

The University of Oklahoma

**Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Abusive Eco-Guards in the Congo
Basin: Why Conservation Should Go Local**



**Cricket Emi Kaya
HON 3993 Africa and the Urge to Help**

**Dr. Andreana Prichard
14 May 2021**

Website Tagline

Critical investigations of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) reveal the horrors inflicted on the people of the Congo Basin– all in the name of conserving nature.

Abstract

Promoted by A-list celebrities like Greta Thunberg, Jack Black, and Leonardo DiCaprio, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has established itself as one of the most popular climate and conservation organizations in the western world. Based in Switzerland, their panda logo sponsors projects across all seven continents. Yet through the celebrity smokescreen, WWF is responsible for the suffering and torment of indigenous groups that “interfere” with their conservation efforts. In August of 2018, the UN Development Programme received allegations of violence, intimidation, and regional restriction by “Eco-Guards” imposed upon the Baka people of the Congo Basin Rainforest. Later, the UNDP verified that the Baka, who are most familiar with the local biodiversity and who rely heavily on the forest to support their lifestyle, were harassed and beaten by WWF-sponsored guards in an attempt to turn the Messok Dja region into a protected national park without substantial indigenous consultation or participation. For a globally renowned organization, this history casts a shadow on their hopes to “build a future in which people live in harmony with nature.” To fully understand this plight, this article will do three things: first, it will **contextualize** the region, the complexities of the Baka people and their lifestyle, and the misguided assumptions that allowed the project’s lack of human rights compliance; second, it will **explore** the intentions and past attempts to enclose the region; third, it will **propose** critical alternatives and explain the path towards ethical redemption.

Introduction

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is a Switzerland-based environmental conservation organization, responsible for thousands of projects all over the world. For over 50 years, they are known for international advocacy on behalf of endangered wildlife in hundreds of countries. Many Americans would recognize their television advertisements featuring sentimental music and high-definition footage of dolphins, chimpanzees, and elephants, contrasted with more difficult visuals of poverty and animal abuse. One of their most popular initiatives is the adopt-an-animal program, where donors can send money to “adopt” an endangered animal in return for a fleece blanket with the panda logo or a pair of whale socks. These funds are distributed across WWF’s many global projects.

The WWF is also endorsed by highly recognizable celebrities, such as Jack Black. In an advertisement campaign for the popular kids’ movie, *Kung Fu Panda*, the celebrity boosts the organization, asking for donations so that the WWF can help protect bamboo forests from

destruction (Kung Fu Panda 3). On their website, they claim that they “work globally, with every sector, at every level”(“Our Work”). The WWF asserts that they partner with experts, businesses, governments, academics, and civil society, to ensure that their advocacy is centered around people.

However, when tasked with advocacy work in Africa and other regions of the Global South, the World Wide Fund for Nature has not always delivered on its commitment to protecting people as much as it values nature. Where there is less institutional support for conservation, the WWF’s approach simplifies the complex exchange of issues that lead to biodiversity degradation and human rights abuses. The focus of this paper is the case of the Indigenous Baka people of the Congo Basin in Northern Africa, where the WWF’s strategy of fortress conservation is reminiscent of colonial paternalistic attempts to “develop” the region without the consent of local activists. They consistently overstep the lifelong commitment of indigenous conservation efforts by funding projects that fail to confront the Illegal Wildlife Trade as a complex issue. Instead, the WWF breaks international compliance treaties and makes assumptions. They enforce restrictions on innocent people who rely on the forest for survival, rather than asking for their guidance. The organization’s failure to acknowledge a long history of colonial exploitation shadows their urge to help the “development” and preservation of the region. Their infantilized perception of the Baka is failing their efforts to reduce wildlife execution.

Part 1: The TRIDOM II Project

One of the largest projects currently sponsored by the WWF is in the Congo Basin of Central Africa. Known as the Tri-national Dja Odzala Minkebe II (TRIDOM II), which is the second iteration of a Protected Area (PA) that crosses three national borders: Cameroon, The

Republic of the Congo, and Gabon. According to the WWF website, the bordered area is 97% forested and is home to many large mammals, including elephants, gorillas, and chimpanzees. Most importantly, the forest is the ancestral territory of the Baka people, who use the land as a hunting ground and are longtime ecosystem engineers—they have been maintaining habitats and acting as conservationists as a part of their identity for thousands of years (Pemunta 1038).

The WWF asserts they have worked from field bases in all three countries since 1993 and are trying to create three different national parks in the region in hopes of combatting poaching and promoting sustainable development. They state that the TRIDOM region is their priority in the Congo Basin (“TRIDOM”). Originally, the project was forged through partnerships with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

With the financial support of the UNDP/GEF, the WWF is paid to enact conservation efforts, where the core activity is to establish the national park known as the Messok Dja Wildlife Corridor (Case No. SECU0009, 6). For the Messok Dja, the Government of the Republic of the Congo is an implementing partner, while many of the activities that are seen and heard on the ground are the responsibility of the WWF who also provides funding (Case No. SECU0009 16). According to the project document, TRIDOM II hopes to “protect biodiversity by combatting the illegal wildlife trade, especially of bushmeat and ivory.” Finally, the original project document claimed that it would provide benefits to the local communities, with emphasis on the Indigenous Baka people, even though they continued to refer to the people by the colonial name of “indigene” and referred to policy changes as “Cameroonian Law” even though the project primarily exists in the Republic of Congo (Case No. SECU0009 18). The project planned to create opportunities for conservation and growth by expanding Protected Areas, strengthening governance, and confronting the Illegal Wildlife Trade (A.K.A poaching) through “community-

based resource management systems” (Case No. SECU0009 12). WWF assumed the creation of socio-economic development through means of restoring tenure rights in the Protected Areas so that the Baka can use resources for cultural purposes (Case No. SECU0009 8).

The WWF had high hopes for TRIDOM, but to anticipate what is to come, none of these promises were fulfilled. As a region that endures poverty, civil war, and conflict, the Congo Basin is a hot topic for dialogues surrounding “development.” Many countries in the region are creating economic plans to catch up with the global market. However, many of these plans include extractive initiatives with invasive infrastructural projects. As the government seeks income-generating sources, this leaves the rainforests vulnerable to development (Phyala 50). The TRIDOM project is a part of this narrative. By trying to establish a national park, the WWF ended up creating a hostile environment that caused further human rights abuses, private exploitation of the land, and a rise in poaching numbers.

Part 2: Human Rights Complaints

On August 2nd of 2018, nearly one year after the initiation of TRIDOM in 2017, the UNDP Social and Environmental Compliance Unit received complaints from six Baka communities living in the northern forest region (Case No. SECU0009 6). The Baka community is associated with three larger ethnic groups of Cameroon and the Congo Basin: the Baka, the Bakola or Bagyeli, and the Bedzan. As a total, their population is estimated at 30,000 people across the region (Vitalis 1038). The complaint is a later iteration of advocacy on behalf of the non-governmental organization Survival International. In 2016, the NGO pursued a response from WWF under the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) but withdrew their complaint in 2017 after the WWF claimed that their allegations were not proven (Corry 1). Of this complaint, there were two core issues raised by the Baka community.

First, Survival International accuses the WWF of failing to fulfill free prior and informed consent (FPIC) of Baka before restricting the Protected Area. The United Nations highly regards this integral human rights process, which is outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). FPIC formally recognizes indigenous peoples as an essential contributing party by requiring their consent. This consent must be free from coercion, sought in advance of any encroaching developments, informed through transparent communication, and made collectively by the Indigenous party (FAO 1). Survival International claims that this process was ignored entirely throughout the inception of TRIDOM II (Survival International 4).



Image Courtesy of Corinne Stanley via Flickr, Creative Commons (Staley)

Second, the document says that law enforcement officials and eco-guards supported by the WWF are abusing the local people in a variety of frightening ways. The eco-guards are harming members of the Baka community in the name of strict conservation, where reports of torture, beatings, hospitalizations, burning down communities, kidnapping, incarceration, and raids, are all clearly outlined in the complaint (Survival International 60). Physical abuse is not the only symptom of this behavior. When the WWF criminalizes the Baka community from entering their land, they are unable to access the resources essential for subsistence living. Survival International claims that eco-guards, tasked with keeping out poachers, see the Baka as easy targets and that this could be a reason for such abuse (Survival International 4). Violations are well-documented through pages of personal testimony and interviews with the community.

Dialogue surrounding the survival of the Baka community precedes this complaint. Additional videos surfaced online, giving the Baka a platform to express their plight. One video, originally created by the Baka, was shared on a channel titled Bakabeyond in 2013. They claim that the WWF made them remove the original video, but that they were able to repost it. In the video, a man is walking down a dirt road displaying their village. He enters the forest for a fishing hunt and communicates the importance of the forest for their survival. Speaking in Baka, the translation reads,

I will talk about the problem of our forest that the WWF confiscated. In the past our parents laid traps in the forest, they killed game and ate without threats from the WWF. We never knew of the WWF and now it disturbs us. They deny us the forest and how we live. We are dying of starvation– us and our children. We survive by digging yams, this helps a lot. But now that we are banned it hurts us a lot. Now when we enter the forest the WWF chases us, and when the WWF catches you they beat you (“The Baka”).

He calls out the WWF directly as “dobudobu,” referring to the first two letters of the acronym.

The video continues with demonstrations of how they use the forest for subsistence. They show a trap that is used for hunting, and the man claims that they do not have guns. He mentions the

need for food in addition to advanced pharmacopeia methods. About halfway through the video, the men reenact what it is like to be arrested by a WWF guard. The man with his hands tied screams out, “They have killed us because of our forest, this is ours! We suffer because of our forest, mercy mercy...always they hit us because of our forest. (“The Baka”).” The video clearly portrays their urgent need for the forest, and their distaste for the WWF and their eco-guards.

Survival International also released several videos featuring interviewed Baka, one in 2019, including a variety of clips where they directly address the letters that WWF sent to Survival International. All interviewees deny any direct involvement between the park and their informed consent for development. “We refuse the park, we can't stand it.” says one man (“Baka People”). News sources picked up the story, with Buzzfeed releasing a scathing investigation in 2019, showing that not much has changed since the initial complaint by Survival International released in 2016. The report goes beyond the Congo Basin with evidence of eco-guard abuse in Nepal, where forest rangers killed a man after they accused him of burying a rhinoceros horn in his backyard (Warren and Baker). It is clear through these testimonies the WWF has a lot of explaining to do.

Part 3: UNDP Response

After abandoning the complaint with the OECD, Survival International sent another formal complaint to the UNDP Social and Environmental Compliance Unit. With the UNDP having an integral financial role in the project from the beginning, the Unit launched a formal investigation into the issue. They initiated a field mission to the region in early 2019 to assess the TRIDOM II compliance with human rights agreements, with special attention towards the WWF and their involvement in physical harm against the Baka. As a result of this investigation, there were three main findings that all verify the accusations made by Survival International.

First, it made clear the relationship between the eco-guards and the WWF. The report claims that these guards are employed by the Government Ministry of Forest Economy, Sustainable Development and Environment (MEFDDE) but that this project on the ground is known as the Espace TRIDOM Interzone Congo- World Wide Fund for Nature (ETIC-WWF), or simply referred to as WWF. The Baka see the Messok Dja National Park as a sole project of the WWF because the panda logo is stamped on to every vehicle and uniform of the eco-guards (Case No. SECU0009 22). As a symptom of this perception, the Baka pin WWF as the primary guilty party behind a swath of complaints. However, these uniforms and paramilitary training were all financed by the UNDP and WWF.

Next, the report finds that a required Social and Environmental Screening Procedure outlined by compliance failed to see the riskiness of the project, and so no social and environmental standards were implemented at all. Instead, the WWF simply assumed that the project would provide "social-economic benefits to indigenous peoples." In addition, as claimed by Survival International, the Free Prior and Informed Consent process was not followed whatsoever, and SECU verified that there were no meetings with the Baka to gain their consent (Case No. SECU0009 8).

Finally, the document reports that there was no assessment of the private sector's heavy involvement in the project. There is evidence to support that the WWF partnered with some of the largest, most influential logging companies in the Congo Basin (Phyala 53). Specifically, the project document did not consider the role of logging concessions and the expansion of monocultures such as palm oil, which open up the forest for further poaching, to begin with. This ironic partnership is outlined in the TRIDOM II project document, where they were unable to

follow the UNDP's policy of due diligence towards the private sector that would have identified the riskiness of their involvement (Case No. SECU0009 9).

Through these findings, the UNDP clearly defines the most apparent violations of human rights agreements. Their investigation verified years of accusations of abuse through a much-needed institutional perspective. In an attempt to provide recommendations, the investigation suggests that the project take a more community-based approach, where the WWF and other implementors must follow the guidance of the Baka and assess the poaching problem outside of easy-to-identify local actors. However, further literature provides evidence that imposed conservation efforts rarely succeed in stopping poaching and the Illegal Wildlife Trade.

Part 4: The Baka Community and Conservation

At the center of their cultural practice is a hunting expedition, that serves as a rite of passage towards adulthood (Vitalis 1039). Despite their rich history and personal identification with the land, the Baka community is uprooted by exclusionary development schemes, such as national parks, that make room for tourists and outside actors (Vitalis 1037). They are also under an oppressive relationship with the local Bantu farmers, who take advantage of their labor and force them to work under slave-like conditions (Case No. SECU0009 13). In his own investigation, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples said that the Baka community suffers “extreme social and economic disadvantages, discrimination, and marginalization when compared to the rest of society (Case No. SECU0009 14).” Without understanding the complex relationship that the Baka community has with the land and existing communities, outside actors are quick to assume that their influence on nature can only be negative and their presence must be a cause for poaching. Through this lens of thinking, extreme restrictions are justified, which leads to human rights abuses and heightened geopolitical conflict.

Why is their presence so infantilized? The Baka community is often perceived to be static and left out of modernity. They are romanticized as protectors of the environment, living in an idyllic state of being one with nature. Their survival is threatened by several external threats, including timber exploitation, farmland expansion, commercial hunting, eco-guards, economic downturn, and the effects of imposed structural adjustment programs (Vitalis 1039). Yet, this perception of antiquity only exists because their methods of domestication and habitat engineering differ from the visual destruction and mass land-modification that the West perceives as “development.” What the WWF fails to realize, is that the disruptiveness of humans in nature varies (Vitalis 1038). Studying the intentional conservation adaptations of the Baka reveals this contrast, because there is no evidence that their presence in the forest is causing the extinctions the WWF is violently trying to prevent.

Part 5: Fortress Conservation as Colonial Oppression

In their assessment of the social contracts surrounding anti-poaching in the neighboring Garamba National Park, Kristof Titeca et. al. argue that the “national park” is an imaginary of colonial development, made to enforce highly unequal power structures. It is a way of establishing spatial authority through coercion, but through the hopeful lens of conservation for nature (Titeca et al. 2). Linking to the methods of colonial empires, such as those strategies used by the Belgian colonial government to claim territory in the Congo, the authors state that, Colonial empires often created protected areas to impose territorial control over frontier spaces in order to assert sovereignty and regulate the extraction and trade of environmental resources (Titeca et al. 3).

By enforcing fortress conservation and creating exclusionary barriers, the WWF is continuing an oppressive colonial practice that criminalizes the Baka and forges an environment for conflict (Vitalis 1042). In Cameroon specifically, the land tenure system was shaped by three colonial influences; the German, French, and British all interjected their norms and transformed

the area's land policy into communal land tenure, ripe for capitalist accumulation by dispossessing local people. This western idea of "vacant" land makes available clearly occupied areas for external development and market-based business operations (Vitalis 1040).

Fortress conservation in the Congo Basin is modeled after American national parks, where indigenous people were displaced to make room for visitors to see "unspoiled environments" (Vitalis 10470). They hoped to expand access to this land to not only preserve the natural forest, but also to allow for income from eco-tourism. Yet, under market capitalism, we are often too quick to disassociate our place among nature. Without the presence of widespread development projects, humans can find our symbiotic relationship among natural ecology, just as the Baka have lived for a millennium. In breaking down this Western perception, the ideals of conservation promoted by WWF are a reactionary response to the horrors of capital accumulation. In this case, the Baka are not the perpetrators of such harm, and conservation dialogue must be shifted to include their participation and livelihoods in the forest ecology.

Conclusion: Towards Sustainable Conservation

The Rainforest Foundation released numerous studies into the ways that strict fortress conservation leads to an increased failure to protect biodiversity. In contrast with the narrative put forth by WWF, studies show that Protected Areas are consistently less effective in conservation than community management efforts (Phyala 47). In fact, research proves that poaching is actually increasing in established national parks in the Congo Basin since the implementation of TRIDOM II (Phyala 48). The Illegal Wildlife Trade is a complex issue, beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is evidence to suggest that this problem is bolstered by the presence of international industry (such as logging and palm oil) and civil unrest. Logging, mining, and oil exploitation all incentivize the construction of roads that

intersect the forest and create easier gateways for poachers (Phyala 50). Further research by the Rainforest Foundation shows that evictions ended up helping rebel groups occupy the land, and civil wars contribute to poaching activities. (Phyala 49).



Image Courtesy of Janhamlet via Flickr, Creative Commons (Janhamlet)

Therefore, if the fortress conservation is not working to reach the goals of the WWF, the UNDP, or the local governments, what is next? It is, after all, important to conserve the natural flora and fauna of the region. The rainforest is the second-largest tropical rainforest, with trees storing 39 billion tons of carbon in their trunks to offset climate change (Butler). Large fauna, such as chimpanzees, elephants, and gorillas face the very real threat of extinction (Phyala 49)

The answer lies in the FPIC and absolute leadership of the Baka. In a study conducted by the World Bank on the role of Indigenous peoples in biodiversity conservation, they make the strong claim that indigenous territories conserve their lands better than any adjacent land

controlled by external powers (Sobrevila xii). Other studies have taken place across Latin America, where Community Managed Forests (CMF) were consistently more effective in reducing deforestation than Protected Areas (Porter-Bolland et al.14). It is already a common practice for the Baka to practice regenerative efforts to conserve the environment. One example is their process of yam gathering, where as soon as they harvest a yam, they plant another one in the same spot so that there will be more the next season (Vitalis 1045). Additionally, Indigenous peoples are the most at risk of the approaching disaster of climate change. They have an ancestral breadth of knowledge surrounding landscape design to help protect against climate change, as well as an integrated knowledge of how to develop genetic varieties of plants to withstand temperature changes over time (Sobrevila xii).

With the structure of TRIDOM II and the history of imposed advocacy, the WWF must enable the Baka to continue their community management processes. To address poaching, the WWF must extend their understanding of the problem beyond local blame and work to target the right perpetrators, including the prohibition of harmful private investors. To quote Tristeca et al. once more, “the ways in which protected areas are governed should be seen as the result of a historical process... rather than something which is uniformly and uniquely shaped by one particular actor aiming to enclose a particular area” (Tristeca et al. 78). Actors must surrender their urge to help away from paternalistic ideals rooted in colonial methods of change if they want to realistically save the rainforest and liberate the Baka people.

Bibliography

“Baka People in Congo Call out WWF for Telling Tales.” Survival International, 13 June 2019,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqp9lFWC0Cs.

Butler, Rhett A. “The Congo Rainforest.” *Mongabay*, Mongabay, 9 Feb. 2020,
rainforests.mongabay.com/congo/.

Case No. SECU0009- Final Investigation Report Investigating Allegations of Non-Compliance with UNDP Social and Environmental Commitments Related to the Integrated and Transboundary Conservation of Biodiversity in the Basins of the Republic of the Congo, TRIDOM II. United Nations Development Programme - OAI, Social and Environmental Compliance Unit, 4 June 2020.

Corry, Stephen. “Survival International Abandons Complaint against WWF for 'Violating Indigenous Rights'.” *The Ecologist*, The Ecologist, 17 Nov. 2017,
theecologist.org/2017/sep/05/survival-international-abandons-complaint-against-wwf-violating-indigenous-rights.

FAO. *Free, Prior and Informed Consent | Indigenous Peoples | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, <http://www.fao.org/indigenous-peoples/our-pillars/fpic/en/>.

Janhamlet. “Loango 19 - Elephant Family 2.” *Flickr*, Yahoo!, 15 Aug. 2014,
www.flickr.com/photos/janhamlet1/14739269878/in/photolist-ossBqJ-oJFhvF-oJ6VPv-oG57Dy-oJX6MD-fP43id-m325Wc-orBGMT-osskte-ossRsa-oHQegH-orBh1R-orBgBK-6mJw4C.

Kung Fu Panda 3. *Join WWF and Jack Black in Protecting Wild Pandas and Their Habitat.*

Dreamworks Animation LLC, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrnpA67jlFQ>

“Our Work | Conserving Natural Resources | WWF.” *World Wildlife Fund*,

<https://www.worldwildlife.org/initiatives>.

Pemunta, Ngambouk Vitalis. "Fortress Conservation, Wildlife Legislation and the Baka Pygmies of Southeast Cameroon." *GeoJournal* 84, no. 4 (2019): 1035.

Porter-Bolland, Luciana, et al. “Community Managed Forests and Forest Protected Areas: An Assessment of Their Conservation Effectiveness across the Tropics.” *Forest Ecology and Management*, vol. 268, 2012, pp. 6–17.

Pyhala, Aili, et al. Protected Areas in the Congo Basin: Failing Both People and Biodiversity? Rainforest Foundation UK, Apr. 2016.

Sobrevila, Claudia. The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity Conservation: The Natural but Often Forgotten Partners. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, May 2008.

Staley, Corinne. “Baka Pygmies.” *Flickr*, Yahoo!, 8 Jan. 2010, www.flickr.com/photos/corinnestaley/4256474072.

Survival International. *Survival International Charitable Trust v The World Wide Fund for Nature*. Survival International, 10 Feb. 2016, <https://assets.survivalinternational.org/documents/1527/survival-international-v-wwf-oecd-specific-instance.pdf>.

Titeca, Kristof, et al. “Conservation as a Social Contract in a Violent Frontier: The Case of (Anti-) Poaching in Garamba National Park, Eastern DR Congo.” *Political Geography*,

vol. 78, 2020, p. 102116.

“The Baka - Hunters or Poachers? - The Film WWF Doesn’t Want You to See”., Bakabeyond,
14 Jan. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=22O1b9xe2Rk.

TRIDOM: Tri-National Dja-Odzala-Minkébé | WWF. World Wide Fund for Nature, 2020,
[https://www.wwf-
congobasin.org/where_we_work/tridom_tri_national_dja_odzala_minkebe/](https://www.wwf-congobasin.org/where_we_work/tridom_tri_national_dja_odzala_minkebe/).

Warren, Tom, and Katie J. M. Baker. “WWF Funds Guards Who Have Tortured And Killed
People.” BuzzFeed News, 4 Mar. 2019,
[https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tomwarren/wwf-world-wide-fund-nature-parks-
torture-death](https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tomwarren/wwf-world-wide-fund-nature-parks-torture-death).