

## **Session Report:**

### **African Forest Elephants - Update on field activities and reflections on joint efforts to ensure their long-term conservation and coexistence with people**

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**Composition of the panel:** Steeve NGAMA – IRAF / CENAREST; Gaspard ABITSI - WCS Gabon; Serge MIBAMBANIA – MINEF Gabon; Paul NGORAN - WWF Congo Basin

#### **Introduction**

Forest elephant conservation remains a concern in the Congo Basin. During the 19th Meeting of the Parties of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP), an event was organised on Wednesday 06 July from 14:30 to 16:00 to present the general situation of forest elephants and the challenges related to their conservation. This report summarises the various points discussed, focusing on "updates on field activities and reflections on joint long-term conservation efforts to achieve coexistence with local human populations".

#### **Objectives of the workshop**

The overall objective of this workshop was to mobilise more partners for a synergy of efforts for the preservation of this species which is at the centre of the ecological processes of the Congo Basin forests. Specifically, it aimed to

- Bring together the different technical partners to share experiences on forest elephants and their coexistence with humans.
- To raise awareness among CBFP partners on the importance of continuing to support conservation actions for the last remaining populations of forest elephants.

#### **Workshop sessions**

This workshop was divided into four sessions. The first session introduced the new taxonomy of African elephants and the conservation status of forest elephants and introduced the workshop objectives. This was followed by the different methods and results of monitoring forest elephant populations and monitoring elephant crop damage and conservation strategies. The third part dealt with methods of mitigating human-elephant conflict and the importance of human-elephant co-existence through a holistic approach. The last session consisted of an exchange on the current laws and approaches to anti-poaching and elephant protection and practical cases of successful law enforcement.

#### **Statut of forest elephants**

Forest elephants are now recognised as a separate species. They are listed as critically endangered, with a heterogeneous geographical distribution. Poaching for ivory and habitat loss are the main causes that threaten the preservation of forest elephants. Poaching is exacerbated by human-elephant conflict, while habitat loss exacerbates human-elephant conflict; this worsens the perception of people in the vicinity of the forest elephants' home range. Human-elephant conflict is an issue that transcends the field of conservation biology and is at the heart of political issues in many forest elephant range countries.

## **Monitoring**

This session provided an opportunity for a global review of activities that have recently been carried out or are currently being carried out in the countries of the Congo Basin in relation to the monitoring and counting of elephant populations and the damage they cause in agricultural areas. It should be noted that many initiatives have been and are being carried out that have led to a good understanding of the status of the forest elephant. For example, elephants know no borders and can be on the move both inside and outside protected areas. However, much remains to be done to ensure the preservation of the remaining elephant populations without compromising the well-being of the communities living in their natural habitat.

## **Conflict mitigation method and human-elephant coexistence**

This session clarified the subsidiary, though indispensable, role of human-elephant conflict mitigation methods. It underlined the importance for conservation actors to work towards human-elephant coexistence, which is the only way to ensure the preservation of elephants and the well-being of local communities. It should be remembered that true human-elephant coexistence is a state of cohabitation where the well-being of humans and elephants is ensured in a sustainable manner. As elephants are in the same natural environment as humans, with mutual aggression linked to conflicts of interest between the two and among humans, this state of coexistence can only be achieved if communities exceed the levels of tolerance and acceptance of elephants. To achieve these innovative ways of valuing the presence of elephants must be developed and promoted.

## **Traditional anti-poaching and inclusive conservation approaches**

The session on enforcement of traditional law and inclusive conservation approaches was an opportunity to fully engage the audience. Success stories were presented on the capacity of local communities to contribute significantly to the conservation of forest elephants.

## **Discussion and outlook**

Each session was marked by constructive exchanges. From these exchanges it is worth noting that:

- Many efforts have been made and are underway to preserve elephants in all the countries of the Congo Basin in and around protected areas by ensuring the connectivity of their populations.
- Forest elephant conservation actors are encouraged to harmonise their methods (especially for size estimation) and share their experiences and initiate collaborative projects that include partnerships with extractive industries.
- Human-elephant coexistence is a necessity for elephant conservation and the well-being of local communities - only holistic approaches can ensure long-term success as mitigations in isolation (e.g., insurance) will not succeed and are considered like Aspirin for a disease.
- The participation and inclusion of local and indigenous communities is strongly encouraged for better protection of forest elephants and their high conservation value areas.
- Other threats, such as the effects of climate change and its effects on forest elephants and their habitats need to be investigated.
- Initiatives such as carbon credits, wildlife credits and other funding for biodiversity and ecosystem services should be tested and implemented if successful.

## **Contributions**

This workshop was carried out with the support of the following partners: National Parc Agencies, Ministries in charge of Wildlife and Forests, AJESEC, Chengeta Wildlife, Duke University, Elephant Listening Project, FAO, Hack the Planet, IRAF-CENAREST, IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group, Panthera, Rebalance Earth, Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, Space for Giants, Traffic, Université de Liège/Gembloux, WCS, WWF.