



CONSERVATION

THE OKAPI WILDLIFE RESERVE: IS THERE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?





BY DAN STILES

In July 2010, I finally got the opportunity to see the elusive Okapi – an animal that I have wished to see for many years. This opportunity came as I flew by charter plane from Entebbe in Uganda to the Okapi Wildlife Reserve headquarters at Epulu, which is part of the dense forest of north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and is the Okapi’s sole habitat. I was fortunate to be travelling with Karl Ammann, the noted wildlife photographer and filmmaker who knows the area well.

We endured immigration hassles at Bunia – a dusty border town that serves as a base for the United Nations peacekeeping operations – and then flew in a small plane over an endless stretch of the tropical Ituri Forest, which is home to the Okapi. After stashing our baggage in our simple guesthouse rooms at the Congo Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN), we headed to the Okapi enclosures where Gilman International Conservation (GIC) is running a breeding programme. Here, I finally saw my first okapi.

It is indeed a strange creature. Henry Morton Stanley, the first Westerner to see one in 1890, thought it belonged to the horse family and, because of the stripes on its forelegs and hindquarters, assumed that it was a variant of the zebra. Sir Henry “Harry” Johnston, then governor of Uganda and an avid naturalist, mounted an expedition in 1900 to the Belgian Congo to find the Okapi.

The local Mbuti pygmies tracked okapis but could not find one for Sir Harry. They showed him its cloven hoof prints but he dismissed them as he was expecting horse-like tracks. He

nevertheless painted a portrait of a pair of okapis from descriptions that turned out to be remarkably accurate.

A Swedish officer, Karl Eriksson, in 1901 sent a pair of Okapi skulls that he had obtained from a Congolese soldier in the area of present-day Virunga National Park to Johnston. Johnston was surprised that the teeth and skull features resembled those of a giraffe. He sent the astonishing specimens to the Zoological Society of London where later that year, Sir E. Ray Lankester, director of the British Natural History Museum, proposed the new genus *Okapia* and species *johnstoni*, in honour of Sir Harry who had done so much to bring the Okapi to the attention of the scientific community.

No one really knows how many okapis are left in the wild though the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) makes a very broad estimate of 10,000 to 35,000 on its Red List which categorises species by conservation status. The Okapi Red List

status is Near Threatened, but from what I saw of poaching for bushmeat and forest destruction for timber and charcoal, I would say that it is definitely threatened. In recent years, it has already been eradicated from western Uganda and in Watalinga Forest in the Virunga region.

The 13,726 km² Okapi reserve, with about 2,500 okapis, is thought to have the highest number of Okapi of any protected area in DRC followed by Maiko National Park, located some 150 km south of Okapi. There used to be many more okapis in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, but in the late 1990s and early years of this century, the reserve suffered heavy poaching as foreign armies and rebel militias fought over the area’s natural resources. In 1998, it was added to the List of World Heritage in Danger. Relative calm has returned to the region now, but poaching has continued.

Epulu has a fascinating history. In 1928, American anthropologist Patrick Putnam, then only 24, travelled to the Belgian Congo to study pygmies. He set



Left:
Gilman Conservation International keeps 13 okapi for breeding at its centre in Epulu in the reserve.

Bottom Right:
The Okapi Wildlife Reserve is located in the dense Ituri Forest.



up Camp Putnam deep inside the Ituri Forest where a dirt track – now part of the Trans-African Highway – crossed the Epulu River. He spent most of the rest of his life there, dying in 1953. During this time, he started a wild okapi capture and breeding programme to supply zoos. An 80-year-old Mbuti I spoke with near Epulu, named Mayanimingi (Many Leaves), told me they trapped okapis in pits dug in the forest tracks and covered with leaves.

In 1952, a Portuguese that Mayanimingi said was called Jean De Medina succeeded Putnam in the okapi programme. In 1987, Karl and Rosmarie Ruf came from Switzerland to establish and manage a project of the GIC – which is based in White Oak, Florida – to conserve the Okapi and its habitat in the reserve. Karl would later die tragically in a 2002 car accident while returning from a meeting to plead with rebel commanders to spare the conservation centre. Rosmarie continues as project director.

The GIC project works closely with the ICCN and provides training for the latter's rangers, community education and assistance, agro-forestry, a cane rat



PHOTOS BY DAN STILES

An Mbuti lady collects vines for weaving baskets.

breeding programme – as an alternative to bushmeat – and the okapi breeding programme. There are currently 13 okapis kept in large pens on the project's grounds, some in breeding pairs. They

are slow breeders and the last birth was in 2004, although one female is currently pregnant.

The okapi feeding system is elaborate. In the wild, okapis eat about 150 different species of leaves, but because of availability, GIC has a list of 52 species that they collect. Only 30 of these were being collected while we were there. Each okapi is named (*Kijana, Tatu*) and meticulous records are kept of which leaf species and the quantities of each that are fed to the animals in each morning and afternoon session.

Teams of Mbuti go into the forest daily to collect the leaves, bundling them by species and bringing them back to the centre where they are distributed into bins marked with the okapis' names. The leaf bundles are then taken into the pens and hung up on what look like clothes-lines. The okapis munch them happily from here.

Seeing how organised and impressive the GIC centre is with its offices, satellite dish for Internet connections, guesthouses and carpentry- and-mechanics shop, one would never guess that a few years ago everything was looted by marauding soldiers. The Rufs kept orphan chimpanzees on an island in Epulu River, but the soldiers killed and ate them all. Amazingly, the okapis were spared.

The Okapi reserve would be an ideal tourist destination if properly managed.



Mbuti Pygmies have lived in the Ituri Forest for millennia and they still engage in net hunting of small antilopes and other forest creatures. They make their nets and baskets from vines they find in the forest.



The leaves are sorted and weighed by species and records are kept of what each okapi is fed.

deposits of gold, coltan and cassiterite (tin). The forest is home to animals with ivory or species that can be poached for bushmeat. The trees include valuable hardwoods and provide the charcoal used by the 170,000 people who live in the Okapi area. Charcoal is also sent east to Bunia and west to Kisangani. Illegal gold and coltan miners have invaded the forest. People attracted by the resources clear land to grow cassava, maize and beans, and everyone obtains much of their protein from bushmeat. It's a free-for-all of destruction.

Michel, our ICCN minder who accompanied us everywhere, admitted in an unguarded moment that the commander of the 13th Brigade of the Congolese army – based in Mambasa about 50 km east of Epulu – was behind much of the elephant poaching. There is a barrier manned by ICCN staff at the Epulu River bridge, but the rangers never search for illegal timber, ivory or bushmeat because they might upset a powerful government official.

Karl Ammann and I visited illicit timber sawmills in the forest, where gangs saw logs into planks to truck off to Uganda and Kenya. They are not transported to Kisangani because no construction is going on there since a US Army base on the outskirts of town was finished.

I cannot have much hope for the future of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, unless the government gets a grip on law enforcement and resource management. It would be a great tragedy for the local population, the DRC and for the world at large to lose such a magnificent World Heritage site. ●

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The forest is stunning with majestic trees and 130 species of lianas, some of which the Mbuti use to weave baskets and make hunting nets. We saw them collect the nets in the forest one day when we accompanied a group on a net hunt.

The Epulu River is beautiful and perfect for river-rafting. This we confirmed while driving to Kisangani. There are mild rapids with protruding rocks, but no waterfalls before reaching a bridge on the main highway downstream where rafts could be pulled out after a two- to- three- day trip. Lodging

facilities would have to be improved, but a large German government-financed infrastructure project, which is about to start, could solve that. The prime drawback to tourism development and the future of the forest and its astonishing biodiversity is the lack of government administration and control over the local population. With the exception of the ICCN, government officials and the Congolese military seem to consider Ituri's natural resources a giant box of chocolates to divvy up and consume. Beneath the forest roots are large

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