



Closing report Research Project

**Challenges of Biodiversity conservation in rural areas : Experience of the
Ecological Corridor of the Kahuzi Bièga National Park in DRC**



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It should be noted that the contents of this report are not binding on CoalitionWILD or MKAAJI MPYA asbl. The views expressed in this report therefore do not necessarily reflect those of the two organisations that who supported the study

I. Introduction

This report presents the activities carried out within the framework of the research project on the challenges of biodiversity conservation in rural areas: Experience of the Ecological Corridor of the Kahuzi Bièga National Park in the DRC and the use of the funds from which this project benefited.

This project has been accompanied since the beginning of the CoalitionWILD EXCEerator Programme Cohort 2021 and EXL-I 2022 and it is in this framework that this project has benefited from the grant for its implementation.

Thus, in the following pages, we present the different activities that were carried out within the framework of this study in the three groups of the Nindja Chiefdom bordering the ecological corridor of the Kahuzi Bièga National Park in the DRC. In addition to the description of the activities carried out and the allocation of funds, this report also contains a section on the difficulties or constraints encountered during the actual field research phase, which was dominated by the holding and organisation of focus groups, individual interviews and observation visits in the ecological corridor of the Kahuzi National Park.

This was done in order to get a feel for the reality and threats in this part of the park and to be able to propose sustainable solutions through the publication of a scientific study carried out at the grassroots level with the communities (riparian populations), customary and local authorities, park authorities, hunters, diggers and some former members of armed groups. These are the categories of people who took part in the individual interviews and focus groups.

It should be noted that after this research phase in the field, the study was written up and finally published for the benefit of the public and all those who are involved in conservation, including those of the Kahuzi Biega National Park.

II. Activities carried out within the framework of the project.

The villages of Luhogo, Irhegabarhonyi and Ihemebe in the Nidnja Chiefdom bordering the ecological corridor of the Kahuzi Bièga National Park in the DRC were the targets of the project and all activities related to this study were carried out there.

As a reminder, this project was conceived in a very worrying context in view of the anthropic threats that weigh on the Kahuzi National Park Ecological Corridor in the DRC and that put all conservation efforts at risk. The Nindja Chiefdom is one of the chiefdoms in the Kabare Territory in South Kivu Province (DRC), and part of the Park extends into it. This part of the Park which culminates in the Nindja chiefdom is called the ecological corridor of the Kahuzi Bièga National Park (KBNP). In this chiefdom, including the ecological corridor of the park, illegal hunting has become a frequent activity and one of the major threats. The park authorities and other actors involved in the conservation and protection of the park are not yet able to put an end to this activity, which undermines conservation efforts in view of the socio-security situation that has existed in this area since 1994. For the record, it was around 1994 that the eastern DRC was penetrated by foreign negative forces on Congolese soil known as the Forces Démocratique de Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR). These forces took over most of the protected areas in the east of the DRC.

Thus, through this research project, it was very important to be able to study the problem in depth, to understand its evolution, the causes and consequences, the actions of the actors, in order to be able to trace a way forward in terms of solutions and strategies for the sustainable conservation of the Park's biodiversity and to ensure sustainability with the local populations that depend on it. The study adopted a purely qualitative approach and the interviews were conducted on the basis of an interview guide developed for this purpose.

II.1 Semi-structured interviews with households living along the Park's ecological corridor in the Nidnja chiefdom

Semi-structured interviews with households living along the ecological corridor of the Kahuzi Bièga National Park in the Nindja chiefdom were conducted with a total of 49 households, including 13 in the villages and grouping of Ihembe, 17 in the villages of the Luhago grouping and 19 in the villages of the Irhegabarhonyi grouping, which are three groupings that make up the Nidnja chiefdom.

These semi-structured interviews with households living along the park corridor enabled us to understand the lifestyles and dependence of households on this part of the park, which is

currently subject to various conflicts. From these interviews, we identified the primary needs of the households which can be summarised in three main categories:

- Access to land (for agricultural activities)
- Access to natural resources (minerals, firewood, game)
- In the villages of Luhago and Irhegabarhonyi (preservation of ritual endorsements ceremonies, traditional and customary ceremonies) in the forests within the park corridor. On the other hand, in the villages of the Ihembe grouping, it is a question of competition for space for raising domestic herds.

It should be noted that all these results will be more detailed in the full study once the drafting is completed.

II.2 Conduct and organisation of focus groups

The focus groups were organised and held in each of the three villages of the Nindja chiefdom bordering the Park's ecological corridor, namely in the villages of Luhago, Irhegabarhinyi and Ihembe.

A total of nine focus groups were held, three in the villages of the Luhago group, three in the villages of the Irhegabarhonyi group and three in the villages of the Ihembe group. The participants in the focus groups were between 7 and 12 people and the gender aspect was scrupulously observed. Participants included artisanal hunters in the Park's ecological corridor, hunters, fishermen (fish farmers), farmers, primary and secondary school teachers, community leaders (local church representatives), local civil society leaders, local authorities (village and town chiefs) and some members of the royal family of the Nindja chiefdom.

Apart from these 9 focus groups, only one focus group was conducted by a homogeneous group of former armed groups (*the Raia Mutomboki excesses*) with the participation of 6 people in the village of Matale in the Irhegabarhonyi grouping.

Through these group discussions, we were able to understand the depth of the problem of ecological corridor management of the Kahuzi Bièaga National Park in Nidnja Chiefdom, since the park was extended in 1975.

The Kahuzi-Biega Strict Zoological and Forest Reserve was created in 1937 by the colonial authorities to protect the habitat of the mountain gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla graueri*). It covered an area of 75,000 ha and occupied only the high-altitude zone of the current KBNP (Kabonyi, 2012). In 1970 under ordinance law no. 70/316, the reserve was classified as the Kahuzi-Biega National Park with an area of 60,000 ha, but after 5 years the area was increased to 600,000 ha by ordinance law no. 75/238 including the low altitude part towards Itebero

(Shalukoma 2016). To ensure forest continuity between the high and low altitudes and to promote genetic exchange between gorilla populations in the two zones, an ecological corridor has been created in the Nindja chiefdom (Kabonyi et al. 2011).

However, the park was extended without the consent or prior consultation of the local population. This is where the problem originated, as the focus group participants and all the interviewees made clear. In addition, the penetration of foreign armed groups on Congolese soil who occupied the corridor between 2003 and 2011, the conflicts over access to customary power since 2013, the emergence of local armed groups to defend the interests of various groups (Raia Mutomboki), community resistance and dependence on natural resources and access to land were the main results identified during the focus groups. These findings will be further illuminated in the full study.



Photo taken during a focus group in Tchulwe village in the Luhago group in Nindja.

II.3. Observation visits to threatened areas in the ecological corridor in Nindja

We carried out observation visits to the ecological corridor of the Park in the Nindja Chiefdom, in the three groups accompanied by volunteers recruited from the villages along the corridor.

Through these visits, we recorded the geographical data of the threatened sites with the help of GPS, including gold mining in the corridor and other minerals, wood cutting, the presence of fish ponds in the corridor, hunting, exploitation of planks and embers, etc.

It should be noted that we did not reach all the places considered to be under threat, due to the presence of local armed groups still active in this part of the park, notably in most of the villages of the Irhegabarhonyi group.



Some pictures taken in the ecological corridor in a mining site.

III. Constraints (difficulties encountered) in the implementation of the project

During our stay in the Nindja Chiefdom, particularly in the three groups that make it up, including Luhago, Irhegabarhonyi and Ihembe, we faced a number of difficulties, some of which seemed very difficult to overcome.

The first difficulty was the sensitivity of our research subject, and many of the people living along the Park's ecological corridor never wanted to hear the word "park" spoken or pronounced. When you talk about the park in this rural environment, you are considered as the umpteenth enemy after the repeated wars that have been experienced in this area. There is now a bloody conflict between the park and the people of Nindja Chiefdom who do not want it. Forced and militarised conservation has still not worked and remains one of the great challenges of biodiversity conservation in rural Congo.

The second difficulty encountered was the taking of photographs. During the focus groups and individual interviews, many people agreed to participate on condition that photos were not taken. Several focus groups were filmed halfway through, and the local authorities categorically refused to appear in the photos.

Conflicts in the area, tragic experiences with armed groups, frustrations with the presence of the corridor in the area, periodic bloody fights in the area, low level of education, first experience with the camera for some, and many other reasons were at the root of this despite all our explanations and clarifications provided in advance.

The third difficulty was the presence of local armed groups in some parts of the ecological corridor, which meant that we could not reach several sites under threat. This was compounded by the resulting community conflicts.

The fourth difficulty was the unbridged rivers, which we all had to cross, getting myself and my team wet several times to reach the park's ecological corridor and the still intact forest in this rural area.

Certainly we had managed to get around some of these difficulties in order to have such good data, having finally received the support of community leaders and especially having involved many people living in and from these villages.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The challenges of biodiversity conservation in rural Congo are still enormous and the actions undertaken by the actors involved in conservation are far from meeting the real needs of the rural communities bordering the protected areas. The case of the ecological corridor of the Kahuzi Biega National Park serves as an example where, to this day, the severity of community conflicts has had enormous consequences on the biodiversity of the park and on the daily lives of the rural communities living along the corridor. In addition to this, there is the context of the creation of several protected areas during the colonial period, including the Kahuzi Biega National Park, which was unfortunately done without prior consultation with the communities and by the communities that depend on it for various resources, the failure to take into account their traditions, customs and cultures in several conservation actions that were considered forced and militarised, and which to this day has remained theoretical, for more than one actor involved in conservation. While the traditional inalienable power to land by rural and riparian communities, which according to them cannot be discussed, is difficult to take into account by certain texts and actors involved in conservation, which consequently undermines conservation efforts.

However, the prolonged absence of adequate and sustainable interventions that meet the needs of the communities living along the ecological corridor of the Kahuzi Biega National Park in the chiefdom of Nindja has also led to the passivity of the communities living along the corridor and the development of prolonged resistance, which is the source of the recurrent threats to the biodiversity of the park. However, it is through these interventions that the communities might have understood the importance of biodiversity and the importance of the park to them, which is not the case today. We can only protect what we know, knowing that there is no conservation without a community and there is no community without conservation.