



News Release

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## HEALTHY ELEPHANT NUMBERS BUT GORILLA DECLINE RECORDED AT ODZALA-KOKOUA NATIONAL PARK IN CONGO



*Recent camera trap images capture forest elephant and lowland gorilla deep in Odzala-Kokoua National Park*

An estimated 9 600 forest elephants still reside in Odzala-Kokoua National Park in Republic of Congo, according to the results of a wildlife census commissioned by African Parks in 2012, but just released. Whilst higher than expected, this healthy number is believed to be a result of compression, with elephants fleeing highly poached areas outside the park and moving into the safety of the centre of Odzala.

The Odzala census was conducted by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) on behalf of African Parks. A total of 83 transects covering 208 kilometres were walked during the survey, which was a follow up to censuses conducted in 2005 and 2008. WCS recalibrated its results from its previous surveys to ensure consistency of analysis over the three survey periods.

Dr Fiona Maisels, who supervised the census, said the results indicated that an estimated 9 600 elephants currently live in the Park (with 95% confidence limits between 7 500 and 12 400). Of these, 65% reside in the southern sector. “There has been no significant change in elephant density since the first comprehensive survey of 2005,” she said.

African Parks’ manager for Odzala-Kokoua, Leon Lamprecht, said although there had been some poaching in the Park in the recent past, the area was now well protected by game guards. “Odzala is now perceived as a place of safety by elephants, which are fleeing less protected areas, including in neighbouring Gabon, and moving into the safety of Odzala,” he said.

The survey reported, however, that increased logging activity around Odzala had led to an influx of people seeking employment and an increased network of roads that could facilitate elephant poaching. During the census, survey teams came across 17 elephant carcasses within the park, mostly a result of poaching. The teams also encountered disturbing signs of human activity, which penetrated far deeper into the park than in previous years. Hunting camps, snares, cartridge cases and other signs of active hunting were found throughout the periphery of the Park, especially in the west and north. The centre of the park remains relatively untouched however.

Over the past 40 years central Africa has lost an estimated 800 000 elephants, with elephant numbers dropping by 62% between 2002 and 2011 alone due to unprecedented poaching pressure. At 13 000 km<sup>2</sup> in size, Odzala-Kokoua National Park is Republic of Congo's largest protected area and plays a vital role in the conservation of forest elephants and western lowland gorillas.

The WCS survey confirmed that the gorilla population in Odzala has declined over the past decade, dropping from nearly 40 000 in 2005 to 22 000 in 2012. The chimpanzee population is estimated at 2 700, with no significant change in density between 2005 and 2012. Over 70% of all the great apes live in the south of the Park, which is the same pattern of distribution as in 2005.

“The decrease in gorilla numbers is the result of hunting pressure combined with the fatal effect of the Ebola epidemic which devastated the west of the park until at least 2005,” said Lamprecht. “Ebola may have removed many of the groups, leaving only solitary males alive and so reducing reproductive capacity, or it may have continued for a number of years after 2005. “We are confident however that our scaled up anti-poaching operations will reduce the hunting pressure on both gorillas and chimpanzees in the park.”

Prior to African Parks taking on the management of Odzala in early 2011 under the auspices of the Odzala-Kokoua Foundation, the central area of the park had not been patrolled for four years. Since then, African Parks has implemented an effective, multi-pronged plan to address threats to the park. “So far, we've increased our anti-poaching and intelligence-gathering capabilities and conducted ongoing disease surveillance of the great apes to combat the threat of Ebola,” said Lamprecht. “Our anti-poaching team also had a major breakthrough this year when they secured the successful arrest of a regional ivory poaching kingpin, who is now serving a five-year jail term.”

### **Ends**

**Note:** A transect is an “invisible line” along which trained wildlife staff record details of animals and their sign, such as droppings or nests. These results are used to calculate the density, and eventually number, of species within the area surveyed.

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