The Gamba Complex Biodiversity Project is a collaboration of the Smithsonian Institution's Monitoring and Assessment of Biodiversity Program (MAB), Shell Gabon, Shell Foundation's Sustainable Energy Program, the Gabonese government and other national and international organizations.

This is the first of several updates from researchers, who are on the ground in Gabon conducting fieldwork for a month. Subsequent updates will include results from field research and other news.

One of MAB's foremost goals is to disperse information gained from research as widely and timely as possible. With these updates—directly from the field—we venture down a new path to keep colleagues and other interested parties informed.

MAB Program Director, Francisco Dallmeier, presents the project scope, including upcoming research and training activities, to the research team and Shell management.

Photos by Carlton Ward Jr./MAB

Smithsonian Institution/ Monitoring and Assessment of Biodiversity Program (MAB)

FIELDNOTES - GABON

Field Newsletter—Issue 1

February 25, 2002—Special report from the Gamba Complex from the Smithsonian Institution, MAB Program.

With much enthusiasm 29 biodiversity researchers arrived in Gabon February 18. Lead scientists from the Smithsonian, and other parts of the United States, South Africa, France, and Belgium have joined their Gabonese counterparts for the biodiversity assessment of the Rabi section of the Gamba Complex. We have started work in this equatorial rainforest where very little biological work has been done!

Why are we here?

For more than 40 years, oil companies have been at work in Gabon's Gamba Complex. Located on the Atlantic coastal plain south of Port-Gentil, the Complex is the primary source of Gabon's hydrocarbon supplies.

Besides its productive oil reserves, the Complex is known for its biological potential and its international importance for conservation. The coastal plain's extensive lagoons, lakes, and open savanna give way to dense rainforest and watersheds further inland. This mosaic of tropical forest, aquatic systems, and savanna nurtures significant biological richness and important habitat for wide-ranging and migratory species.

The Gamba storehouse of biodiversity remains largely unexplored. Gaining scientific information on biodiversity is essential to devise better conservation and development strategies. In cooperation with Shell Gabon, and with a grant from the Shell Foundation, the Smithsonian MAB Program is conducting an assessment of biodiversity in the region together with Gabonese counterparts. The Program is also focused to increase the capacity of in-country participants.

The Gabon collaboration is modeled on a similar project in the Camisea region of Peru's Amazon. Both Shell and MAB realize the tremendous opportunity to apply the lessons they learned in Peru to other biologically-rich but understudied areas around the world.

Samples of biodiversity recorded at the beginning of the assessment at Rabi, Gabon.

What have we done to date?

Beginning in August 2000, MAB staff visited the Gamba Complex several times to consult extensively with stakeholders, including government officials and non-governmental organizations. We also consulted with numerous international experts and scientists at the Smithsonian who are familiar with the Gabon rainforest.

In November 2000, MAB and Shell Gabon convened a workshop in Gamba that brought together 35 participants representing 19 of the key agencies and organizations with an interest in the Complex. The results of the initial consultations, workshop, and follow-up meetings led to formation of the Gamba Complex Biodiversity Project. We will continue to meet with stakeholders and interested parties during all phases of the project.

Our objectives are to:

- Increase knowledge of biodiversity in the Gamba Complex through research, assessments, and monitoring.
- Promote links among stakeholders in Gabon, researchers, conservation scientists, and resource developers.
- Increase in-country research capacity through technical training in established biodiversity assessment and monitoring protocols.
- Disseminate the scientific information generated from the biodiversity assessments to a wide range of audiences.
- Advance the model of conservation and sustainable development through successful partnerships among local stakeholders, scientists, and industry.

We made many accomplishments over the past several months. We assembled the research team and established an office and laboratory in Gabon with fulltime personnel. We conducted initial fieldwork and training for birds, amphibians and reptiles, mammals and arthropods in the Gamba area, and we continue with a 1-year study on arthropods and training of para-taxonomists. Also, our health, safety, and environmental plan is fully in place.

We continue to actively pursue capacity building with Gabonese participants. These researchers will be an integral part of the work throughout the project and we hope they will take the lead in establishing and maintaining a long-term biodiversity monitoring program in the Gamba Complex and throughout Gabon.

Members of the Amphibian and Reptile team plan the fieldwork strategy. From left to right, Jean-Aimé Yoga, Marius Burger and Olivier Pauwels.

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Who are we?

The MAB Program is a part of the Smithsonian Conservation and Research Center, National Zoological Park. The mission is to conserve biological diversity by providing training and information for better management and decision-making. The aim is to promote *in-situ* conservation of biodiversity, which complements *ex-situ* conservation efforts.

The Gamba Complex Biodiversity Project is led by Francisco Dallmeier, MAB Program Director, Alfonso Alonso, Director for Conservation, Frédéric Njem, Project Manager, Michelle Lee, Scientific and Field Coordinator, and Carlton Ward, Photojournalist.

The scientific team for the Rabi assessment includes:

Vegetation Team

Team Leader: **Patrick Campbell**, Smithsonian Institution; **Henri Bourobou-Bourobou**, L'Herbier National du Gabon; **Thomas Nzabi**, L'Herbier National du Gabon; **Joseph Mayombo**, L'Herbier National du Gabon; **Deborah Bell**, Smithsonian Institution; **Steve Smith**, Smithsonian Institution; **Pedro Rivera**, research associate, Smithsonian Institution.

Mammal Team

Team Leader: **William McShea**, Smithsonian Institution; **Raphaël Ngangui**, Institut de Recherche en Agronomie Forestièr; **Sylvain Guimondou**, Direction de la Faune et de la Chasse; **Serge Mboumba**, Labo Vembo, Smithsonian Institution; **Melissa Songer**, Smithsonian Institution; **Major Boddicker**, research collaborator, Smithsonian Institution; **Calvin Porter**, research collaborator, Texas Tech University; **Federico Hoffman**, research collaborator, Texas Tech University.

Bird Team

Team Leader: **George Angher**, Smithsonian Institution; **Hervé Omva Onovo**, research collaborator; **Landry Tchignomba**, Labo Vembo, Smithsonian Institution; **Brian Schmidt**, Smithsonian Institution; **Patrice Christy**, research collaborator, Smithsonian Institution.

Amphibian and Reptile Team

Team Leader: **Marius Burger**, University of Cape Town; **Jean-Aimé Yoga**, Institut de Recherche en Agronomie Forestier; **Alain Pambo**, Direction de la Faune et de la Chasse; **Olivier Pauwels**, research collaborator, Smithsonian Institution.

We look forward to keeping you informed about this exciting project as work progresses.