Biomonitoring involved systematically placing camera traps to monitor okapi populations and inform adaptive management strategies. Knowledge sharing was facilitated through exchange visits between MNP, community rangers, and the Okapi Wildlife Reserve to share best practices and lessons learned. Community engagement included outreach programmes to raise awareness and garner support for okapi conservation. Surveys and assessments were conducted to evaluate okapi relative abundance, occupancy, and threats in MNP, community reserves, and accessible regions west of MNP.

KEY OUTCOMES

The project achieved several key outcomes. Law enforcement coverage and effectiveness improved across community reserves and the Maiko National Park, with regular patrols conducted. Over the project's duration, 185 MNP patrols were deployed, covering 1,659 km² and walking 21,161 km. Community patrols covered 1275 km² and walked 19,305 km. Camera trap monitoring was established in community forests, providing baseline data for future comparisons. Knowledge sharing between community reserves, the Maiko National Park, and Okapi Wildlife Reserve was facilitated through exchange visits to share experiences on wildlife monitoring and community engagement including data

sharing. Awareness and community support for okapi conservation increased through outreach programmes, reaching 2,285 people. The project assessed okapis' relative abundance, occupancy, and threats, identifying priority areas for conservation action. These surveys recorded 34 mammal species, including okapi (*Okapia johnstoni*), Grauer's gorilla (*Gorilla beringei graueri*), forest elephants (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*), chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), leopards (*Panthera pardus*), and red colobus monkeys (*Piliocolobus langi*). Conservation teams observed over 1,020 traces of okapi, removed 195 snares and 115 gun cartridges, dismantled 146 illegal camps out of 370 detected, and shut down 82 mines with over 1,114 pits.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Several factors contributed to the project's success.

- Adaptive management of patrol plans based on data analysis was crucial, with patrol data analysed and discussed during debriefing and planning meetings.
- Community involvement in camera trapping and biomonitoring efforts was essential.
- Collaboration with local partners, including ICCN, community forest management, and the University of Kisangani, was vital.
- The integration of various conservation strategies, including law enforcement, biomonitoring, community engagement, and knowledge sharing, ensured a comprehensive approach to okapi conservation.

4

LESSONS LEARNED FROM CONSERVATION ACTIONS IN THE DRC

4.1 Community ownership of conservation efforts is essential for success

One of the most important lessons from conservation efforts in the DRC is that community ownership of conservation efforts plays a vital role in achieving success. Projects that actively involve local communities, such as recruiting eco-guards from within villages, foster a strong sense of responsibility and ensure higher efficiency in patrols and habitat protection. In the Itombwe Nature Reserve, this local engagement helped patrol teams exceed their targets, leading to the removal of over 1,218 snares and the dismantling of 63 illegal hunting camps. As Etaka Lwikecha, a community eco-guard, shared, *"Since joining this project as an eco-guard, I started earning an income that allowed me to support my family's needs, including food and my children's education."* His words highlight how community engagement is not just a strategy, but a life-changing opportunity that builds both conservation success and social resilience.

Projects that actively involve local communities, such as recruiting eco-guards from within villages, foster a strong sense of responsibility and ensure higher efficiency in patrols and habitat protection.

4.2 Economic incentives reduce illegal activities like poaching and logging

Conservation efforts that integrate economic incentives have proven effective in curbing illegal activities such as poaching and logging. By providing alternative livelihoods, these initiatives address the root causes of resource exploitation. Employing local people as eco-guards not only offers a stable income but also fosters a deeper commitment to protecting biodiversity. In areas where logging is a major threat, the lack of viable income-generating options often drives communities to exploit forests for timber or charcoal.

Introducing sustainable alternatives—such as livestock farming, beekeeping, or community-managed woodlots—can ease this pressure. In Kahuzi-Biega National Park, rabbit farming was introduced as a

conservation-linked livelihood initiative. A local community member emphasised its impact: *"The introduction of rabbit farming has not only provided an alternative income source but also helped improve nutrition in our households."* This powerful testimony reflects how conservation and community well-being can go hand in hand.

4.3 Maintaining stable and well-trained teams ensures conservation continuity

The stability and training of conservation teams have also proven to be crucial in achieving long-term conservation outcomes. Consistent staffing of eco-guards and rangers led to more effective habitat monitoring and law enforcement. The use of technology, such as Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tools (SMART), further enhanced tracking efficiency and data collection, improving conservation planning. However, even the best-trained teams face security threats, which continue to pose significant challenges to conservation in the DRC. Armed conflicts and attacks on patrol posts in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve and Maiko National Park highlight the dangers that rangers and conservationists face daily, underscoring the urgent need for increased ranger protection, better equipment, and stronger collaboration with security forces.

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4.4 Integration of conservation with livelihoods and development strengthens community buy-in

An integrated approach that combines conservation with sustainable livelihoods has been instrumental in gaining local support. Projects that address socio-economic needs alongside conservation goals tend to foster more lasting behavioural change.

In Virunga National Park, for instance, conservation-linked employment helped retain 60 local trackers despite COVID-19-related economic hardships. Education and awareness-raising have also been powerful enablers. Community-led sensitisation events—like participatory theatre and football matches in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve—reached over 2,285 people, promoting conservation values in engaging ways.

The broader impact of such programmes is also recognised by conservation organisations. A representative from FODI observed, *"The project has significantly improved our capacity to mobilise partners for conservation actions. It has also enhanced our visibility as a key civil society actor committed to protecting Grauer's gorillas."* These insights speak to the multiplier effect of community-driven conservation—strengthening networks, building momentum, and attracting broader support.

"Community-led sensitisation events—like participatory theatre and football matches in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve—reached over 2,285 people, promoting conservation values in engaging ways."

4.5 Adaptive management is key in response to unforeseen challenges

Another critical lesson is the importance of adaptive management in responding to unexpected challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, created new threats, including potential disease transmission to great apes and disruptions in conservation funding. Rapid adjustments, such as distributing personal protective equipment to eco-guards and reinforcing disease prevention measures in the Lomako Yokokala Faunal Reserve, ensured continued conservation operations while safeguarding wildlife health. The pandemic also underscored the need for financial sustainability in conservation projects. Many initiatives struggled with funding gaps, demonstrating the importance of securing long-term financial support for conservation and community programmes.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE SPECIES CONSERVATION EFFORTS

Building on the successes and challenges of these projects, several key recommendations emerge for future species conservation efforts in the DRC.

- **Scaling up community-based conservation models** is essential for achieving lasting conservation success. Proven initiatives, such as eco-guard programmes, have increased local ownership, improved surveillance, and reduced illegal activities in several reserves. These models should be strategically replicated and adapted to other regions. Equally important is securing long-term funding for core conservation functions. Sustained financial support is critical to

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ensure consistent ecological monitoring, enforcement, and adaptive management, enabling regular patrols, species surveys, and effective conservation planning.

- **Strengthening veterinary and livestock health systems** is also vital, as improved veterinary capacity enhances disease surveillance and prevention, protecting both wildlife and livestock. This, in turn, supports alternative livelihoods based on livestock, boosting community resilience. Additionally, **diversifying and expanding sustainable livelihood opportunities**—such as beekeeping and agroforestry—can reduce pressure on natural resources by providing viable income alternatives. These programmes must grow in tandem with conservation to address underlying drivers of hunting, logging, and land degradation.
- **Law enforcement and ranger support** must be bolstered through enhanced training, better equipment, and increased attention to ranger safety and mental well-being. This is critical for countering illegal wildlife trade, poaching, and habitat destruction.
- **Deepening community engagement and conservation education** is equally crucial. Environmental education, especially among youth, and community-led awareness campaigns help nurture a conservation ethic and drive positive behavioural change. Integrating conservation with local development goals—like improved access to water, healthcare, and education—can strengthen community support and ensure conservation is viewed as part of a broader effort to improve well-being.
- Finally, **expanding and improving the management of protected areas**, including tools like micro-zoning, allows for a balanced approach that meets both conservation and community needs through informed and inclusive land-use planning.

Diversifying and expanding sustainable livelihood opportunities—such as beekeeping and agroforestry—can reduce pressure on natural resources by providing viable income alternatives.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to the support provided through the IUCN SOS African Wildlife Initiative these conservation efforts across the DRC have demonstrated the power of community-led initiatives, economic incentives, and adaptive management in tackling critical biodiversity threats. Projects in Itombwe, Kahuzi-Biega, Virunga, and the Okapi Wildlife Reserve have helped stabilise populations of Grauer's gorillas, chimpanzees, okapi, and bonobos through a combination of ecological monitoring, anti-poaching patrols, and alternative livelihood programmes. In Virunga, conservation activities led to the removal of snares, while in Lomako Yokokala, disease prevention measures helped safeguard bonobo populations. These efforts have not only protected wildlife but also improved the well-being of local communities through job creation, food security programmes, and access to essential resources.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain. Armed conflicts, funding shortages, and socio-economic pressures continue to threaten conservation progress. To ensure long-term success, stronger law enforcement, expanded community-driven initiatives, and sustained financial support are essential. Conservation projects in the DRC have provided a replicable model for protecting endangered species in complex environments, demonstrating that when conservation is integrated with economic development and community empowerment, it creates a lasting impact. Moving forward, scaling up these efforts and ensuring long-term sustainability will be crucial to securing the future of DRC's rich biodiversity.

\\ Conservation projects in the DRC have provided a replicable model for protecting endangered species in complex environments, demonstrating that when conservation is integrated with economic development and community empowerment, it creates a lasting impact. //

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