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USAID FUNDED BUILDING EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE FINANCING OF THE OKAPI WILDLIFE RESERVE THROUGH A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

OVERVIEW

The purpose of this program is to bring security to the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR), build management and enforcement capacity, establish a secure enabling environment to protect its unique biodiversity, empower local communities, and to attract future private investment to better ensure the sustainable management of the Reserve and the wider landscape.

BACKGROUND

The OWR in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is of exceptional biodiversity importance, harboring DRC's largest remaining strongholds of forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), endemic okapi (*Okapia johnstoni*) and eastern chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*). As a result of these uniquely high levels of biodiversity and its intact ecosystem, UNESCO listed the OWR as a World Heritage Site in 1996. The Reserve is also of great cultural significance, with the Mbuti and Efe indigenous people thought to have inhabited these forests for some 40,000 years. The OWR was once deemed a 'model' protected area in DRC, with a thriving tourism and conservation education product based around the elusive okapi.

Over the past 10 years, however, the OWR, its biodiversity, and the local communities who depend upon its forests, have been increasingly threatened by escalating levels of insecurity, poaching, and illegal gold mining. The OWR has weathered periods of extreme insecurity in the past and now an opportunity exists to enhance law enforcement

capacity and management systems to confront its threats. If this window to address OWR's management limitations is not embraced, one of DRC's flagships protected areas risks becoming totally stripped of its wildlife and subjected to a gradual breakdown in the rule of law.

Through the current cooperative agreement with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the project will strengthen the management of the OWR by leveraging a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) signed between WCS and the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN) in late 2018. Building on over 30 years of on-the-ground experience in the OWR and drawing on lessons learned from other successful PPP initiatives in DRC and the wider region, the project will support the implementation of WCS's new delegated management mandate. This will involve restoring security to the OWR, building management and enforcement capacity, establishing a secure enabling environment to protect its unique biodiversity, empowering local communities, and attracting future private investment to better ensure the sustainable management of the Reserve and the wider landscape.

STRATEGY AND APPROACH

The vision for this program is to return OWR to its former status as a model protected area: a beacon of stability in the area where its unique biodiversity thrives, where local communities both inside and outside the Reserve are directly benefiting from the security and economic opportunities that the OWR provides, and where the OWR constitutes a new component of a world-class tourism circuit in DRC showcasing the unique values of the protected areas for future generations.

The objectives of the project are as follows:

1. Conservation and the security situation in the OWR are improved by mitigating threats through enhanced law enforcement and high-level stakeholder engagement.
2. Protected area management capacity is strengthened through the operationalization of the OWR PPP.
3. Community support for conservation in the OWR is increased through improved wellbeing and shared governance of natural resource zones.
4. Sustainable financing and economic development are accelerated through conservation-led income-generating activities.

BENEFICIARIES

- ✓ This project will directly benefit the whole Reserve through strengthened protected area management, enhanced social wellbeing of its resident communities and the creation of conservation-led income generating initiatives that can contribute to sustainably financing future Reserve activities.
- ✓ Community structures will benefit from capacity building support to manage their community forests and develop sustainable natural resource management plans with which to govern them.
- ✓ Local communities both inside and outside the Reserve will directly benefit from the security and economic opportunities that the OWR provides.



De Brazza's Monkey (*Cercopithecus neglectus*). A riverine monkey found in OWR's unique and highly threatened lowland rainforest habitat.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS FROM YEAR I

- ✓ Increased the number of OWR rangers by almost 25% with new recruitment and basic field ranger training of 59 new recruits to bring the total law enforcement staff from 166 to 227
- ✓ Purchased a dedicated Cessna-206 aircraft to support the Reserve and provide critical capabilities immediately upon arrival
- ✓ Developed a six-phase law enforcement strategy that aims to progressively secure sectors of the vast Reserve and to extend operational reach as logistical support and ranger capacity increases and permits
- ✓ Designed a social safeguarding policy for the OWR, including a Code of Conduct for all employees of the Reserve and a law enforcement code of ethics