



INDIGENOUS ELEPHANT HUNTERS AND EXTREME CITIZEN SCIENCE

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One thing most people agree upon is that the conservation of biodiversity is a good thing. It's good for the ecosystem services on which our survival depends (the anthropocentric view), but of course it's also good for the survival of endangered species which have an intrinsic right to be alive (the ecocentric view). Unfortunately, the exclusionist methodology of 'fortress conservation', characteristic of colonial-era Africa, whereby 'wild' areas are considered best preserved by forcibly evicting any human presence – that includes indigenous peoples who have ancestral claims to the land – is still employed in contemporary conservation efforts. However, consult any anthropologist with local knowledge and one quickly learns that natural spaces considered 'wildernesses' are largely a figment of a modern Western

imagination. Indeed, indigenous peoples have been shaping and co-evolving with Earth's ecosystems ever since *Homo sapiens* emerged as a species.

After thinking about this in relation to current conservation issues, one arrives at a seemingly clear conclusion: effective conservation cannot involve the expulsion of indigenous and local communities (ILCs), either on environmental or ethical grounds. Instead, such communities must be directly engaged in protecting their local biodiversity, and in having a say in how to manage the forest resources on which they depend. It is not, after all, ILCs hunting for food which is contributing to the Anthropocene's biodiversity crash, but rather the illegal wildlife trade and land-use change.



Forest Elephant: By dsg-photo.com (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

The Extreme Citizen Science Research Group (ExCiteS) at UCL, spearheaded by Jerome Lewis and Muki Haklay, is developing tools which aim to give power back to those who know their environments best: indigenous and

local people. An app created by ExCiteS, 'Sapelli', has been trialled in the Republic of Congo alongside the indigenous Mbendjele people in an attempt to reverse the power dynamics of resource control (see Gill Conquest's article in *Anthropolitan*,

Issue 12). However, in an attempt to focus primarily on the illegal wildlife trade, a new and exciting project has been launched in collaboration with the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). Working in the South and East regions of Cameroon, an area

of the Congo Basin rife with poaching (of forest elephants, western-lowland gorillas, chimpanzees and pangolins), the effort will develop specific Sapelli projects in collaboration with chosen villages. For the first time, both indigenous Baka hunter-gatherers and Bantu farmers will be provided with the means of reporting and monitoring their experiences of poaching and poachers in their forest through using a completely text-free interface. Users can also use Sapelli to report abuse at the hands of eco-guards (a common occurrence amongst the Baka who serve as easy targets for corrupt officials). The methodology adopted relies crucially on a free, prior, and informed consent process (FPIC), with every aspect – from designing the icons to deciding who is able to access the data and how it will be used – discussed openly with communities, ensuring that they have the final say. I've recently returned from the Dja Biosphere Reserve for the third time, having identified and talked with communities about their concerns for the forest and their interest in joining the project, guided by Samuel Leboh and Simeon Eyebe from ZSL. Five villages have now successfully completed the process and are already providing valuable data to take on the illegal wildlife trade.

The importance and urgency of this project is two-fold. Firstly, greatly enhanced protection of the aforementioned species is critical for their survival – gorillas are otherwise likely to be a relic of the past within ten years (Nellemann *et al.* 2010). Secondly, those who, more than any others, deserve the right to live and hunt in the forest, yet are forcibly removed and continually marginalised, can finally be empowered to regain some control over the resources of their ancestral land. It is, after all, only through fundamentally shifting the very concept of conservation to work cohesively with local people rather than antagonistically, that biodiversity and ILCs have a hope of a sustainable future.

Nellemann, C., Redmond, I. and Refisch, J. (eds). 2010. *The Last Stand of the Gorilla – Environmental Crime and Conflict in the Congo Basin*. UNEP