

Report on Mission to Moyen-Bafing National Park, May 2023

Ian Redmond, OBE, DSc(hc) - Consultant Wildlife Biologist

Introduction

As a primatologist involved in great ape conservation since the 1970s, I was invited by BMTrada to take part in the audit of a biodiversity offset in Guinea, focussed on the West African Chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes verus*, a Critically Endangered subspecies (Humble *et al*, 2016 <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/15935/102327574>). The plan was to visit both Sangarédi, the location where mining by Compagnie des Bauxites des Guinée (CBG) and Guinea Alumina Corporation (GAC) threatens a population of chimpanzees and the new Moyen Bafing National Park on the other side of the country, the site of the offset. I will admit that I was sceptical at first – biodiversity in different regions varies according to the underlying geology, topography and local weather so given the distance between the sites, the species present are likely to differ; moreover, it would be unethical to kill chimpanzees in location A and think that protecting other chimpanzees in location B would somehow compensate. The 57-page ARCC report of the IUCN Primate Specialist Group also cast doubt on the calculations of future changes in chimpanzee numbers and concluded that the offset was unlikely to have the desired effect in the 20-year period that funding for MBNP is designed to cover.

Unfortunately, my departure had to be delayed by 48 hours due to family illness, so the visit to the area impacted by mining had to be cancelled and the field trip concentrated on visiting MBNP to meet some of the local communities affected and the staff of Wild Chimpanzee Foundation (WCF), the NGO partner. Detailed documents were provided explaining the use of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) PS6 system of mitigation – avoiding, minimising and restoring damage to ecosystems, and offsetting to cover any unavoidable residual losses. The methods described seem to indicate that over the decades-long timescale of the mining operation, the long-term impact might not be as damaging as first impressions suggest. Restoration of topsoil and regeneration over 20 years might allow chimpanzee habitat to be restored – as long as the chimpanzees are protected from hunting and their gallery forests protected from excessive disturbance. It is unlikely, however, that chimpanzees will tolerate blasting and heavy machinery within earshot of their forest, unless methods could be adapted to minimise disturbance. If such measures and the ecosystem restoration plan were to be successfully implemented, the anticipated decline in chimpanzee numbers around the mine site at Sangarédi could be largely avoided and with the investment in Moyen Bafing, CBG and GAC would be net positive for chimpanzees in particular and nature overall. But that is a big if and will need closely monitoring with adaptive management. Where there is a conflict between mining and conservation priorities, the reputational risk of the companies must be seen to be as important as the desire to maximise output and profits.

Itinerary

2.5.23 – Train to London, PCR Test, to Gatwick, received negative test result, depart on Royal Air Maroc to Casablanca and on to Conakry.

3.5.23 – Arrive Conakry 01.25, met and transferred to Hotel Palm Camayenne; picked up from hotel 9am and driven across Guinea to Labe, Fouta Djallon; meet Sebastien Regnaut

4.5.23 – After greeting ceremony and speech by Mayor of Kansagui: M. Issiaga Sow, visit parts of Moyen Bafing National Park, including recent chimpanzee nests about 1km from the WCF office in Kansagui and Tene River, likely to be affected if the Koukoutamba Dam is built. Overnight chez WCF.

5.5.23 – visit Ley Kimbely agricultural project, fenced area in park with irrigation under construction and after discussion with villagers, walk through sacred forest, noting chimpanzee nests in drumming tree and burnt grassland beyond gallery forest. Back to hotel in Labe.

6.5.23 – hybrid meeting with CBG and GAC followed by seminar with staff of WCS;



Fig 1: Meeting the staff of Wild Chimpanzee Foundation in Labé. Photo: Ian Redmond

7.5.23 – driven back to Conakry noting countless sacks of charcoal beside the road in every town; return to Hotel Palm Camayenne.

8.5.23 – breakfast meeting with Prof Christophe Boesch and Pacifique Kizila of WCF; afternoon flight to Monrovia cancelled; explored alternatives but none so hotel.

9.5.23 – further delays until flight to Monrovia via half of West Africa!

A Pioneering Project

The Moyen-Bafing National Park (MBNP) was created by Presidential decree on May 04, 2021, (WCF press release of 7.5.21): “With an area of 6'767 km², this park hosts the largest continuous population of chimpanzees in West Africa, a subspecies classified as 'critically endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. This magnificent park located in the north of the country along the Bafing River, near the border with Mali, is a treasure of biodiversity with an array of habitats typical of the region and a strong tradition of co-existence with a human population of 287 villages.”

This last sentence is extraordinary. The concept of including human settlements in a new national park, while common in the UK, is unusual in Africa. But if members of these communities accept the restrictions that the conservation objectives bring, then there is no need for the controversial relocating of villages which has led to conflict in other parts of the world. Given the categories of protected areas developed by the IUCN in 1994:

Areas managed mainly for:

I Strict protection – i.e. a) Strict Nature Reserve, and b) Wilderness Area

II Ecosystem conservation and protection – i.e. National Park

III Conservation of natural features – Natural Monument

IV Conservation through active management – i.e. Habitat/Species Management Area

V Landscape/seascape conservation and recreation – i.e. Protected Landscape/Seascape

VI Sustainable use of natural resources – i.e. Managed Resource Protected Area.

Worldwide, most national parks are in Categories I and II, following the American model, which started with Yellowstone in 1872 and prohibits any human activities other than research, tourism and park staff, with only the necessary infrastructure, and other development being strictly controlled. Indigenous people were evicted to allow ‘nature’ to flourish, ignoring the fact that people are a part of nature and traditional ways of life were in tune with and a part of the ecology. In 1925, Africa’s first national park, the Albert NP in the Belgian Congo (now Virunga NP in DRC) followed the same pattern except for the Batwa Pygmies who were considered so primitive they were virtually categorised as part of the fauna – a shockingly racist view but one which did allow them to live their traditional lives in the forest. After independence, however, they too were evicted from national parks in DRC, Rwanda and Uganda – the latter as recently as the 1990s. These parks would fit the Category I and II criteria.

In England, the Lake District, Peak District, Exmoor and other national parks are full of farmers and even mines, but with planning restrictions that protect the landscape and limit development. These are Category V and if Moyon Bafing successfully follows this example, it will set a precedent that could be very influential across Africa and other tropical regions. It is hard to exaggerate the positive benefits of 20 years running costs from the being invested, but as the ARCC report concluded, this alone will not necessarily suffice in the face of all the challenges. It does, however, buy time to establish alternative sources of revenue, such as ecotourism and/or payment for ecosystem services.



Fig 2. Tene River bed: De la droite vers la gauche : Johnny RABENATOANDRO, Issiagha KEITA, Ian REDMOND, Aissatou Abdoulaye DIALLO, Alexandru Paul MACARIE, Mamadou Billo DIALLO, Alseyni BALDE, Alphadio BALDE, Sebastien REGNAUT.

Photo courtesy of Mamadou Samba BARRY

First Impressions

The Moyen Bafing National Park has a mostly open landscape, comprised of a mosaic of rocky outcrops, savannah and forest patches, the latter mostly gallery forests growing along water courses. To a visiting naturalist, the termite mounds, toads, birds, beetles and butterflies are fascinating.

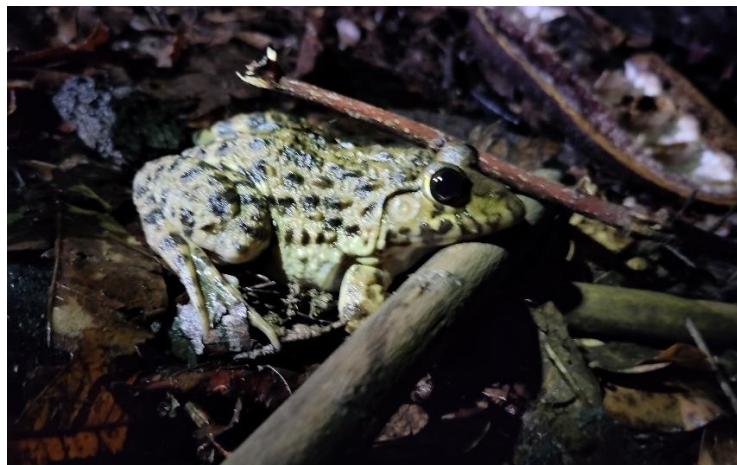


Fig 3: Toad spotted on a night walk beside stream. Photo: Ian Redmond.

To anyone used to national parks in East and Southern Africa, however, the infrequent sightings of large mammals is likely to be disappointing. When wild animals such as baboons, antelopes or buffaloes are spotted, it is often at a distance and moving away - they appear to be unused to benign human observers, but this would change over time if they were protected from hunting and disturbance.

The cultural attractions of the traditional way of life in the villages, with beautiful, thatched houses and goat huts in the compounds, would also appeal but any tourism development would have to manage expectations very well.



Fig 4: Traditional architecture seems to echo the shape of termite mounds. Photos: Ian Redmond

In due course, if a community of chimpanzees were to be habituated for tourism, it would be an attractive package to have guided nature walks through the forests, vehicle-based viewing of less skittish wildlife on the savannah and cultural activities in participating villages. This sort of low volume, high-cost ape tourism has proved successful in Rwanda and Uganda with communities surrounding the protected areas benefitting from revenue-sharing schemes. Nevertheless, it would be a long time before tourism revenues in Guinea were sufficient to cover the costs of running a protected area.

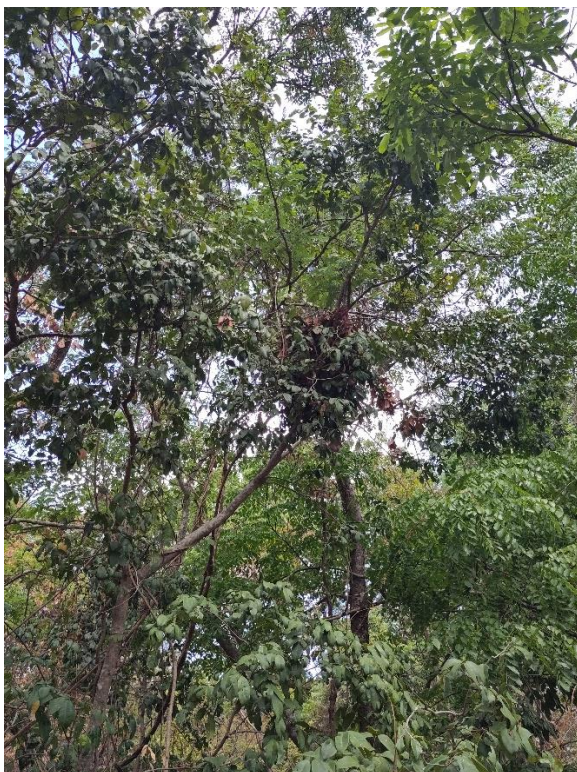


Fig 5: Chimpanzee nests and sampling wild maracuja – chimp food. Photos: Ian Redmond.

One important difference in MBNP compared to other protected areas in Africa is the lack of snares, which main and kill chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos even though they are not the intended target. Here, because people have cattle and goats roaming in the park that would get caught in snares, nobody sets them. This immediately reduces the need for anti-poaching patrols and therefore lowers the cost of protecting the chimpanzees.

Context of Biodiversity Offsets

The Government of Guinea has made commitments in a number of multi-lateral environmental agreements in recent years, some legally binding, some expressions of good intent. In the latter category and specifically concerning Guinea's only great ape, the Western Chimpanzee, Guinea is a signatory to the 2005 Kinshasa Agreement on the Conservation of Great Apes, which commits signatories to implement the Global Strategy for the Survival of Great Apes and their Habitat (revised in 2012, and downloadable from <https://www.un-grasp.org/about-grasp/key-documents-final/>). This includes this paragraph:

3.1.4 Assessing the impact on great apes and their habitats of extractive industries such as logging, mining, oil exploration, agriculture, agroforestry etc., and, in conjunction with the appropriate ministries, chief executive officers of the companies concerned and development agencies such as the World Bank, other development banks and financial institutions, take action to mitigate this pressure...

Guinea is a party to the UN's Convention on Migratory Species www.cms.int which lists chimpanzees on Appendix I and II, and is one of the four countries included in a Concerted Action on Nut-cracking Chimpanzees agreed at CMS CoP13 in 2020, https://www.cms.int/sites/default/files/document/cms_cop14_doc.32.2.1_ca-reporting-nut-cracking-chimpanzees_e%20.pdf. I asked if evidence of this behaviour had been reported in the park and was told it has but not shown evidence. Camera-traps in suitable locations would confirm this and bring additional interest in this population.

Guinea is also a party to CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, though controversy has raged around fraudulent exports of apes. Beginning in 2007, evidence indicates a total of 138 chimpanzees and 10 gorillas were shipped from Guinea to China with false 'captive bred' permits; there are no facilities in Guinea breeding apes (Stiles, Redmond, et al, 2013 Stolen Apes, GRASP-UNEP). This led to the arrest of the official involved and suspension of trade in CITES-listed specimens from Guinea (https://cites.org/eng/guinea_arrest_20150903). The trafficking of infant apes is a persistent problem across Africa and is one of the reasons for poaching even in countries where ape meat is not eaten. The resources provided by the CBG/GAC biodiversity offset can help to prevent such poaching and trade, thereby preventing similar cases in future. The communities benefitting from this project are also less likely to assist poachers from outside the area, and more likely to report them – all of which reflects well on CBG and GAC.

Corporate investors now look closely at the environmental and social impact of their investment and the Taskforce for Nature-related Financial Disclosures is highlighting the positive and negative impact of investments on the ecosystems that sustain us all. In Africa, which has globally important ecosystems, investment opportunities in natural capital are of great international interest, as evinced by <https://fsdafrica.org/our-work/green-finance/african-natural-capital-alliance-anca/>

Already some of the world's biggest investors are excluding companies with a questionable record on the environment, for example the Norwegian Government Pension Fund Global has recently excluded Power China on the grounds that its subsidiary, Synohydro, is constructing a dam that threatens the newly described Tapanuli Orangutan <https://etikkradet.no/power-construction-corp-china-ltd-2/>. In this context, the commitment to biodiversity conservation being shown by CBG and GAC is commendable, but the outcome may be threatened by the less careful activities of other mining companies surrounding their concessions.

Charcoal

The most commonly used cooking fuel in most parts of Africa is either firewood sold in bundles or charcoal, which is lighter and so easier to transport. As a result, almost anywhere that a road passes through or within walking distance of a forest or woodland, the trees and bushes are being systematically cut down

for fuel. Gradually this deforestation and steady degradation is removing forest cover, damaging ecosystems and causing erosion across vast areas of Africa. I saw evidence of commercial charcoal making just outside the MBNP boundary in habitat that is probably used by chimpanzees; without law enforcement patrols, the temptation to extract wood from within the park will grow as woodland outside the boundary becomes degraded. And gangs of labourers may also be tempted to indulge in hunting for meat or – if there is a dealer around – live chimpanzee infants for the illegal wildlife trade.



Fig 6: Charcoal-making site just outside MBNP boundary – legal but not necessarily sustainable. Photo: Ian Redmond



Fig 6: Sacks of charcoal are on sale for domestic cooking in every town – a lucrative business resulting in forest degradation/deforestation; urgent need for fuel-efficient stoves and alternative fuels. Photo: Ian Redmond

Future prospects for MBNP

At only two years old, it is too early to judge the success of the MBNP but the prospects are promising. The enthusiasm shown by the officials and members of the local communities we met was impressive. If the use of slash and burn agriculture decreases, if hunting for bushmeat is reduced and if all the communities are convinced that their future development is enhanced by the park, it might work. But the threat of mining in the park, of charcoal gangs destroying woodlands, of the Koukoutamba Dam being built, all add to the uncertainty.

The population pressure on the park's resources is likely to increase over the 20-year period of the offset. The Mayor told us in his welcoming speech (a scan of which is available) that the Rural Community of Kansangui has 11,283 people in 70 villages across an area of 472 square km. The whole park is reported to contain 287 villages in the park's area of 6,767 square km. One of the dangers of successful development in a community is the so-called 'honey-pot effect' whereby an improved standard of living and job opportunities attract immigration from surrounding areas and indeed from further afield. The local authorities will need to be aware of this and, if necessary, impose planning restrictions on new houses, roads and amenities of the conservation aims of the park are not to be compromised.



*Fig 7: Ley Kimbely Village elders: De la gauche vers la droite: SOW Abdoul Karim, Abdoulaye SOW , Abdoulaye Saikou SOW, Abdoul Rachid SOW, Mamadou Telli SOW , Ian REDMOND, Amadou SOW, Mamadou Samba SOW, Mamadou Yero SOW
Photo courtesy of Mamadou Samba BARRY*

There is great potential for ecosystem services in such a large park to generate revenues from biodiversity and carbon credits; now that the role of megafauna is being valued, innovative finance mechanisms for conservation are being developed. Initially the focus has been on forest elephants

(<https://www.imf.org/Publications/fandd/issues/2020/09/how-african-elephants-fight-climate-change-ralph-chami>) but apes are also keystone species in their habitat

(https://www.academia.edu/64239509/Redmond_Ian_2021_Primates_Biodiversity_and_Climate_Primate_Eye_No_135).

If the offset period is not extended beyond 20 years, it may be possible to use this time to develop payment for ecosystem services as a source of funding in perpetuity, for the benefit of the chimpanzees and communities alike. In due course, if all goes well, MBNP would likely qualify for listing on the IUCN Green List of well managed protected areas that achieve a positive conservation outcome with good governance and respect for human rights -

<https://iucngreenlist.org/standard/global-standard/> .