

Boots on the Ground - Ziama

Final Report 2018



ENGLISHMAN IN AF

: Official ceremony ©Callum Gerrish / AFEF

Principle Investigator:

Christian Triay – Co-founder | COO

Co-investigator:

Callum Gerrish – Co-founder | CEO

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1. SUMMARY OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

GOAL:

- To protect the last forest elephants in Guinea and their forest habitat – the forests of the Ziama Massif Biosphere Reserve.

OBJECTIVES:

- To equip the eco-guards of Ziama with high quality equipment to ensure that they are able to conduct their daily activities safely and effectively, thus ensuring the protection of Ziama's forest elephants, as well as their habitat.

EXPECTED OUTCOME:

- Reduced elephant poaching as a result of increased habitat security and effectiveness of security patrols.
- Improved safety and comfort of eco-guards.
- Increased morale and self-worth.
- Improved sense of identity and belonging among eco-guards ensuring loyalty to the cause.

ACTIVITIES:

- Identify 30 motivated eco-guards capable of protecting the forest elephants of Ziama;
- Equip the identified eco-guards with high quality equipment (boots; socks; backpacks; solar rechargeable flashlights);
- Conduct a site-visit to review outcomes and assess further conservation needs on the ground.



2. CONSERVATION NEEDS

This project focuses on the Ziama Massif forest in Guinea - on the border of Liberia - which contains the last remaining population of forest elephants in Guinea and is therefore considered a priority site for forest elephants in West Africa.

The rate of decline of forest elephants is devastating: over 60% of all forest elephants were lost in less than a decade between 2002 to 2011 and their numbers continue to plummet to this day. The most recent study - the results of which were released in February 2017 - show that Minkébé National Park in Gabon was emptied of 80% of its forest elephants in a single decade (2004-2014), a loss of some 25,000 elephants, despite having been thought a remote haven for these animals. The time for action to secure the future of forest elephants is now.

A census in 2005 revealed that only approximately 200 forest elephants remained in the Ziama forest - ecologically isolated from other forest elephant populations. However, recent studies have shown that this number may have been inflated by the migration of forest elephants escaping the turbulence of the Liberian civil war and that may now in reality be much lower. In addition, only around 30 game rangers have been identified as capable of protecting the forest elephants in the region. These rangers are underfunded and insufficiently equipped to be able to carry out their duties properly and safely.

We cannot expect game rangers and eco-guards to fulfill their vital role to the best of their ability, and safely, without proper equipment.

This project is therefore necessary to enable game rangers in the region to effectively protect the crucial population of forest elephants in the Ziama forest.





The Ziama Forest is a remote and vital tropical forest ecosystem in the mountainous highlands of southeastern Guinea and extends across the border to Liberia. Renowned for its incredibly high levels of biodiversity as a UNESCO biosphere reserve, boasting more than 1,300 species of plants and more than 500 animal species, the Ziama Forest ecosystem boasts



: The Ziama forest © Callum Gerrish / AFEF

pristine and dense primary and secondary mountain forest. Due to this richness of the ecosystem it is home to a great number of Africa's threatened mammal species, including chimpanzees and the only viable forest elephant population in Guinea.

Guinea is the source of 22 West African rivers, including the Niger, Gambia, and Senegal Rivers. Protecting the forests that act as watersheds for these rivers is crucial for the health of wildlife and humans alike across the region.



The south of Guinea contains important remnants of the Upper Guinean forest that used to cover the entire region of West Africa. The biodiversity under the lush forest canopy is stunning – elephants, chimpanzees and many more endangered species, including 22 species protected by CITES, all rely on this unique habitat.

The Ziamia Forest, and the wildlife which benefits from and sustains this important ecosystem, is under threat. Agriculture has begun to encroach upon the Ziamia Forest Biosphere, replacing pristine ecologically rich forest landscapes with farmland – we witnessed the encroachment of palm oil plantations and livestock farming onto what was formerly pristine forest now cleared for agricultural use. Habitat destruction in the form of forest clearing for agricultural development timber extraction, together with the ever-present poaching threat that accompanies these activities, threatens the survival of both the forest and the elephants that call it home.



: a palm oil plantation encroaches onto what was once part of the Ziamia forest.

© Callum Gerrish / AFEF



During our visit, we joined two of Ziama's rangers on their patrol within the 'forêt classée' (the core section of the protected forest in which all human activity, and certainly natural resource extraction, is forbidden). During our patrol of this uninhabited pristine forest over a few hours, on eight separate occasions we came across spent shotgun cartridges and ammunition shells on the animal-worn game trails which we followed through the forest. Evidence of poaching was never far away even in this most protected area of forest.



: Evidence of poaching ©Callum Gerrish / AFEF

The conservation challenges we face to save the remaining population of forest elephants in the reserve are significant, in a place where environmental protection takes a very distant second place to natural resource extraction. However, there is great optimism to be had for Ziama's elephants if all effort possible is now put into their protection.



3. PROJECT IMPACT

The forest elephants in Ziama are the **last remaining forest elephants** in the Republic of Guinea. The eco-guards on the ground are the elephants' last hope of survival in a region where resource extraction takes priority and poaching is rife. Protecting this group of forest elephants will be vital for the genetic biodiversity of forest elephant populations in the future.

It is now accepted that forest elephants play a **vital role in seed dispersal**. Forest elephants disperse seeds over much larger distances than any other vertebrate dispersers moving over 80% of seeds over 1km from the parent tree and consistently moving seeds over 5km. The extinction of forest elephants will therefore drastically, and for some species totally, affect tree seed dispersal and thus the forest habitat across Central and West Africa.

The immediate short-term benefit and outcome for the eco-guards will be the ability to carry out their **anti-poaching duties** more effectively and safely.

However, in the longer term, it is more than just providing eco-guards with equipment to carry out their duties. It is also about reminding the eco-guards that they are vital to the survival of the forest and all wildlife that inhabits it, and that they are **not forgotten** in the world's desire to protect wildlife. AFEF is committed to ensuring that these crucial men and women feel valued; maintain **morale** and **self-worth**; and ensure **loyalty** to the cause.



: The Ziama Rangers in Seredou © CFZ / FFI



4. SUMMARY OF PROGRESS

The equipment was successfully shipped from Johannesburg in South Africa to Conakry in Guinea at the end of July 2018 and arrived in early August 2018. After some logistical challenges (See Section 6 below) the equipment arrived in Seredou safely on September 7 2018.

Christian & Callum visited Ziama, Guinea during the first week of September 2018 to officially hand-over the equipment to the rangers of Ziama and find out more about the operations on the ground.

AFEF officially handed-over custody of the equipment to Centre Forestier de N'Zerekore on Thursday 7th September 2018. The official ceremony subsequently took place at CFZ Headquarters in Seredou on Friday 8th September 2018.



: The Ziama Rangers © Callum Gerrish / AFEF



: Seny, a CFZ Ranger with his new backpack © Callum Gerrish / AFEF



5. PROBLEMS & CHALLENGES

As a whole the project did not face any serious problems or challenges however we were faced with a number of logistical challenges.

Firstly, due to the poor road conditions between Conakry and Sereidou, we decided to travel to Monrovia in Liberia and then travel to Guinea by road. This required visas for both Guinea and Monrovia as well as travel arrangements in Liberia. Thankfully Fauna and Flora International were extremely helpful in making the necessary arrangements for us.

Secondly, due to customs requirements, the equipment had to be sent to Conakry and travel within Guinea on the poor road conditions. Please see Section 6 below for further information in this regard.

6. LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

We quickly learned that flexibility and patience is key when operating in Guinea. We had shipped the equipment from South Africa to Guinea over one month before our scheduled site visit to ensure that the equipment would have arrived in Sereidou before us so that we could have an official ceremony with the rangers and verify that the equipment was safely in their hands.

Although the distance from Conakry to Sereidou is 'only' 740km, we had arranged to travel to Ziamia via neighbouring Liberia, avoiding the treacherous road conditions in Guinea. Unfortunately when we arrived we learned that the equipment had only recently been cleared through customs and was still en-route from Conakry.

Throughout the first few days of our visit, the driver transporting the equipment called us with regular updates, usually to tell us that he was stuck in a road block (or "bloquée") caused by trucks becoming stuck in the mud or to tell us that he had recently managed to get through a bloquée.



With only two days remaining of our visit, the driver told us that he and the equipment were trapped in a serious bloquée about 4 hours away from Seredou. To make matters worse, his phone was almost out of battery and he had no way of charging it.



: Finding the equipment in the bloquée © Callum Gerrish / AFEF

On the Thursday morning we decided to rescue the equipment ourselves and drive the three hours to the bloquée to find hundreds of vehicles and thousands of people trapped on either side of a school bus that had become stuck in deep mud. We drove the 4x4 as far into the bloquée as we could before having to continue on foot to find the driver who had no phone battery left amongst thousands of people. A situation of looking for a needle in a haystack.

Thankfully we found the driver and the equipment on the other side of the bloquée. With the help of some local people we managed to carry the precious equipment through the bloquée back to our vehicle and then subsequently back to CFZ headquarters back in Seredou for the official ceremony on the Friday.



: Retrieving the equipment from the bloquee © Christian Triay / AFEF



: The Ziama Rangers with new boots and socks © AFEF



: Callum Gerrish (CEO at AFEF) at the official ceremony © Christian Triay / AFEF



7. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The equipment was successfully delivered to the rangers of Ziama who are now better equipped to carry out their duties safely and effectively thus ensuring the better protection of Guinea's last forest elephants in the Ziama forest.

During our visit to Ziama we spent a lot of time getting to know the CFZ Rangers as well as the local Fauna and Flora International to learn as much as possible about their operations and future needs.

Very special thanks to **Fauna & Flora International** for supporting us with logistics in Liberia & Guinea and thank you to **Centre Forestier N'Zerekore** for their hospitality and sharing their experiences with us.



: Christian Triay (AFEF) speaking with Seny (CFZ) ©Callum Gerrish / AFEF



We identified that the following additional support is required for the next phase:

1. Tents & Sleeping Mats

Without tents and sleeping mats, the Ziama rangers cannot conduct multi-day patrols meaning that vast areas of forest are left unpatrolled. This is because rangers are limited to traveling around 4 hours away from each ranger post having to turn back to ensure that they can arrive in daylight. The ranger posts are all situated around the periphery of the Ziama forest reserve, leaving vast areas of the reserve without the security of the anti-poaching patrol presence. Therefore, tents would allow rangers to conduct multi-day patrols through deeper parts of the Ziama forest and ensure that habitat security in the Ziama forest is as robust as is necessary to protect the habitat itself, its forest elephants and other important wildlife

2. GPS Units

We experienced how easy it is to disorientate yourself inside the dense forests of West Africa and the Congo Basin. Even the rangers who know the forest well can lose their way. GPS Units will help rangers conduct more efficient and targeted patrols of the forest without getting lost.

More importantly however, GPS units would assist with anti-poaching and biomonitoring allowing rangers to record important information, such as location of forest elephant sightings; forest elephant dung; illegal farming; and evidence of poaching. This data collection which is made possible through the supply of GPS units is crucial to ensuring the assessment and implementation of comprehensive and effective conservation strategy. With our ground partners, we are taking steps to establish effective conservation solutions into the longer term and this data will be crucial to the protection of the ecosystem.



3. Camera Traps

Traditional transect methods of elephant monitoring are in the process of being replaced with the use of camera traps and DNA sampling. This method will allow us to more accurately estimate forest elephant population numbers by allowing scientists to identify individual elephants. A census using these methods will be conducted in the Zياما forests as well as surrounding forests in neighbouring Liberia.



: A female forest elephant with its calf in the Zياما forest © CFZ



8. PROJECT COLLABORATORS



African Forest
Elephant
Foundation



International
Elephant
Foundation



Fauna & Flora
International



Centre Forestier
N'Zerekore



9. MEDIA INFORMATION

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