

**IMPACTS OF CONFLICTS ON
FORESTS AND PEOPLE IN D.R.
CONGO**

*By Richard Tshombe, Terese Hart and
Christien Amboya*

During the eight years of civil wars in DR Congo the the Okapi Faunal Reserve (RFO) in the Ituri Forest suffered not only battles and pillaging but also elephant poaching and illegal mining activities. The greatest challenges to the long-term survival and integrity of the Reserve are immigration and exploitation. Ideally, local populations would help protect the Reserve. During the war, however, the authority of the Reserve was put in question and progress towards a system to control the influx of humans and their use of the Reserve was limited.

This paper describes the impact of these challenges on the forest and the local population and the response strategy developed by ICCN (Congolese Conservation Institute, the parastatal in charge of Parks and Reserves) and its partners, working with the local people.

Between 1992, when the Reserve was created, and 1996, when war began, the major threats to its integrity were gold mining, illegal hunting (especially in the north) and the illegal killing of elephants. The ICCN was slowly building up a capacity to deal with encroachments: about 50 guards, only a third of whom had guns, were supposed to protect a Reserve almost half the size of Belgium. With the first wave of war all the guards were disarmed and left

still less equipped to handle the subsequent challenges.

Coltan mining. Over two to three months in 2000, between 2 000 and 3 000 people came into the forest from up to 700 km away to mine a new mineral: coltan (columbite-tantalite, high value to industry). Because of its high grade, the coltan from the Reserve was bought at \$80/kg within the Reserve and sold at \$100–150/kg in Beni and Butembo, or \$150–200/kg in Goma and Bukavu. With the wartime lack of employment, teachers, students, pastors, public servants, soldiers all converged on the Reserve.

By 2001, coltan exploration or mining affected two-thirds of the Reserve. As almost all young people moved from villages to mining camps, gardens were abandoned, creating food shortages in the Reserve. The food available in villages was sold to mining camps. Prices roughly doubled. Some local people, particularly chiefs with land tenure authority and thus some authority over the coltan mining camps, gained important short-term benefits and power, as opening a coltan mine involved buying “authorisation” from territorial authorities and subsequent payment of a certain tariff to the “owners” of the claim by all miners. Even less well-placed local people were able to get temporary jobs digging and sifting gravel, portering or guarding the mine. However, about 90 percent of the profits from coltan were invested outside the Reserve, since most entrepreneurs in the Reserve were immigrants.

Although the impact of coltan mining on the environment has not been studied, it is probably minor and temporary because of the artisanal scale of mining. Although the

flow of small streams is interrupted, their banks are dug up, some trees are cut and bark funnels are used to wash the mineral, these perturbations are primarily temporary as long as the mines themselves remain short-lived. The immigration of farmers associated with the mines may have much more long-term effects than the mines themselves.

Elephant poaching during the war was usually connected to networks reaching top levels of the rebel hierarchies. The networks included soldiers (Congolese and foreigners) or police, traders, professional poachers and a mixed group including public servants, students, and staff of at least one development NGO. Between April and October 2000, at least 60 elephants were killed in the Reserve –almost certainly many more– for both meat and tusks. Elephant meat was openly sold in Mambasa market at 0.6–1.4/kg; ivory, bought at \$3–5/kg in Mambasa, was sold for \$20/kg \$ in Bunia and Beni.

The RFO reacted in a coordinated manner. Through internal CoCoSi (local coordination committee) meetings the international Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Gilman International Conservation (GIC), operating in the RFO, became a strong collaborative force with the ICCN. Mid-2000 the RFO presented the situation to the authorities in Bunia, and received military collaboration for an anti-poaching operation (Tango) as well as the necessary funds.

Tango (T for *Tembo*, elephant in Swahili) ,a joint military and park guard operation, supported by the international conservation NGOs and ICCN, was launched to eliminate elephant poaching and restore ICCN

authority throughout the Reserve (late 2000, ICCN controlled only 10 percent of the Reserve). The troops involved comprised 12 Ugandan UPDF soldiers and 22 Congolese from the Congolese People's Army (APC) that controlled the region as well as guards from the RFO. The operation, planned for three months, continued from October 2000 through February 2001. Twelve poachers and four ivory buyers were arrested, more than 117 kg ivory was confiscated, twelve automatic and four smaller rifles were seized and the coltan mines were closed. However, all the poachers were later released.

The most lasting impact of the Tango operation is the collaborative management that ICCN developed through its CoCoSi. Poaching and coltan mining forced it to become an effective tool for a unified strategy within the Reserve. The CoCoSi was the central organising unit – writing proposals, managing the operation, contacting local and Ugandan authorities, and coordinating the provision of intelligence including maps and intelligence summaries.

Today, more than three years after the end of the Tango operation, the poachers captured in 2000–2001 and later released have been starting a new battle in RFO with the help of soldiers still deployed in the region. The killing of elephants has resumed, with more than 11 000 kg of ivory exported from the Reserve in 2003 alone. Of this more than 7 000 kg was sold at its first market within the Reserve itself. The transport routes are through Beni in the Southeast of the Reserve and through Kasenyi and Mahagi in the Northeast. Uganda is the main transit center (Mapilanga 2003).

The demand for ivory has created a prosperous market for guns. Guns like AK 47 are available in Mambasa for \$70–90; an AK 47 bullet for \$0.25–0.30. The post-conflict “no war, no peace” situation could be worse than the conflict period because of uncertainty among local authorities, hunters, soldiers and politicians. The forest and wildlife suffer as the soldiers that were part of various rebel factions remain in the area.

While poaching of elephants and other wildlife might not have an obvious impact on local people, they are both its victims and essential to its success as guides, scouts and even gun-wielding poachers. But poaching depletes the Ituri forest, on which a large concentration of hunting and gathering Mbuti (Pygmy populations) depends. Data from various sources (carcass observations, documented kills, bush meat data, ivory reports) suggest that in 2002–2003 at least 230–460 elephants were killed, 10 percent of the pre-war population (Hart 2003; Hart and Hall 1997). An incomplete tally showed that the same gun-based poaching network was responsible for the sale of 4075 kg of primate meat between May and November 2003 in the market of Mambasa alone (Mapilanga 2003).

Both coltan mining and elephant poaching are driven by outsiders at the expense of the local population. The marginal benefits gained by some local people are short-term. Until non-forest immigrants moved around the forest village of Oicha in the 1930s, the triangle between Beni, Komanda and Mambasa, south-east of the Okapi Reserve was luxuriant forest. Now only small forest fragments remain within the triangle and forest people are a small

minority in the population. Immigrants are moving steadily into the forest and even the Reserve will not be protected unless strong measures can be taken. During the conflict, the CoCoSi was instrumental in setting up the Tango operation. Now its utility as a management structure must be tested against the long-term challenge of immigration control.

References and further reading on request from :

Richard Tshombe
WCS site manager - RFO
E-mail: richardtshombe@yahoo.com and
cefrecof@uuplus.com

Christien Amboya
Officier des gardes - RFO
E-mail: cefrecof@uuplus.com

Terese Hart
WCS country director for DRC
E-mail: teresehart@aol.com

Postage mail address:
Terese Hart
WCS/DRC country director
International division
185th St and Southern Blvd
Bronx, NY 10460
USA

References

- Mapilanga, J-J. 2003. *Suivi du marché de l'ivoire et de la viande d'éléphants en périphérie de la Réserve de Faune à Okapis*. Unpublished report, ICCN.
- Hart, J. 2003. *Conflict ivory: elephant poaching and ivory traffic in the Ituri Forest during the Congolese civil war, 1996-2003*. A collaborative document: ICCN, WCS, MIKE & GIC.
- Hart, J.A. & Hall, S.J. 1996. Status of Eastern Zaire's forest parks and reserves. *Conservation Biology* 10 (2): 316–327.