

Gabon's first generation of Ecoguards and Ecoguides: a major step towards the development of the new National Parks

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Gabon, known to house some of the best preserved patches of primary rainforest of tropical Africa, was until quite recently dependent solely on petroleum oil, (a resource which is condemned to disappear within the next few decades). The creation in 2002 of 13 National Parks by President Omar Bongo Ondimba generated a whole new spate of activities and hope in Gabon, as new skills were increasingly required to man the large area set aside for protection. Among the identified need for proper conservation was the need for game rangers better known in the area as ecoguards. Recently 65 game rangers came out as the first batch of trainees to man Gabon National Parks. Logging and large-scale bush meat trades poses severe threats to the forests and fauna of Gabon, and so require the services of specifically trained field assistants.

In agreement with the objectives of the National Parks Council (CNPN) and with the support of the US-based Moore Foundation, WWF and several partners such as the Wildlife Conservation Society and the EU Project for the Valorization of Protected Areas (PSVAP), assisted the Forestry School of Gabon (Ecole Nationale des Eaux et Forêts, ENEF) to develop a curriculum for future ecoguards. This curriculum was based on those already existing in other Forestry schools of the region (Cameroon, South Africa, Tanzania), but was adapted to the Gabonese realities.

The first training session began in May, and comprised of theory and practical field work. Supervised by



Ecoguards during training session

instructors from ENEF, Omar Bongo University and the Gabonese Gendarmerie among others, trainees received a physical training and learnt how to cope with forest life. Not less than 20 disciplines were included in the common program, ranging from entomology to GIS,

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and from first aid to local history. With the sound training received,

ecoguards and ecoguides are expected to assist park conservateurs to manage and protect the fauna, and to help in the biological inventories of the parks and archaeological sites. Ecoguides will provide both traditional and scientific information to tourists.

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This first training session is the result of collaboration between WWF and numerous institutions, such as the French Army, the French Cooperation, the French Gendarmerie, the NGO Ibonga, the Peace Corps, Shell Gabon, CyberTracker and the Smithsonian Institution. ■