

INDIA Forbes

March 2018



A Natural State

National parks, marine reserves, conservation projects:
Understanding Gabon's ecotourism sector

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MARQUEE

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Up until 2000, the treasures of Gabon's 20-million-hectare tropical rainforest were a well-kept secret. One that conservationist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Mike Fay revealed to the world at the end of his 'Megatransect' – a 456-day-long expedition across the Congo Basin. It is said that the team encountered land so remote that they were the first humans to meet the resident chimps. What they also discovered was a repository of rare flora and fauna exclusive to the region. Former President Omar Bongo Ondimba was as intrigued by the research findings. A self-proclaimed nature lover, he went on to create 13 national parks, occupying 10 per cent of the country's area.

Almost two decades later, Omar's successor, President Ali Bongo Ondimba, couldn't be more aware of this biodiverse legacy. With leisure travel spends expected to grow at the rate of 6.6 per cent (2017), ecotourism is a prime sector on his economic diversification agenda. Much has been done towards polishing the country's image as a tourism destination – the introduction of an e-visa, improved air and road connectivity and a better hospitality offering, which includes plans for a network of upmarket lodges within the national parks. In this final part of our special supplement on Gabon, we examine the country's potential to be an ecotourism hotspot, its various conservation-centric development projects and finally, its Marine Protected Areas network – the largest on the continent.

Enjoy the issue.

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Spotlight

Green Dream

Capitalizing on its unique biodiversity, Gabon hopes to offer wildlife enthusiasts a premium ecotourism experience

SERGEY URYADNIKOV/DINODIA



Almost 20 years ago, conservationist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Mike Fay set out on his 'Megatransect' journey across the Congo basin. Covering a distance of 3,220km, the expedition took 456 days on foot and spanned the rainforests of Gabon and the Republic of Congo. His mission: To document the flora, fauna and possible human activity of these remote areas. Fay and his team – National Geographic photographer Nick Nichols and writer David Quammen – went on to collate a comprehensive database, which included information on plant and animal species exclusive to the region. It also helped identify sensitive areas that needed protection. It eventually led to former President Omar Bongo Ondimba creating 13 national parks – 10 per cent of Gabon's total land – in 2002. Fifteen years later, President Ali Bongo Ondimba furthered his father's conservationist vision with the formation of an enormous Marine Protected Areas (MPA) network. Part of the Gabon Blue initiative, the network comprises nine marine parks and 11 aquatic reserves.

The nation has always been proud of its biodiversity and committed to conservation. It comes as little surprise then that ecotourism is integral to the Emerging Gabon economic diversification strategy. With the world's second largest rainforest, the country holds some of the biggest populations of forest elephants, western lowland gorillas and nesting leatherback turtles. This alone puts it in prime position to become a global player in ecotourism. According to the immigration department, between 2010 and 2015, Gabon welcomed an average of 180,000 to 200,000 visitors annually. While majority came for



Gabon has Central Africa's largest population of the endangered forest elephant



A female leopard crosses a log bridge at Lopé National Park

SKENNER/INDIA

business purposes, 22 per cent did so for leisure. On the whole, the sector's direct contribution to the GDP was 11 per cent in 2016, with a projected growth of 6.8 per cent in 2017. Leisure travel spending (inbound and domestic) generated 74 per cent of the direct travel and tourism GDP in 2016. Expected growth spends for 2017 were estimated at a rate of 6.6 per cent.

STEP BY STEP

The state is currently looking to implement a marketing model inspired by Rwanda; that is, a premium tourism experience based on animal watching. If it takes off, the country's ecotourism sector has the potential to generate an annual turnover of USD42 million by 2025.

Ecotourism projects are undertaken by Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (National Parks Agency, ANPN). In 2013, the ANPN formed a Public Private Partnership (PPP) with Sustainable Forestry Management (SFM) Safari Gabon – a local subsidiary of South African conservation and development company SFM Africa. The resultant conservation tourism concession agreement aims to develop a luxury ecotourism safari circuit, with lodges in Pongara and Loango national parks, targeting 2,000 visitors annually. The collaboration will also establish an institute for the study of great apes in Loango, managed by the Max Plank Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.

Until recently accommodation within the parks was little to none. The reopening of two lodges brings hope for the

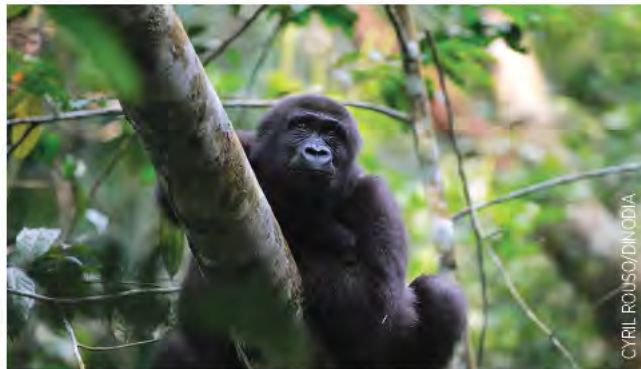
eco-tourist. There is the Likwale Lodge in the southern coastal town of Mayuma. On offer is sport fishing, whale and turtle viewing, and excursions to Moukalaba-Doudou National Park. The other is Loango Lodge in the eponymous national park located in the west. The property arranges game-viewing and fishing excursions, camping getaways and visits to the local gorilla habituation programme.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the offing is the reopening of the Langoué Bai (an ancient forest clearing) camp to tourists. At the UNESCO Heritage Site of Lopé National Park, mandrill tourism is scheduled to resume after a successful campaign that tagged 800 of these West African baboons with radio collars.

While on the subject, the country's Tourism Investment Code, enforced in 2000, continues to stimulate foreign investment in the sector. It offers a range of tax exemptions during the first eight years of operation, including tax-free imports and other administrative incentives. Tourism operators can access and freely transfer foreign currency within the Economic Community of Central African States.

All said and done, reach remains an obstacle, given the country's dense expanse of rainforests. Investment in a better transport network, more efficient air links and expanded hotel facilities is expected to improve this situation in the near future. With that in place, Gabon has the potential to become a top high-end ecotourism hotspot. ♦



A five-year-old western lowland orphan gorilla, part of Aspinnall Foundation's reintroduction project

CYRIL ROUSO/INDIA

Forest Conservation

THOMAS BREUER/CREATIVE COMMONS

Into the Wild

Surfing hippos, beach-bum elephants, great apes, shy leopards... Gabon's national parks are delicate ecosystems unto themselves. Here's a look at some of the projects protecting the natural order of things, while encouraging ecotourism

AFRICAN FOREST ELEPHANTS

With up to 50,000 forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) inhabiting its rainforest, Gabon is the last stronghold for these gentle giants in Central Africa. The species is on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red list as endangered in the region, mainly due to ivory trade. Without forest elephants, the land will lose its natural gardeners who help maintain the local ecosystem. In 2014, the leaders of Chad, Tanzania, Botswana, Ethiopia and Gabon founded the Elephant Protection Initiative. Efforts to support the same are underway by international organizations such as Stop Ivory and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Gabon.

LOANGO LODGE AND NATIONAL PARK

Loango Lodge, set on the Iguela Lagoon, is one of Gabon's first high-end hospitality offerings within its protected forests. The property comprises seven bungalows and three suites, each offering views of the eponymous national park within which it is located. Experience highlights include: The Tassi Savannah Camp that lets you enjoy ocean breeze and unspoiled grassland vistas simultaneously. The Akaka forest camping getaway that's replete with en suite bathrooms and private terraces. Or spend an hour with the gorillas at the in-house habituation program.



KURT DUNDY/CREATIVE COMMONS



LOPÉ NATIONAL PARK

A view over the Ogoolle River at Lopé National Park, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007. Located at the heart of Gabon, the park's northern parts contain the last remnants of Central Africa's grass savannas formed during the Ice Age 15,000 years ago. In 1946, the Lopé-Okanda Wildlife Reserve became the country's first protected green zone. Tourists can enjoy facilities such as chalets and al fresco dining.

MICHAEL RUNKEL/DINODIA



CYRIL ROUSO/DINODIA

In 1946, the Lopé-Okanda Wildlife Reserve became the country's first protected green zone

WESTERN LOWLAND GORILLAS

Two great ape sub-species reside in Gabon; namely, the western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) and central chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes troglodytes*). While both are on the IUCN Red List, the former is considered critically endangered. Commercial poaching for bushmeat and illegal trade as well as the Ebola virus are the main reasons for this. The Ivindo-Chaillu and Loango-Moukalaba Doudou complexes have high concentrations of ape populations. Non-profit organizations like WCS Gabon and Aspinall Foundation have been aiding the Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (National Parks Agency, ANPN) to enforce wildlife laws effectively, track and update related data, and impart environmental education with indigenous communities. Many of the country's national parks are home to gorilla sanctuaries that are now opening up to a select number of tourists. Seen here, five-year-old gorilla orphans receiving medical care as part of Aspinall Foundation's reintroduction project. ♦

Marine Conservation

The MPA network will help protect pelagic fish populations such as these rainbow runners

Going Coastal

Gabon's Marine Protected Areas make up one of Africa's largest underwater conservation projects

COURTESY ENRIC SALA/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

At the 2017 United Nations Ocean Conference, held in New York, President Ali Bongo Ondimba announced the creation of a massive Marine Protected Areas (MPA) network in Gabon. It comprises nine new marine parks and 11 aquatic reserves. The initiative expands the country's protected waters by 53,000sqkm, – a little over 26 per cent of its Territorial Sea and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – making it one of Africa's largest protected aquatic zones. “Our marine ecosystems are as rich and precious as our better-known rainforests, and we had to do for the oceans what my father, the Late President Omar Bongo Ondimba, did for the forests when he created 13 national parks in 2002,” remarked the President.

Marine biodiversity faces serious threat, with over 70 per cent of global fish stocks being overexploited or collapsed. Add to this, the damaged state of coral reefs. With only four

per cent of the world's oceans being under formal marine protected areas, President Bongo's announcement was well received to say the least. Gabon's waters are home to the largest breeding populations of leatherback and olive ridley sea turtles, and 20 species of whales and dolphins, including humpback whales and Atlantic humpback dolphins. Many threatened species of sharks and rays – such as great hammerhead sharks, manta rays, whale sharks and tiger sharks – can also be found here.

WAVES OF CHANGE

The project is the result of a month-long expedition spent trailing Gabon's 800-kilometre coastline in 2012. The research was organized by renowned marine conservationist Ted Waitt, in collaboration with National Geographic Pristine Seas, Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Gabon chapter, and Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (National Parks Agency, ANPN). The team was led by National Geographic explorers-in-residence and conservationists Dr Enric Sala and Mike Fay.

The findings of the same were featured in the 2013 National Geographic film titled 'Wild Gabon' and presented to President Ondimba aboard marine research vessel, Plan B. On discovering the incredible biological treasures of Gabon's ocean world as well as the threats posed to the ecosystem by illegal fisheries, the President initiated Gabon Blue. The conservation programme, under the leadership of Fay and

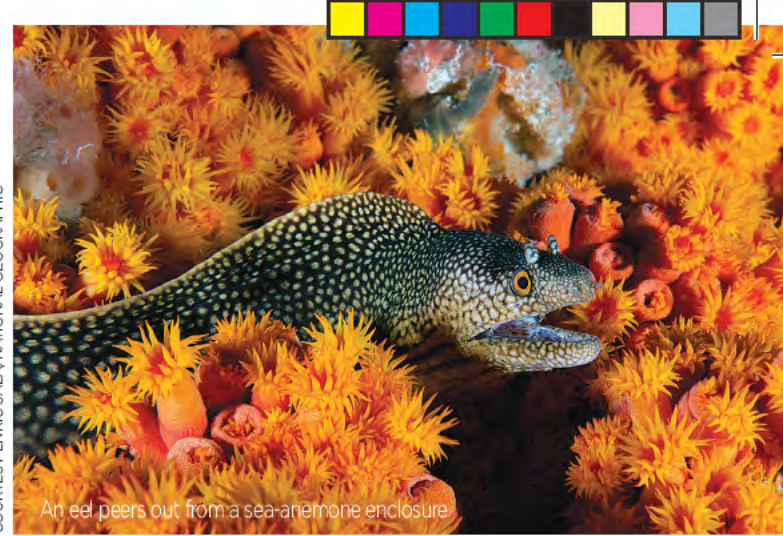
Atlantic humpback dolphins patrol the forested coast

COURTESY T. COLLINS/WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

ANPN Director Professor Lee White, works to protect and restore the country's marine ecosystems and fish stocks. It also develops plans for sustainable fisheries management across the nation's ocean territory. "Gabon's action shows tremendous leadership that we hope will resonate and be replicated across Africa's coasts," said Sala. Of note is La Réserve Aquatique du Grand Sud du Gabon that is part of Mayumba National Park. At 27,000sqkm, it is the largest protected area in the network. The MPA plan also includes small marine parks at crucial points along the coast, such as river mouths, to protect particularly sensitive or productive resource areas.

ACTION POINT

The five-year period, between 2012 and 2017, was one of in-depth research on the subject. Scientific knowledge on Gabon's marine ecosystems was compiled, coupled with consultations of fisheries and environmental organizations, as provided for by local fisheries law. Among the contributors were: researchers and technicians from Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CENAREST, Gabon's Institute for Scientific Research), the National Parks and Fisheries Agencies, WCS, University of Exeter, private fishing and oil companies and local non-governmental organizations Aventures Sans Frontières and Manga. The latter specialize



COURTESY ENRICH SALA/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

An eel peers out from a sea-anemone enclosure

in sea turtle conservation. The work was funded by the Gabonese government, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and oil companies Total Gabon, Perenco, Tullow Oil and Ophir Energy.

Like most of the country's national projects, the new MPAs offer a multitude of socio-economic developmental opportunities – including fisheries and tourism exploitation. The reformation programme for fisheries management aims to restore and sustainably manage marine fisheries to ensure food security. Additionally, it hopes to increase the number of indigenous people who earn their living in the fisheries sector. Thereby reducing the number of offshore agencies that absorb profits and the lion's share of the catch.

The marine protected area will be managed by Gabon's the newly established Nature Preservation Agency. ♦



Local beaches are an important nesting ground for the leatherback turtle, the world's largest sea turtle

COURTESY, A FORMIA WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY