

AFRICA

ECOSYSTEM AND RELIC CULTURAL LANDSCAPE
OF LOPE-OKANDA

GABON



WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION – IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

ECOSYSTEM AND RELIC CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF LOPÉ-OKANDA (GABON) – ID No. 1147 Rev

Background note: The IUCN Technical Evaluation of the Ecosystem and Relic Cultural Landscape of Lopé-Okanda, nominated by Gabon as a mixed property and cultural landscape in 2004, was presented to the 29th session of the World Heritage Committee (Durban, 2005). IUCN's evaluation noted that the property had the potential to meet natural criterion (ii) (now ix).

At its 29th session, the World Heritage Committee decided (Decision 29 COM 8B.17) to refer the nomination back to the State Party, on the basis of natural values, in order “to allow the State Party to provide an improved comparative analysis that demonstrates the outstanding universal value of the property, considering other protected areas in Gabon and the region, and in relation to detailed inventories of fauna and flora, as available.” At its 30th session, IUCN presented a second evaluation of this property, based on an updated nomination submitted on 30 January 2006, reaffirming the potential of the property to meet criterion (ix) but noting that the case was not fully supported by the comparative analysis included in the updated nomination. The Committee decided (Decision 30 COM 8B.29) to refer the nomination back to the State Party in order to allow the State Party to provide a comprehensive global comparative analysis that demonstrates the outstanding universal value of the property and to address the need for increased management capacity. After the 30th session of the Committee, IUCN and the World Heritage Centre provided additional technical guidance to the State Party on how to enhance the comparative analysis of the nomination.

1. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The State Party submitted on 31 January 2007 a new revised nomination including a comprehensive global comparative analysis supported by detailed inventories of flora and fauna. Additional information was also provided on efforts to increase the management capacity at the property to ensure the effective implementation of the management plan.

2. EVALUATION OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The new revised nomination contains a comprehensive comparative analysis of the nominated property with other protected areas in Gabon as well as with comparable World Heritage properties in the region and worldwide. This analysis is supported by detailed inventories of flora and fauna. IUCN's evaluation of the new revised nomination in relation to Decision 30 COM 8B.29 of the Committee is as follows:

The new revised nomination convincingly demonstrates the case for the outstanding universal value of the nominated property. Key arguments to highlight are:

a) The dynamic environmental and ecological processes that have led to the co-existence of forest and savannah ecosystems in the nominated property are outstanding and ongoing. Similar processes have occurred in other areas of the Congo Basin, the Amazon Basin and forest areas of East Asia, but in these areas rainforest has re-colonized almost all the space previously occupied by savannah after the Pleistocene, resulting in dense forest ecosystems. However, due to the relatively dry conditions prevailing in the area where the nominated property is located, the rainforest could not re-colonize all the space occupied by savannah; thus resulting in an unusual

interface between dense and well conserved tropical rainforest and relict savannah environments, and a very important manifestation of evolutionary processes in terms of species and habitat adaptation to post-glacial climatic changes.

b) The diversity of habitats present in the nominated property is the result of natural processes and also the long-term interaction between man and nature. The property contains 6 types of savannahs and 17 types of forests in a relatively small area; adding to its uniqueness.

c) The diversity of habitats and the complex relationship between forest and savannah ecosystems have favourably influenced species richness and abundance; notably the large populations of gorillas and elephants. However, the influence of the habitat diversity has been even more important for the speciation of the flora. While a vast area of the nominated property is still to be surveyed and researched, over 1,550 plant species have been recorded to date. In the last 20 years over 40 plant species have been described, all of them never recorded before in Gabon. Based on the results of ongoing floristic surveys and research it is anticipated that the number of plant species recorded for the nominated property could reach 3,000 – 3,500, making the nominated property one of the most outstanding areas in relation to floristic

diversity and complexity in the Congo Rainforest Biogeographic Region.

In relation to the conditions of integrity the following points need to be highlighted:

- a) The detailed long-term management plan (2006-2010) and zoning for the property have been finalized and adopted in August 2006. The plan has been agreed between many partners: *le Conseil National des Parcs Nationaux* (CNPN), the Ministry of Economic Forestry, Ministry of Culture, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Zoological Society of London (ZSL), the EU, US Forest Service, *le Réseau des Aires Protégées d'Afrique Centrale* (RAPAC) and others. Amongst the objectives of the plan are the conservation, inventory and monitoring of the unique mosaic of habitats with their key species; multidisciplinary research synthesising biological and socio-economic knowledge about the property; resolving conflicts from competing interests; raising awareness amongst local people on the importance of conserving this property and to involve them in its management; and developing innovative ecotourism. The basic zones are the central core zone, i.e. the existing Lopé National Park, and its extended 5 km-wide buffer zone which includes the historic complexes. These have been further divided into zones for Special Protection, Tourism and Sport Fishing, Sacred Places, Light Infrastructure, Heavy Infrastructure (for future park-related development), Research, and Natural and Cultural Sanctuaries. IUCN believes that the plan is comprehensive and will provide an excellent guide to the protection and management of the natural values and resources contained in the nominated property.
- b) At the end of 2006, the number of permanent rangers working in the park was increased from 6 to 9, which adds to the 55 rangers from WCS and ZSL working in the Park. The State Party has also created a station in Iboundji that is in charge of controlling the southern sector of the park. In addition, training activities have been implemented in 2006 to enhance the capacity of the park's staff to better understand the interactions between the existing natural and cultural values, thus enabling them to enhance their performance and effectiveness in relation to conservation and environmental education activities with local communities.
- c) A new national Law on National Parks is expected to be approved during 2007. This law will create a National Parks Agency and foresees increasing the number of permanent staff working in national parks, including in the nominated property. This law has provisions to ensure better coordination between the field staff working for the institutions dealing with forest conservation, water resources and the local police (which will be involved in controlling and patrolling activities in the park), and will provide additional human and institutional resources to the protection and management of the nominated property.

In conclusion, IUCN considers that the new revised nomination convincingly demonstrates the case for the outstanding universal value of the nominated property and meets the conditions of integrity as required under the Operational Guidelines.

In addition, IUCN would like to congratulate the State Party for its commitment in promoting this nomination and providing an excellent and comprehensive global comparative analysis as requested under the Operational Guidelines.

3. APPLICATION OF CRITERIA / STATEMENT OF OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE

The property has been nominated as a mixed property and a cultural landscape. Its natural values are proposed for inscription on the basis of criteria (ix) and (x). IUCN considers that the nominated property meets these criteria and proposes the following Statement of Outstanding Universal Value:

The Ecosystem and Relic Cultural Landscape of Lopé-Okanda represents an unusual interface between dense and well conserved tropical rainforest and relict savannah environments. A greater number of threatened species of large mammals find their last refuge in Lopé-Okanda than in any other comparable rainforest area in the Congo Rainforest Biogeographical Province. The property also preserves a record of biological evolution over the last 15,000 years of the still extant rainforest-savannah transition zone.

Criterion (ix): Ecological and biological processes

The nominated property demonstrates an unusual interface between forest and savannah environments, and a very important manifestation of evolutionary processes in terms of species and habitat adaptation to post-glacial climatic changes. The diversity of species and habitats present are the result of natural processes and also the long-term interaction between man and nature.

Criterion (x): Biodiversity and threatened species

The diversity of habitats and the complex relationship between forest and savannah ecosystems have contributed to a high biological diversity particularly in relation to the property's flora, making it one of the most outstanding areas in relation to floristic diversity and complexity in the Congo Rainforest Biogeographical Province. Over 1,550 plant species have been recorded, including 40 never recorded before in Gabon, and it is anticipated that once all the floristic surveys and research are completed the number of plant species could reach over 3,000.

Conditions of Integrity, Protection and Management

The property is of sufficient size to maintain the long-term ecological viability of its habitats and ecosystems. The conservation and management of the property is guided by a management plan for the period 2006-2011 which is supported by international cooperation, particularly through a number of international and national NGOs.

Conservation and management of the property also benefits from a number of transboundary cooperation initiatives. Key management issues include the need to resolve conflicts from competing interests, and to raise awareness amongst local people on the importance of conserving this property and to involve them in its management. Control and regulation of commercial poaching is of priority as well as the need to fully enforce regulations banning commercial logging within the property. Additional financial, logistical and human resources need to be obtained to ensure the effective management of the property and its buffer zone.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

IUCN recommends that the World Heritage Committee **inscribes** the Ecosystem and Relic Cultural Landscape of Lopé-Okanda, Gabon, on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria (ix) and (x).

IUCN recommends that the World Heritage Committee congratulates the State Party on its efforts to secure international support for the management of Lopé National Park and commends the support provided by the EU, through the ECOFAC programme, and NGOs, in particular the Wildlife Conservation Society.

IUCN also recommends that the World Heritage Committee requests the State Party to inform the World Heritage Centre and IUCN on the approval of the new proposed Law on National Parks and on measures taken towards its enforcement in order to enhance the effective long-term conservation and management of the property.

Map 1: Boundaries of nominated property

