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The Law, Communities and Wildlife Management in Cameroon

Samuel E. Egbe

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GORILLA-BASED TOURISM: A REALISTIC SOURCE OF COMMUNITY INCOME IN CAMEROON? CASE STUDY OF THE VILLAGES OF KOUNGOULOU AND KARAGOUA

Elias Djoh and Mark van derWal

SUMMARY

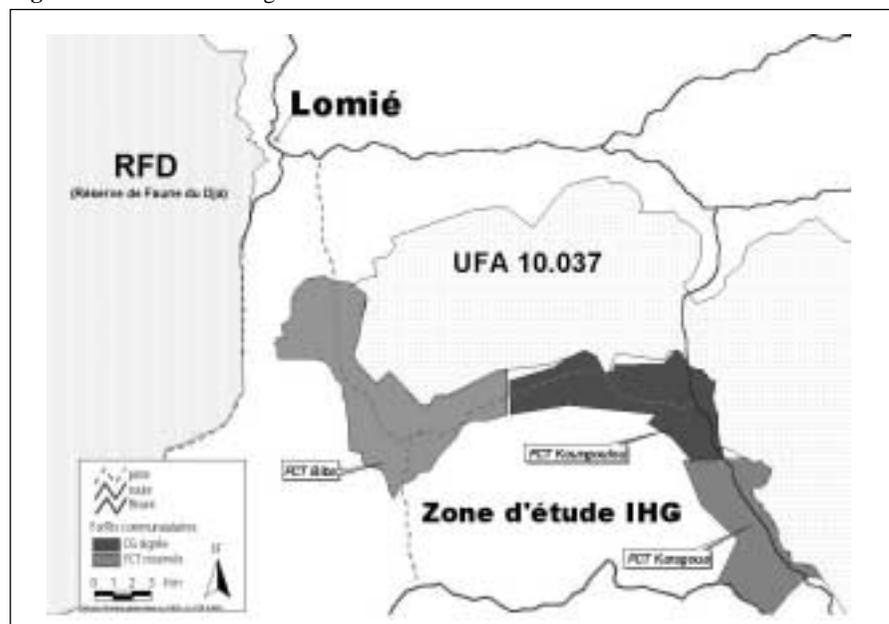
In the southern forest belt of Cameroon a trial is underway to develop a 'community-based gorilla research and tourism site'. This is taking place within the context of government policy to involve local populations in the management of wildlife, and is an attempt to address the desire of a local community to develop some sort of tourism in and around their community forest. This paper discusses some fundamental questions related to the feasibility of the trial, such as the difficulty of working within existing legislation, the need to habituate the gorillas to the presence of humans, and the problem of helping the community to organise such an activity effectively.

INTRODUCTION

There is an on-going debate in Cameroon concerning the sustainable management of wildlife, the involvement of local populations in natural resource management, and activities which can generate sustainable income for those populations.

In the Lomié region, and indeed throughout the humid forest belt of southern and eastern Cameroon, agriculture used to be the favoured source of income for farmers, primarily through the sale of commodities such as cocoa and coffee. However, the end of State subsidies and a drastic fall in the market price of these products, have caused local people to turn to hunting (all of which, according to current legislation, is illegal 'poaching') in order to meet their needs. Although industrial logging within the 'agro-forestry' zone (of the preliminary zoning plan for the forests of southern Cameroon) undoubtedly provides an income for the State and populations living adjacent to concessions (for sales of standing volume, salvage logging, etc.), the impact of this income at village level is very minor.

Given this situation, the Government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and projects have put emphasis on working with the local populations to find other activities which could generate more sustainable income, to compete with hunting and logging. In this respect, local people can potentially benefit from Cameroon's forestry policy, which gives them the right to apply for and manage Community Forests and

Figure 1 Location of the gorilla habituation trial

Note: Please see list of acronyms at end of paper for translation of map terminology.

Community Hunting Zones according to established norms and procedures. Although the areas concerned are not large, and there is always competition with permits for sales of standing volume and salvage logging, this is nevertheless an achievement for the populations, allowing them to take their own decisions about the use of the forest. A good example of this is provided by the case of the Lomié region where the populations of five villages, supported by the SDDL project, have just finished drafting simple management plans for their community forests.

A GORILLA HABITUATION TRIAL

Karagoua and Koungoulou are two villages to the South-east of the Dja Wildlife Reserve and World Heritage Site (Fig. 1). In Karagoua the

procedure for the granting of a Community Forest is still on-going, whereas, in Koungoulou, a simple management plan has already been completed. Both populations have included the development of tourism in their forest management objectives, more specifically, tourism to observe gorillas in their natural habitat. This initiative is supported by a local NGO, CIAD, which, together with the local populations, has initiated a gorilla habituation trial in the village forest areas¹.

In the long term, the aim is to develop a site for tourism and scientific research where the

¹ The trial is funded by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the Netherlands Committee for IUCN, and the SNV (Netherlands development organisation).

gorillas will be protected and habituated to the presence of humans in their environment. The provision of services for tourists and researchers should allow the two communities to earn an income to supplement that from existing sources (cocoa, agriculture, fisheries, poaching, the logging of Community Forests under State management², forestry fees). However, this is only possible under certain conditions: there must be sustained support at all levels (local, regional, national and international), and the local gorillas have to show a certain level of 'receptivity' (that is, not be too disturbed by the current poaching situation). These two points are the main subjects of the feasibility study.

The feasibility of habituating lowland gorillas to the presence of humans (and the relative difficulty of this compared to work with mountain gorillas) has been the subject of other studies (e.g. the WWF project in Dzangha-Sangha in the Central African Republic; and the ECOFAC project in Lopé, Gabon and Lossi, Congo-Brazzaville). The Lomié study, like the gorilla sanctuary in Lossi, is innovative in its participatory approach and because it does not lie within a protected area. Part of the target zone has been requested as community forests by the villages of Karagoua and Koungoulou, and another part is in a zone which, for the time being, is still classified as production forest. The Lomié study assumed that there would be a much better chance of protecting the gorillas in a forest belonging to neighbouring

² State-authorized logging by the local population.

populations, rather than in a protected area belonging to the State and thus effectively to 'nobody' (and hence to everybody, as is the case with the Dja Wildlife Reserve).

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

In Upper Nyong division, a hunter can earn FCFA 35,000 – 45,000 from killing a gorilla, whereas a live gorilla, habituated to the presence of humans in its environment, can be much more valuable. This is illustrated by some figures relating to mountain gorilla tourism:

- During peace time, profits from gorilla tourism represented Rwanda's third largest source of foreign income, after tea and coffee. In 1989, the Volcano National Park generated more than US\$ 1 million from entry permits to see the gorillas. The current price of gorilla visits in Rwanda is around US\$ 200.
- In Uganda, three families of gorillas produce the equivalent of more than FCFA 5 million every year, from entry permits alone. Taking hotel and restaurant income into account would triple or quadruple the figure.
- In the Democratic Republic of Congo, gorilla tourism in the Kahuzi-Bianga Park, which is linked to the Virunga Park, produced approximately US\$ 818,000 in 1990.

If a tourist were willing pay around FCFA 140,000 to see gorillas, and an average of 50 tourists visited the habituated groups each year, the resultant annual income would be around CFA 7,000,000 from the entry permits alone. This is not only more profitable and sustainable than hunting

gorillas, it is also preferable to a sale of standing volume permit³, the income from which is spread over only 2 or 3 months.

PROBLEMS AND CONSTRAINTS

From other countries, we know that it is possible to effectively habituate gorillas, and that, in their turn, these gorillas can be a very interesting source of income. But, and there is a great but, the fact that it works in other countries does not necessarily mean that it will work in Cameroon. Similarly, the fact that it works for mountain gorillas does not necessarily mean that the same will be true for lowland gorillas.

The 'gorilla' factor

The first question we wanted to answer was whether we could manage to habituate the gorillas from the Lomié area (i.e. make them lose their fear of men)? There were two reasons why this might be difficult:

- The Lomié gorillas, like others in Cameroon, are under extreme hunting pressure and their population density is declining at an alarming rate. This means that the gorillas have many bad memories of their encounters with men. The more bad memories they have, the longer it will take to habituate them. If they have too many bad memories, it could very well be impossible to regain their trust.
- The mountainous terrain and corresponding highland vegetation types

³ A Sale of Standing Volume is a logging permit with a maximum area of 2500 ha, which can be granted in Community Forests and Community Hunting Zones.

in which mountain gorillas live, makes tracking easier than in the often closed and flat lowland forest in which the Lomié gorillas are found. Easier tracking reduces the risk of unexpectedly getting too close to the gorilla group. Gorillas, like people, do not like to be scared! But in the dense undergrowth of the forest in the Lomié region it may prove difficult to avoid sudden and close encounters between people and gorillas.

The 'people' factor

Needless to say, people are the second key factor in a gorilla-based tourism programme. Thus the second type of question we needed to answer concerned the social organisation of the communities involved: could we achieve the high level of organisation needed to provide the quality of service that both tourists and researchers would expect? If our colleagues in other countries could develop this type of tourism, why could we not do the same? For at least two possible reasons:

- Most importantly, the mountain gorilla tourism programmes are able to offer a very high standard of service to tourists. People who are willing to spend well over FCFA 180,000 per day just to see gorillas want to be very well received. This part of the tourist market is used to receiving a very high quality of service during their holidays, and this means from the moment they get off the aeroplane in Douala or Yaoundé. So the question was whether we could provide them with the service they expected all the way from the airport to their stay in the forest and the village.
- Secondly, in the case of the mountain gorillas, the animals are well protected

against poachers. In some cases the habituated groups are protected by armed guards 24 hours a day, seven days a week. An open question was whether we (i.e. the villagers) would be able to ensure the safety of the gorillas in our area.

FIRST RESULTS AND IMPRESSIONS FROM THE FIELD

The social and organisational aspects of the process began in March 1999, although both the local NGO, CIAD, and the Dutch SNV-SDDL project had already been working with the villagers for four years. Actual tracking of the first group (of 7 adult gorillas) started in March 2000. The tracking of a second group (of 14 adults) started in August 2000 but, despite interesting results, was abandoned in early December because of serious organisational problems with the tracking teams involved. Trackers work in two teams of four people for each gorilla group and are supervised by an ex-gorilla hunter/bushmeat trader. A CIAD extension worker helps the communities with organisational issues and the second author provides the technical backstopping. All trackers are local hunters from Koungoulou and Karagoua. Great pains were taken to ensure that the primary responsibility for the development of the activity and major decision-making was left in the hands of the villagers themselves. Through the salaries of the trackers⁴ approximately FCFA 500,000 has entered each village each month, since the start of the actual tracking.

⁴ Currently funded by the project.

Below, the results in brief:

- In our case, as in other habituation trials, the key factor to success appears to be the quality of the trackers. Of the 20 hunters tested, only three (2 Bantu and 1 Baka) have so far proved to be good enough trackers to keep up with the gorillas on a day-to-day basis, and only one of them is really excellent. One of the main tasks of the village leaders is to improve the efficiency of the tracking team (through an ongoing process of hiring, followed by a trial period, and replacement if necessary).
- At the time of writing this paper, the forest zone designated by the villagers for the habituation trial has been completely free from any form of hunting for about 18 months. In this period, wildlife has already become either more abundant or less easily disturbed by people. It seems, therefore, that the village is capable of keeping external and internal hunters out of the area, even without the assistance of MINEF (Ministry of the Environment and Forests) officials.
- The communities have now realised that their gorillas are not the dangerous and aggressive animals they feared. The trackers have proved to their family and friends that they can stay close to free ranging gorillas without being attacked.
- The habituation initiative has recently been asked by MINEF to come up with a proposition for the legal status for the block of forest where the habituation trial is taking place. The project is currently looking into what would be the most

Table 1 First group of 7 gorillas – number of contacts and length of observation per month

Month (2000)	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
No. Contacts	0	2	2	0	1	4	17	6	30	16
Observation (min)	0	2	3	0	< 1	< 1	53	34	74	46

Table 2 Second group of 14 gorillas

Month (2000)	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov
No. contacts	0	1	4	2
Observation (min)	0	10	192	26

appropriate legal status for the area to ensure true co-management of the zone and maximum benefits for the local population in the long term.

- For the first group of gorillas we observed a clear change in behaviour after about five months of tracking. The tables above show the number of contacts (defined as a two-way observation between the trackers and the gorillas) and the duration of the contacts per month for the two groups.

CONCLUSION

In the case of the Lomié, it is clearly possible to habituate one or several groups of gorillas, although the habituation process takes time. Locally, it is often compared to the establishment of an oil palm plantation: four years of time and energy must be invested before the first palm nuts can be harvested. Thus it will require patience and perseverance before the gorillas are habituated and the investment begins to show returns. Given the need to diversify local sources of income, we still firmly believe that it is worth attempting despite

the problems encountered. We have found that the gorillas are 'collaborative' enough. The biggest question is whether the populations concerned are capable of organising themselves to manage this community activity. Once they are well organised, it will represent a more sustainable source of income, in contrast to the sporadic income from the sales of standing volume. There are, however, several other questions which remain unanswered: how will this money (the income from a community activity conducted by several villages) be managed? Will the activity have a positive impact on the conservation of gorillas as a species in Cameroon? Or will the gorillas still be hunted in the part of the forest which is not involved in this habituation trial?

ACRONYMS

CIAD	Centre International d'Appui au Développement Durable (International Support Centre for Sustainable Development)
ECOFAC	ECOSystèmes Forestiers d'Afrique Central/Forestry Ecosystems of Central Africa
FCFA	Currency in French-speaking West and Central African countries. Exchange rate: 100 CFCA = 1 FRF 750 CFCA = 1 USD
FMU	Forest Management Unit (a type of logging permit)
IFAW	International Fund for Animal Welfare
IUCN	World Conservation Union
MINEF	Ministry of the Environment and Forests
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SDDL	(project) Support for Sustainable Development of the Lomié/Dja region
SNV	Netherlands Development Corporation
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

TRANSLATION OF TERMINOLOGY USED IN FIGURE 1

Body of map

FCT	Community Forest
RFD	Dja Wildlife Reserve
UFA	FMU (see above)
zone d'étude	trial zone

Legend

piste	track
route	road
fleuve	river
forêts communautaires	community forests
CG signée	(community forests) with Signed Management Plan
FCT réservée	proposed (community forest)

Please send comments on this paper to:

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