

GABON

ECONOMY · POLITICS · CULTURE · TOURISM

AUTUMN 2005

Man of peace

President Omar Bongo Ondimba
opens the UN summit in New York

MAN OF PEACE President Bongo opens the UN summit in New York **ENERGY** Asian tigers join the hunt for elephants in the oil fields **CULTURE** Georges M'Bourou takes his artistic talent to this year's Expo in Japan



Animal magic

If you want to experience heaven on earth, visit the jewel in the crown of Gabon's national parks where the wildlife is breathtaking

LONG before humans came to dominate Africa, hippos probably waded in the waves while buffalo and elephants frolicked along the beaches all the way from Angola to Senegal. Today, the only sizeable protected area of its kind along Africa's Atlantic shoreline is in Gabon — about two degrees south of the Equator.

This thousand square miles (1,550 sq km) of magic, known as Loango, was defined in 2002 as part of President Bongo Ondimba's bold and ambitious plan to create a national park network. The park is a beautiful and complex mosaic of landscapes, including forests, lagoons swarming with crocodiles and fish, wetlands and savannahs as well as nearly 60 miles (100km) of wild beaches.

Here you will see elephants lumbering along the sand, hippos playing in the surf and, if you are lucky, rain-forest gorillas rambling across a patch of savannah between the trees. "When you get up close to the gorillas they are unbelievably enormous," says Chris Illemassene, a recent visitor to Loango. "They are breathtaking."

But there is much more. Loango is "the jewel in the crown" of the Gabon National Parks system, says Dr Lee White, the British biologist who heads the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Gabon programme. And, in his view, it may be "the best park in Africa today".

For several months each year the beaches of Loango are home to huge leatherback turtles which come ashore to lay eggs and then disappear into the sea to join the humpback and killer whales that are seasonally in abun-

dance. Throughout the year the park is teeming with elephants, buffalo, small game and colourful birds such as touracos, hornbills and parrots.

"If, after all that, you thought you had died and gone to heaven, just wait until you spot the forest elephants. They are smaller than their cousins who live on the savannah, and rather shy. You will probably need patience to get close," says Illemassene. But be prepared for a surprise. These elephants are partial to the mildly hallucinogenic plant, *iboga*, which grows near the coast and can make them aggressive. "The drunken pachyderms get incredibly stoned."

The savannahs are a good place to see red river hogs, graceful sitatunga antelopes and numerous small primates, including red-capped manglebeys. You might be lucky to spot, or at least hear, chimpanzees or be especially fortunate and have a daylight sighting of a handsome male leopard.

Hypnotic power

Kayaking the backwaters and lagoons or exploring the rivers by motorboat are the only ways to penetrate the dense forest. Keep an eye out for hippos and crocodiles, and birds of all sorts in the mangroves at the water's edge. "As you surrender to the hypnotic power of the rainforest, in the grand scheme of life you will suddenly feel very small," says Illemassene.

Birdwatching here is excellent, with more than 340 species recorded in the park. The Loango weaver, African river martin, Rosy bee-eater and Forbes's plover are all regulars. Finally, there is the simple pleasure of spending an afternoon walking along the Atlantic beach, keeping an ever-careful eye out

for elephants and buffalo, but enjoying the ghost crabs and sea birds as you watch the sun set over the sea.

The best ways to get to the park are from the north at Iguéla or from the south at Gamba, the Shell Oil complex. Iguéla is a two-hour drive from the airport at Omboué, which has a twice-weekly service from Libreville. There are three or four flights a week from Libreville to Gamba.

From Gamba there is good access to the southern part of the park. There are several lodges and camps in the Sette Cama area on the Ndogo Lagoon, an excellent place to start exploring. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) runs the southern part of the park and, backed by some funding from the EU, is involved in a number of interesting community-based ecotourism projects.

The northern part of the park is managed by Operation Loango, a partnership between the Gabon government, the Wildlife Conservation Society and the privately owned Société de Conservation et Développement (SCD). The SCD owns and runs the stylish new Loango Lodge located on the border of the park overlooking Iguéla Lagoon.

Operation Loango emerged from a chance meeting between Rombout Swanborn and Mike Fay, the Wildlife Conservation Society scientist who walked across central Africa several years ago (see page 24). He was instrumental in the transformation of an old fishing camp into Loango Lodge, the base for Operation Loango. Meanwhile, Swanborn, a major shareholder of SCD, grew up in the area while his father ran the Shell programme at Gamba. Swanborn's aim is →



The forests, lagoons, wetlands, beaches and savannahs of Loango are teeming with wildlife from reptiles and birds to monkeys, hippos and crocodiles

NATIONAL PARKS LOANGO

to use the profits from Operation Loango's sustainable ecotourism activities, including the operation of the lodge, to fund programmes to protect and manage the wildlife on which it depends. "As a businessman I find it very important that we demonstrate that you can earn money by protecting nature," he says.

A major goal of Operation Loango is to involve the local community, including the former hunters, as safari guides. "They now can use their knowledge of nature in a sustainable manner which is, in fact, a better job," says Swanborn.

Operation Loango has already trained several dozen "eco-guides" and also "eco-guards", who help to manage the park. It is funding several projects, including animal and archaeological research, and cleaning up rubbish from passing ships that has been washed ashore over the years. As a result, Loango's beaches are now among the most pristine and beautiful in the world.

The next goal is to take the Operation Loango model and apply it to other parks in Gabon, and other

parts of the world. As Swanborn says: "We need to develop a rational way to utilise the natural resources, optimising revenues while not compromising the long-term survival potential of the area and its residents." ■

Robert J. Ross

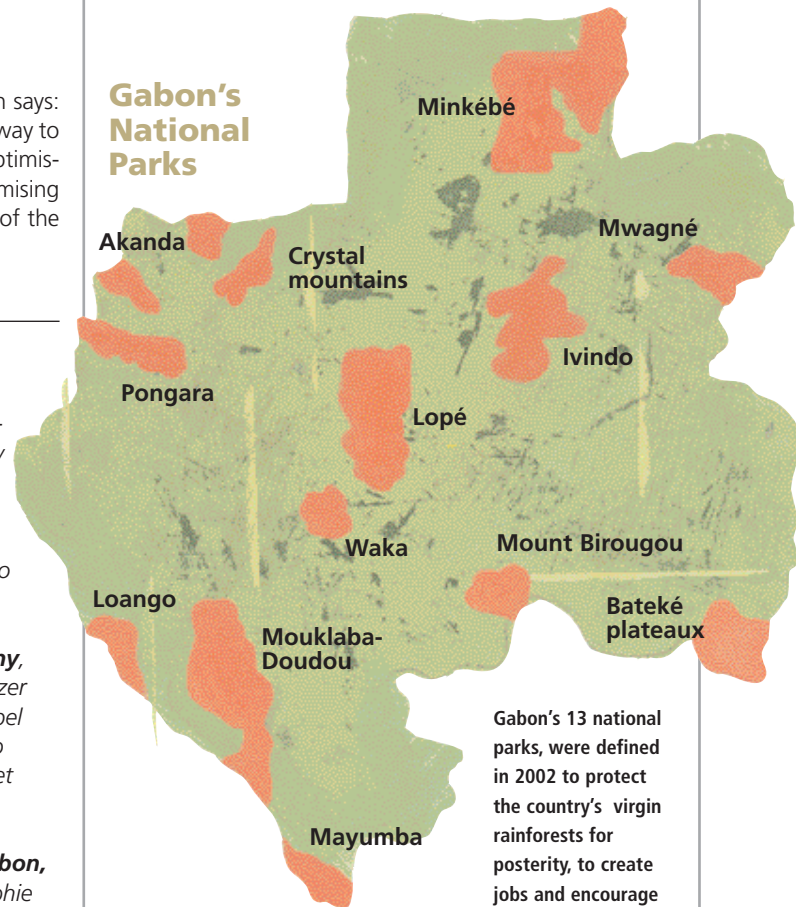
Suggested reading

Travels in West Africa by Mary Kinglsey, originally published in 1895, and published by *National Geographic Adventure Classics*, is the account of her travels into the African jungles, where the tribes were reputed to be ferocious and cannibalistic.

Albert Schweitzer, a Biography, published by the Albert Schweitzer Library, tells the story of the Nobel Prize-winning humanitarian who moved to Gabon in 1912 and set up a hospital in Lambaréné.

The Bradt Travel Guide to Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe by Sophie Warne, covers everything a first-time visitor might need to know.

Gabon's National Parks



Gabon's 13 national parks, were defined in 2002 to protect the country's virgin rainforests for posterity, to create jobs and encourage tourism



PHOTOGRAPH: CARLTON WARD JR

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

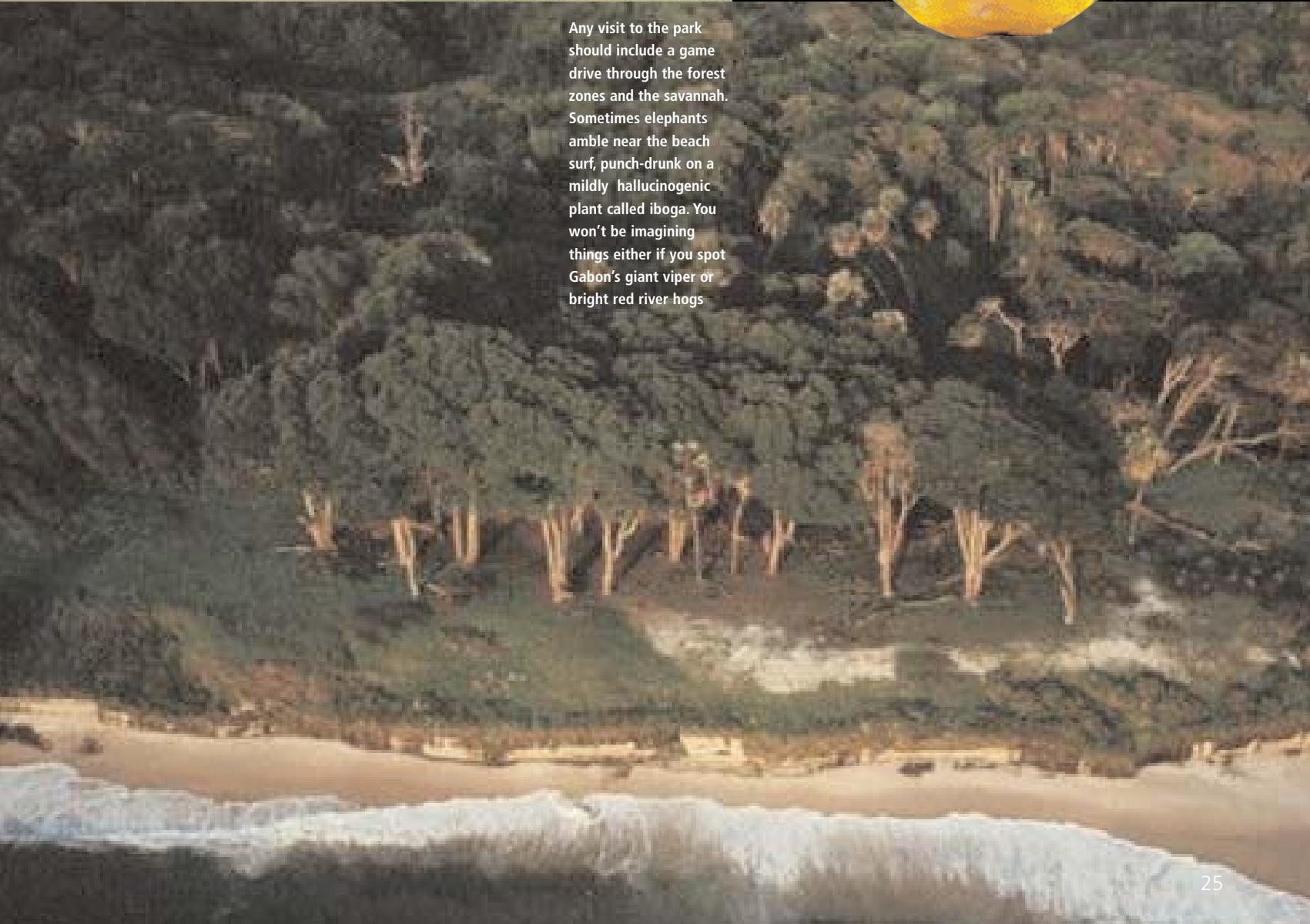
MICHAEL FAY, the American scientist who first arrived in equatorial Africa to study the one habitat where gorillas still thrive, provided the inspiration to set up Gabon's network of national parks. In the 1990s he became aware of the ecological damage being done to the Congo Basin from uncontrolled logging and other human activities. After persuading *National Geographic* magazine and the Wildlife Conservation Society to sponsor him, he set out to walk 2,000 miles to the coast, collecting scientific data from the unexplored forests and swamps that lay between him and the Atlantic. Accompanied by *National Geographic* magazine photographer Michael Nichols, and guided by pygmies, Fay's Megatransect team, as it became known, set off on the 15-month trek from the Democratic Republic of Congo, soon crossing the border into Gabon before arriving on a beach in what is now part of Loango National Park in December 2000. During this epic and perilous journey, the team experienced everything from mosquitoes and humid heat as they tramped through swamps and dense forests to eye-opening moments when they came across gorillas who had never seen humans before and rounded up their families to stare at the strange visitors wearing clothes.

Fay's determination and drive took him and his pygmy trackers through some of the richest, toughest and least understood ecosystems on Earth.

When President Bongo Ondimba heard about the "crazy" American walking across his country, he wanted to meet him. Several months after reaching the Atlantic, Fay found himself in a New York hotel suite showing Nichols's stunning pictures — of elephants in the forest, gorillas in the clearings and hippos on the beach — and telling stories of the marvels of the forests to the mesmerised President. The talks and picture shows continued and in less than a year Gabon had a national parks system comprising more than 11 per cent of the country's land area. Fay, and a dedicated and capable group of others, had accomplished one of the great environmental success stories of the young millennium. ■



Any visit to the park should include a game drive through the forest zones and the savannah. Sometimes elephants amble near the beach surf, punch-drunk on a mildly hallucinogenic plant called iboga. You won't be imagining things either if you spot Gabon's giant viper or bright red river hogs



BEST SIGHTINGS



Turtles

NOVEMBER - MARCH

Some years the leatherback turtles start moving ashore to lay their eggs as early as October, but the best time to see them in their nesting grounds is between mid-November and March



Whales

JULY - SEPTEMBER

This is a spectacular sight as hundreds and thousands of humpbacks make their way up the Gabonese coast to Cap Lopez



Fishing

NOVEMBER - APRIL

Game fishing for tarpon and other big fish is probably most enjoyable during the short dry season in December and January



Hippo visibility

ALL YEAR

Hippos are noisy, sociable animals, normally found in small groups which spend most of the day in the water, often with just their ears, eyes and upper nostrils above the surface



Large primates and other mammals

(Gorillas, monkeys, elephants, buffalos)

ALL YEAR

Loango has monkeys galore, notably De Brazza's monkey, which lives along the Atlantic coast in small groups and is noted for its love of swimming. Western lowland or rainforest gorillas often come to the beach.

So, too, do elephants, which enjoy the saline soil. Forest buffalo live in lowland rainforest areas, close to water and grassy areas



Reptiles

(Crocodiles, lizards, snakes)

ALL YEAR

Beware of crocodiles in Gabon's lagoons and rivers. They can often be difficult to spot in the daytime because of their camouflage. But at night their red eyes are a dead giveaway, staring out like torchlights, as they try to hide among the foliage along the riverbanks. Watch out, too, for vipers. They can grow up to 4ft (1.2m) long and swallow a small monkey



Birds

ALL YEAR

The best time for bird spotting is August to September. October to December are pretty good as well. But there is plenty for the sharp-eyed visitor throughout the seasons. Rainforests are a birdwatcher's paradise and as many as 680 species of birds have been recorded in Gabon



Mosquitoes

OCTOBER - APRIL

Mosquitoes, tsetse flies and other insects proliferate near rivers and swampy areas, especially between dusk and dawn and during the wet season, so use insect repellent and cover up where possible



Walking trails

ALL YEAR

Hiking trails meander through pristine forests, along deserted beaches and through the savannah. Locals who know where the wildlife hang out have been trained as eco-guides. Can be combined with canoe trips in wet season



Burning savannahs

AUGUST - SEPTEMBER

Not at all dangerous and really quite spectacular, say those who have seen the controlled burning of the open areas of high grass and isolated shrubs

Useful websites

Gabon National Parks

www.gabonnationalparks.com

This is a goldmine of information on the national parks, pinpointing each park's animal population

Operation Loango

www.operation-loango.com

Check out this website for details about Loango National Park, activities, accommodation, including Loango Lodge, and how to book it online. There are details of air and boat timetables and lots of facts, figures and background information

Sport fishing at Iguéla

www.fishinggabon.com

For pages of illustrated details about game fishing along the southern coast

Mistral Voyages

www.ecotourisme-gabon.com

For ecotourism in Gabon and info about the agencies that can arrange transport and accommodation

Eurafrique Voyages

www.gabon-destinationinsolite.com

Also offers ecotourism opportunities

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

www.panda.org

Outlines the WWF's work in Gabon through its long-term work with park and wildlife authorities, the local population, research institutes and the private sector

Conservation International

www.conservation.org

If you're interested in conservation worldwide, this site will keep you up to date on the latest developments and the aims of Conservation International

Wildlife Conservation Society

www.wcs.org

Click here for news about the WCS's work in Gabon, as well as its other activities worldwide

Ecofac

www.ecofac.org

More information on conservation in Central Africa including Gabon, plus explanations of biodiversity

National Geographic

www.nationalgeographic.com

A huge site with information about animals, nature, geography, travel, exploration and much more

Whalewatching is a spectacular experience as hundreds of singing humpbacks flip and dive along the coast. Meanwhile, birds mass on wetlands and colourful crabs go on a beach crawl

