



Breaking the bushmeat cycle in Congo: A good news story

BY TERESE AND JOHN HART



Black fronted duiker in a metal snare trap in the forests of Kailo Territory, Maniema Province, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The provincial governor took the podium for the closing remarks. “I want you all to know that after this presentation of the important flora and fauna of our province of Maniema, I plan to do my part to preserve it.” He paused.

“As of today, I will no longer eat Bonobos.”

Some in the audience laughed; they all clapped.

“I repeat. I will no longer eat Bonobo”. Again, applause.

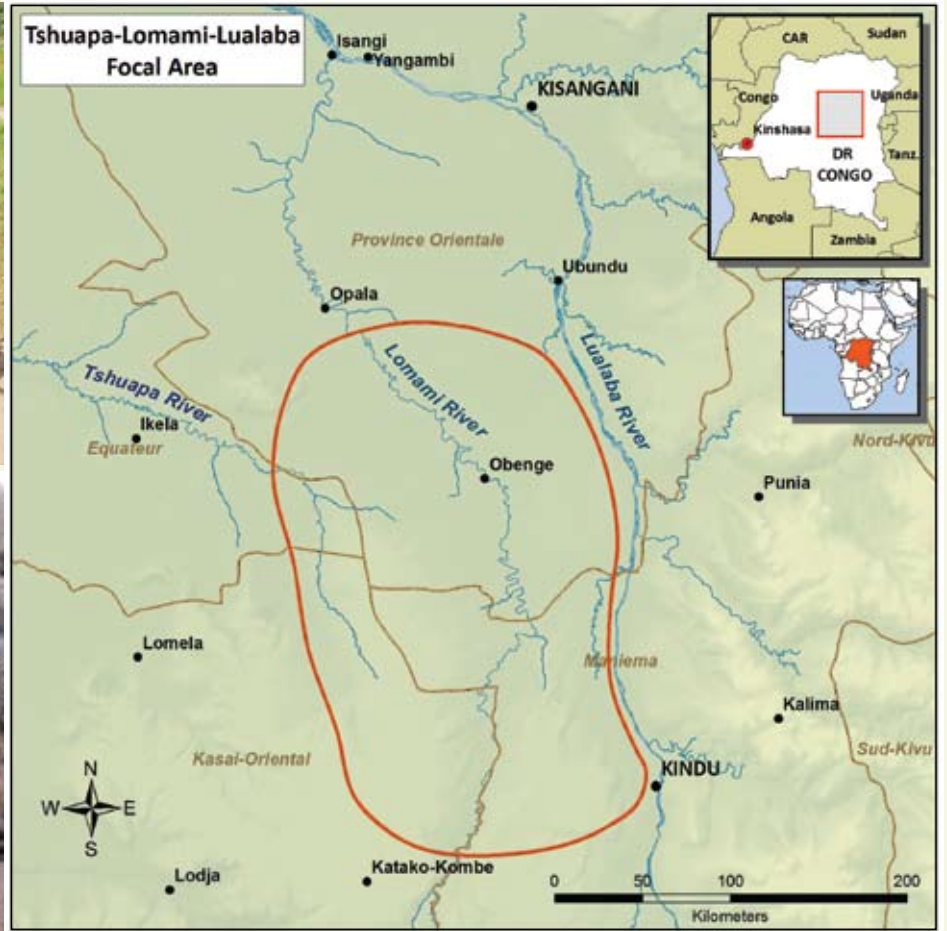
Terese Hart was probably more taken aback than anyone in the audience. She had just presented to a gathering of over 40 members of the provincial administration the results of John’s field surveys. He and the project teams had found previously unknown populations of wildlife in the forests between the Tshuapa, Lomami and the Lualaba rivers, a region known as the TL2 for its three dominant basins. Among their findings was a surprising abundance of Bonobos, Democratic Republic of Congo’s endemic ape. Yet everywhere throughout this vast, road-less, nearly unsettled forest, the field teams also found evidence of hunting: snare sets, hunting camps and spent ammunition from 12 gauge shotguns.

This was in 2008. The Presentation was the first we, the TL2 project, had made in Kindu, a city of 150,000 and the capital of Maniema Province as well as the destination for most of the wild meat taken from the area we explored. The Bonobo is a totally protected species and yet smoked carcasses were frequently available in Kindu market for about \$50. We were gratified to get the no-Bonobo-eating pledge from the governor. But if even he, a trained medical doctor, was eating Bonobos, a major information campaign would be necessary to stop the practice.

We started exploring the TL2 landscape in 2007. In addition to Bonobos, the surveys documented populations of Okapis, elephants, and a wide range of primates including two forms endemic to the TL2 region and even a new species of monkey, now being described.

Hunting is the only major threat to the conservation of the TL2 landscape and its wildlife. Unless it can be controlled, there will be major losses. Further to the north and west, in areas closer to settlement, we found entire blocks of forest nearly

PHOTOS BY: TL2 PROJECT, LUKURU FOUNDATION



Top: This *Sitatunga* is being carried to market through the streets of Kindu.

Bottom: *De Brazza's monkey (Cercopithecus neglectus)* laid out for sale as bushmeat in a market along the upper Congo River.

BASED ON OUR EXPERIENCE, ONLY A SMALL FRACTION OF CONGO'S REMAINING FORESTS, THE LARGEST IN AFRICA, STILL CONTAIN WILDLIFE POPULATIONS NOT LARGELY DEPLETED BY UNCONTROLLED HUNTING.

empty of wildlife. In the TL2 landscape, only about a third of the region still has important concentrations of the large mammals targeted by hunters. The pattern we found in the TL2 region mirrors results of surveys we conducted elsewhere in Congo over the last 20 years.

Based on our experience, only a small fraction of Congo's remaining forests, the largest in Africa, still contain wildlife populations not largely depleted by uncontrolled hunting.

It is easy to suggest that Congo's persistent conflict and poverty are the

ultimate causes of its uncontrolled and unsustainable commercial meat trade. This is an over-simplification and prevents us from recognising opportunities for action to stop losses that would otherwise seem to be inevitable.

Conservation seems to be a low priority for government action in Congo, but then the government is hardly able to take action on any priorities. Congo's low capacity to govern by law, coupled with a lack of economic options, has allowed hunting to spiral out of control.

Government employees are often unpaid and unsupervised so motivation is low, corruption widespread. The rudimentary conditions of rural life in Congo, ethnic divisions and the lack of education all contribute to a limited vision and facilitate unsustainable exploitation by a few of wildlife resources that should be for many.

The governor's pledge to get behind wildlife protection was more a statement of personal engagement than an expression of political will. Could we transform this personal commitment into real protection of the TL2's wildlife? Our experience over the last two years in Maniema has proved that personal engagement can compensate for weak government and can lead to effective conservation.

After his speech, the governor signed into law Maniema Province's first No Hunting season, which came into effect in July 2009. While the entire province was included in the ban, the TL2 landscape



A subspecies endemic to the TL2 landscape, *Cercopithecus mona elegans*, is carried along with Black and white colobus (*Colobus angolensis*) to the market in Kindu on the back of a bicycle.

was especially affected as most of Kindu's wild meat originated in the TL2 region, funnelling into the city along bicycle tracks that traverse the Kasuku River, an otherwise impassable barrier, at two crossing points. Following the governor's lead, the mayor of Kindu joined forces with the TL2 Project in a media campaign to inform Kindu's consumers of the upcoming ban on wild meat. Several of Kindu's wild meat vendors, who had already begun to see declining supplies of their produce, joined forces in the outreach. As the date for the hunting ban approached, we placed monitors at the Kasuku crossings. There was essentially no legal enforcement, so we were doubtful that there would be widespread compliance.

Amazingly, we found almost total compliance with the ban during that first closed season. Market vendors and transporters, who had earlier declared that they had no other way to live except to sell bushmeat, began to sell dried fish and other produce. Monitors at the Kasuku crossings found the bicycle transporters, who formerly carried loads of smoked, dried monkeys and duikers, now carried live goats, pigs, chickens and other small stock.

While we were encouraged by this result, we were uncertain that we could expect the same result during the no-

hunting season of the following year. In addition, the hunting ban provided only a temporary, three-month reprieve. More protection was needed.

In 2008, after we informed the governor of the importance of the TL2 region for conservation, the head of DRC's national parks agency, the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN), came to the province

himself and announced at a gathering attended by more than 70 local chiefs, elders, and provincial administrators that the TL2 landscape needed a national park, with total protection for its wildlife. He also planned to create a base for the ICCN in Kindu and to send a warden to head it.

After a day of debate, including closed-door sessions, the gathered chiefs announced that they agreed that there should be a protected area in TL2 landscape, but with an important condition. The head chief of the Bangengele people, whose homelands would be included in the park, a woman known as Mama Chieftaine, spoke for the entire assembly stating that no park would be accepted if consultation did not culminate in a traditional ceremony, the *tambiko*, to request blessing from the ancestors.

Our field season in 2010 began with organisation of the *tambiko* ceremonies. A single ceremony became three, thus covering ethnic divisions within the landscape. The TL2 Project provided logistics and food, but the ceremonies were in the hands of the elders. There was dancing, singing, chanting and lots of talking. At the meetings we organise, we give Powerpoint presentations to explain the implications of overhunting and the importance of protected areas. At the *tambiko* ceremonies, we said nothing. We listened, as did the provincial administrators from Kindu, who joined us



A group of hunters from the Bangengele village of Tshombe Kilima now must walk a full day to their hunting grounds carrying 12 gauge shotguns and metal cable snare traps.

THE RUDIMENTARY CONDITIONS OF RURAL LIFE IN CONGO, ETHNIC DIVISIONS AND THE LACK OF EDUCATION ALL CONTRIBUTE TO A LIMITED VISION AND FACILITATE UNSUSTAINABLE EXPLOITATION BY A FEW OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES THAT SHOULD BE FOR MANY.

as witnesses. We slept in our tents while the singing and discussions continued into the night. The ceremonies varied from one *tambiko* to the next, but in all cases every chief gave an exhortation, and spat on the ground through a mixture of herbs pulled from the same earth.

No papers were signed at the *tambikos*, no official list of attendees drawn up, but afterwards everything changed. The next step, participatory delimitation of the park borders, was relatively easy. That happened with painted signs on the trees at key points along the park perimeter and the signature of the traditional authorities who attended.

Although illegal hunting has not completely stopped, now, at the close of 2010, hunting in the TL2 landscape is greatly reduced. Local hunters are informed of rules controlling hunting including the limits of the proposed protected area. There is general acceptance. After the chiefs marked out limits for the future park, the provincial government provided an edict in support of protected area rules. ICCN has sent the first park guards: patrols have been initiated. The killing of Bonobos has become rare and we even feel comfortable habituating some groups in the park area.

Where rule of law is weak, we have tried to reach out to organise and motivate people from across Congolese



Along the road that leads from Kindu to the Lomami River, a villager and his son return to their village with a Black mangabey killed with a 12 gauge shotgun.

society, accompanying them in decisions they make to protect wildlife. In the ongoing experiment in TL2, committed individuals at all levels, from the governor and the mayor of Kindu to the local chiefs and even individual hunters and market vendors, have each in their separate ways recognized the value of their wildlife and made contributions to ensure its

protection for the future. The challenge is to make this long term and make conservation part of a tradition.

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THE HARTS first came to the Democratic Republic of Congo in the mid-1970s, John for a two year study living amongst the Pygmies to learn their Ecology and Terese as a Peace Corps teacher. They returned in the early 80s to do their PhD research in the Ituri Forest, Terese in botany and John in zoology. Now working under Lukuru Foundation, the Harts have developed a project of exploration, monitoring and conservation action in the central forests of DRC. The project works between the Tshuapa River and the Lualaba River and is concentrated in the basin of the Lomami (TL2 project). Their teams work in the forests, villages and towns of three provinces: Maniema, Kasai Oriental and Orientale.

For more info go to: <http://www.Bonoboincongo.com/>