

## Hi SWARA.

In SWARA Volume 4, 2010, I subtitled my article on the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, 'Is there hope for the future?' I concluded with, '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.'

On 24 June, 2012, a notorious poacher kingpin named Morgan led a group of illegal miners and poachers, identified in some reports as Mai Mai rebels, in an attack on the Institute in the Congo for Conservation of Nature (ICCN) headquarters in Epulu. The attack was in retaliation against the ICCN because its rangers had been interfering with illegal mining and poaching in the reserve area. The Congolese Army and UN peacekeeping troops eventually took back control, but not before six people were killed, many injured, and the offices of ICCN and the Okapi Conservation Project, run by the NGO Gilman International, were looted and wrecked. The rebels also killed all 14 okapis that had been bred for years by Gilman.

UNESCO and Fauna & Flora International are now raising funds to rehabilitate the ICCN headquarters and re-establish the anti-poaching and okapi breeding programmes.

The burning question that remains, however, is what will be done to bring Morgan and the perpetrators to book? The question applies to all of the other armed militias that are roaming around eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, poaching elephants and other wildlife, illegally cutting down the forest to export timber and ripping valuable minerals from the earth - all with impunity.

Unless the DRC government and international community get serious very serious – about establishing control in the region, piecemeal conservation projects will do no good in protecting one of the most important biodiversity areas in the world.

## **Dan Stiles**

Diani Beach, Kenya

## **A** Poacher **Turned Gamekeeper**

(NOTE: In East Africa and elsewhere the eggs of owls are said in local lore to have magical attributes. This is a letter from someone who discovered that the attributes of the owl have much more down to earth applications)

## Hi SWARA,

Sometime in January this year strange noises started being heard in my roof. I had seen owls entering and leaving a ventilation hole at the top of the house. It was then I checked and found a nest with eight eggs built in one corner of the roof. I tried contacting people who knew about them or about markets for their eggs since I was quite informed about their importance. I didn't take much notice that this was not the first brood to have lived up in my roof.

One day much later while doing some repairs in the roof I found that indeed the eggs had started hatching and became intrigued. All around the nest were bits of dead rats and mice which showed that the owls were successfully hunting and bringing food to the chicks.

I visited an internet café in town and began a search for more information about owls and came across Munir Virani and The Peregrine Fund, With his advice I followed the progress of the chicks taking some pictures and forwarding them to him and a colleague of his, Darcy Ogada. I got more insights into the importance of having the owls' service and use them as the best pest control mechanism available.

I was able to see the damage done by the pests to the grain store reduced by the intervention of the owls as they fended for their chicks. At this time, I also got Sarah Higgins from Naivasha to offer advice to me and also explained to me the work she does at her sanctuary. I was touched by her dedication in her efforts at rescuing, treating and