

STATE OF PROTECTED AREAS IN CENTRAL AFRICA 2020



State of Protected Areas 2020

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<http://www.observatoire-comifac.net>

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COMIFAC: Central African Forests Commission

COMIFAC is an international organisation recognised for its role in the subregional integration of conservation and sustainable and coordinated management of forest ecosystems. It is responsible for the orientation, harmonization and monitoring of forestry and environmental policies in Central Africa. COMIFAC emerged from the commitments made in March 1999 by the Heads of State of Central Africa in the “Yaoundé Declaration”. It brings together ten member countries of the subregion that share a common natural heritage. Its legal framework is governed by the February 2005 treaty: “Treaty on the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa and to establish the Central African Forests Commission”. COMIFAC’s Convergence Plan defines the shared ten-year intervention strategies of Central African States and development partners in the field of conservation and sustainable management of forest and savanna ecosystems. A second edition of this plan, covering the period 2015-2025, now exists.

Web site: www.comifac.org

OFAC: Central Africa Forest Observatory

OFAC is a specialised unit of COMIFAC, in charge of coordinating the Forest Observatory, in relation with the COMIFAC National Coordination committees and in collaboration with all of the partners producing and disseminating information on the forests and ecosystems of Central Africa. OFAC is responsible for coordinating the collection and editing of data, the analysis of results and the dissemination of information to target groups through the Observatory’s website and various publications. OFAC thus provides the subregion and its partners with essential tools for steering and sharing knowledge for better governance and sustainable management of forest ecosystems. The unit contributes to the organization and dissemination of information within the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP). It benefits from a support project financed by the European Union and the BIOPAMA program (IUCN and JRC).

Website: www.observatoire-comifac.net

IUCN : International Union for Conservation of Nature

IUCN is a membership Union composed of both government and civil society organisations. It harnesses the experience, resources and reach of its more than 1,400 Member organisations and the input of more than 18,000 experts. IUCN is the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it.

Website: www.iucn.org

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the Teke people of Gabon and the two Congos, Aka and Baka Pygmies of the great forests, etc.). This cultural tourism, which could involve at least some protected areas, would make it possible for tourists to immerse themselves in the natural environment with the natives of these regions, the custodians of

ancestral knowledge. However, this type of tourism is scarcely developed in the subregion (with the possible exception of certain regions in Cameroon); to do so, respect of the local populations must be ensured and numerous associated dangers avoided (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2007; Rodary, 2010).

Wildlife watching tourism from observation platforms overlooking forest clearings

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What is a *baï* and where can tourists observe wildlife?

Baïs are natural clearings in tropical forests. There are many types, including large (up to 50 ha) permanently flooded marshy clearings, *baïs* on areas of bare soil dotted with extremely mineral rich mudholes, and small open areas (less than 1 ha) called *yangas* (Maisels & Breuer, 2015). Consequently, the fauna that visit these *baïs* varies enormously, as does their tourism potential. Grasses, water and salt attract a variety of animals, including gorillas, forest elephants (*L. cyclotis*), forest buffaloes (*S. caffer nanus*), bongos (*Tragelaphus euryceros*) and birds (Breuer & Metsio Siena, 2015).

An exceptional set of clearings stretches from northeast Gabon to southeast Cameroon, CAR and North-Congo. Other swampy clearings also are present in DRC (such as in Salonga National Park), but the fauna is much rarer there due to heavy hunting activities. Wildlife observation towers have been built in Ivindo, Lobeke, Nki, Odzala-Kokoua, Dzanga-Sangha and Nouabale-Ndoki. The advantages of wildlife viewing on elevated platforms are the absence of long and tedious tracking, relative safety from large wildlife, better chances of seeing wildlife than in the forest, good elevated views, the possibility to spend the night on the mirador (a very different experience than in daytime), and easier viewing at dawn and dusk when animals are moving.

Meeting expectations

Wildlife viewing in *baïs* can nevertheless be difficult. The animals may be far away and not present in large numbers all year round or every day; moreover, they may only appear in the late afternoon when it is time to return to camp (Turkalo *et al.*, 2013; Gessner *et al.*, 2014). It can be difficult to endure the heat and the many insects on the platform, and walking in the forest around the miradors is not advisable as these areas are hotspots of animal activity and it would be dangerous.

Lastly, human activities in the vicinity (logging or mining) and poaching can lead to the disappearance or disruption of the animals' visiting patterns, reducing the possibilities of observation (Stephan *et al.*, 2020). This is the case for forest elephants, which become more nocturnal and suddenly leave the *baï* (Maisels *et al.*, 2015a). To diminish possible frustration, tourists should be aware that they are taking a once in a lifetime glimpse into the life of these large mammals in their natural habitats, and not in a controlled environment like a zoo. Many of these species are critically endangered and being able to see them, even from a distance or briefly, is a privilege.