

*The paradigm of conservation in Central Africa is failing:  
an analysis of the current situation*

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**The current situation**

Wildlife populations are collapsing inside and outside protected areas throughout Central Africa with a significant decline in large mammal populations in savannah and forest habitats (Albrechtsen et al., 2007; Abernethy et al., 2013; Cronin et al., 2016). Top predators are disappearing even from national parks, which are supposed to receive the highest levels of protection (Bauer et al., 2003; Aebischer et al., 2020). Some years ago, countries like Cameroon in Central Africa lost their last cheetahs and likely last African wild dogs (Hance, 2010; De Longh, 2011). The future of other large carnivores is hanging in the balance, and the area could soon be saying goodbye to the lion, a symbol of strength and power, and the symbol of sports teams in Cameroon, including the national soccer team (Bauer et al., 2015). Similarly, forest primates, our closest relatives in the animal world, also face a looming risk, with over 50% of primate species threatened with extinction (Sesink et al., 2015; Cronin et al., 2016). Populations of Cross River gorillas, drills and Preuss's red colobus monkeys, some of Africa's most endangered primate species that are found primarily in this area, have declined significantly over the last decade (Cronin, 2013). African forest elephants have undergone dramatic declines of up to 90%, and some populations are locally extinct (Maisels et al., 2013). These declines are not limited to large mammals but have also been reported for several bird species (Whytock et al., 2014).

## The way forward

A group of conservation scientists, including faculty members from respected universities in the Central African subregion and abroad, representatives of protected areas management units, law enforcement organisations (LAGA), rangers, and international organisations (TRAFFIC, WWF) met in Yaoundé, Cameroon in October 2019 to assess the current status of conservation in the area and discuss ways forward to solve what is considered to be a conservation crisis. Based on their combined experience, which encompassed both the social and the ecological sciences, and the data presented, it was clear that in many ways conservation in the Central African subregion is failing. Data presented revealed that there isn't currently a single area of forest that is untouched by poaching with cable snares or guns, or other forms of habitat degradation. This does not only imperil ecological integrity but is also a threat to the wellbeing of the Central African population through the disruption and loss of environmental services. Conservation is not a luxury. Wildlife and nature play an essential role in the livelihoods, cultures, and religions of local people living in rural areas. The current conservation crisis could lead to a food security crisis among vulnerable communities, including indigenous people. Local cultures and religions have formed complex relations with nature and wildlife. Thus, the loss of the Central Africa natural heritage would in turn severely affect its rich cultural heritage. The area will also lose an important potential source of foreign income through ecotourism.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the current crisis will not be solved unless there is political will and investment at multiple levels: legal, financial, educational, and social. *This is a call for a commitment to developing national legal frameworks based on scientific evidence, revising outdated laws, and speeding up legal processes for reviewing laws and legal procedures for conservation, and to change the current paradigm of conservation as a whole.* For example, protected species catalogues must be updated to be in line with current scientific evidence. Science must also inform the design of conservation projects, decisions, and actions. We propose that the social, economic, and ecological outputs and impacts of conservation initiatives must be rigorously monitored and evaluated by an external body, and standardised monitoring and evaluation protocols must be developed and implemented within an adaptive management cycle. Such monitoring and scientific evidence could help using the limited resources available for conservation more wisely, but we also need strong prioritisation of the available resources to prevent critically endangered species from extinction.

Equally important will be to professionalise, diversify, and support protected area management. Protected areas are one of the cornerstones for conservation but currently those in the area suffer from inadequate infrastructure and equipment, unmotivated personnel and poor management, as well as a general lack of support from surrounding human populations who have been previously excluded from conservation processes. For this, all protected areas must have ratified management plans that are achievable. Local communities must be consulted and involved not only in developing such plans but also in their implementation. Currently, managers often find themselves trying to solve problems at the programmatic level, rather than focusing on small level changes suggested by local community members and supported by interested organisations. Management plans must be developed considering the site-specific characteristics rather than trying to follow globally implemented models. Consequently, novel methods and approaches to management must be explored and tested out. Management can become adaptive by including regular and independent monitoring to inform and adjust management actions. This will not only help improve the success of protected area management and resource management but will also ensure its accountability and transparency. It is important to add that protected area management must be led by people with the required technical proficiency paired with government staff. This should also include innovative approaches to protected area management including delegated management models under public-private partnerships. There is already good local expertise that can be used. However, training in conservation science must continue being supported and improved. This call is also for curricula development of conservation science at the local academic institutions, with the inclusion of field courses and fostering interdisciplinary training for diverse students. Finally, a recommendation for the establishment of a Wildlife Research Institute in Central Africa is necessary to support this and all the above-proposed measures to improve conservation in the area. Such an institution could become a hub of research, education, management and policy-development for conservation and be the seat of an independent body in charge of monitoring conservation initiatives in the area.

Governments and other relevant stakeholders in Central Africa are urged to draw attention to this crisis and jointly develop and commit to practical solutions that can help the nature and the people of the area.

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