



Press Release

Libreville, the 14th of April - Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba announces strong measures to combat a stark increase in elephant poaching following the discovery of over 30 fresh carcasses in the Wonga Wongué Reserve by staff of the National Parks Agency. These measures come just three months after Gabon raised the status of the forest elephant to 'fully protected' due to unprecedented levels of poaching.

The African Forest Elephant, *Loxodonta cyclotis*, now accepted to be a separate biological species from the larger savanna elephant, resides in the forests of West and Central Africa. Its small size, smaller ears and down-pointing tusks are an adaptation to its lush tropical forest environment and its 'pink' ivory is more finely grained than that from savanna elephants, making it particularly prized by master carvers.

The market price for ivory is growing exponentially. Today just one tusk from a prize bull elephant will sell on the black market for upwards of \$50,000 and organized smuggling rings can make staggering profits, purchasing ivory from poachers for around \$50 per kilo and selling it for \$2000 per kilo in the Asian market.

During an overflight of the Wonga Wongué Reserve, previously one of the last havens where forest elephants roamed freely, Conservationist Mike Fay and Park Warden Norbert Pradel counted over 30 freshly slaughtered elephant carcasses.

"We spotted one carcass, then another, and another, and within minutes we realized that something was very wrong" said Mike Fay, who was one of the key actors in the creation of Gabon's National Park Network in 2002, when he revealed the natural wonders of the country to the late President Omar Bongo Ondimba, following his epic walk across Central Africa, labeled by National Geographic as the "Megatransect". "We shifted from a surveillance to systematic flight mode and within an hour had detected some 28 carcasses, all from the last few months". "Wonga Wongué is mostly forested so we can only guess at the true number of carcasses, but this level of poaching is absolutely unprecedented in the history of Gabon". "This is not an isolated act, we are seeing exponential growth in elephant poaching throughout the country and indeed the continent."

In the last 30 years the vast majority of forest elephants across Africa have been slaughtered for the illegal ivory trade. Democratic Republic of Congo, which once

had over 500,000 forest elephants, counts 12,000 or fewer today. Gabon, and northern Congo represent the last frontier, and these observations confirm fears that the final battle for the survival of the forest elephant has begun.

Professor Lee White, CBE, a Gabonese citizen of British origin, named head of Gabon's fledgling National parks Agency, by President Bongo in 2009, stated that "these latest observations prove that organized criminals are penetrating deep into Gabon and slaughtering elephants in some of the most remote forests left on the continent. According to our intelligence, most of the poachers are foreign nationals using weapons that came into circulation during the civil wars that have plagued the region in the recent past. Our park guards are out gunned and out numbered. Without decisive action by Gabon's political leaders we are going to lose the battle to save the forest elephant, and as we have seen elsewhere, that would be the beginning of the end for most rain forest species".

Following a briefing by Dr Fay and Professor White to the Cabinet, President Ali Bongo Ondimba announced the immediate creation of a 240-man military unit, a "Jungle Brigade", to support the National Parks Agency that will be charged with shoring up the parks and stopping elephant poaching and other wildlife related crime in Gabon. President Bongo underlined the fact that "Wildlife protection and the preservation of natural resources generally is the great challenge of our time. If we lose our elephants we will enter the same spiral that has seen wildlife and natural resources plundered elsewhere in Africa, with the inevitable consequence of political instability and conflict in dysfunctional ecosystems where man can no longer live sustainably in harmony with nature. Today I have undertaken to create an elite military unit that will be signed into law this month, which will support our National Parks Agency in their critical work to manage Gabon's natural treasures. This decision demonstrates my government's commitment to the principal of Gabon Vert – Green Gabon – and to the management of our National Parks as both a National and International treasure. I implore ivory importing nations, particularly in Asia, to get serious about addressing this problem, as I am today, and to inform their citizens that the purchase of ivory will be dealt with severely. Ivory smuggling rings are working in a concerted fashion internationally, law enforcement must do the same. Gabon cannot fight this problem alone.

The environment's policy of Gabon

Gabon plays a key role in the safekeeping of the Congo Basin forest. In 2002, President Omar Bongo Ondimba made the decision to classify 11% of the country's land as a protected zone, which led to the creation of 13 national parks. In 2005, le Gabon was 12th worldwide and 1st in Africa in Yale University's sustainable ecological development index. At the Copenhagen climate change conference in December 2009, President Ali Bongo Ondimba put himself forward as a leading voice for environmental protection by actively participating in the negotiations right up to the final round. He has also committed himself to implementing a climate plan for Gabon and work began on this in 2010. In September 2010, President Ali Bongo Ondimba was designated spokesman for

the African position on biodiversity at the end of the Libreville pan-African Conference.

For more information contact www.cocom.rggov.org or visit www.presidentalibongo.com and www.legabon.org



Prof. Lee White in action



Carcass photographed from the air



Elephant carcass in Wonga Wongué



President Ali Bongo Ondimba with his two sons and Wonga Wongué Head Warden Norbert Pradel, observing elephants in the reserve.

