



CONGO CONSERVATION COMPANY

The story of Odzala Discovery Camps



COMMUNITIES AND RESEARCH MEET

The communities in and around Odzala-Kokoua National Park had a deep affinity for the land, as well as its inhabitants, and were searching for a way to protect and conserve the delicate ecosystem of the region.

Research became a viable course for communities to take their message to the key decision makers of the Republic of Congo in Brazzaville. Over many years spent in Africa, scientists Magdalena Bermejo and Germán Illera had come to understand the connection between conservation and communities. They became the voice for these communities during a catalyst moment in the Republic of Congo, the Ebola outbreak of 2002-2003.

During the first gorilla and chimpanzee studies funded by the European Union, Magda and Germán associated the Ebola outbreak in West and Central Africa communities with the 5000 western lowland gorillas who died in 2002 and 2003. This amounted to a loss of 95% of the western lowland gorilla population within the Lossi Community Reserve area at the time. This area became a symbol within the Republic of Congo as a community driven conservation area and as such, the loss was devastating for not only the close-knit communities found here, but also the country as a whole.

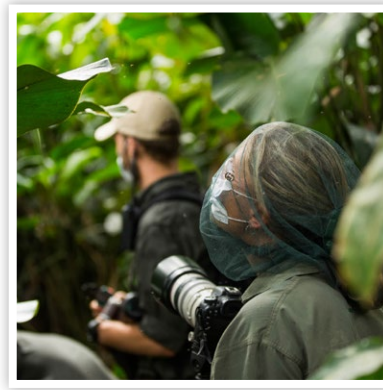
During this trying time, the communities became very involved in helping the researchers to investigate the Ebola outbreak. They did this without consideration of personal risk or the heart-breaking circumstances, including the loss of their own family members.

An unbreakable bond was formed between Magda, Germán, their research team and the communities of Odzala-Kokoua National Park as people worked together to help those who couldn't help themselves - the gorillas.



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A common conservation goal



TOURISM FOR CONSERVATION

Magda, Germán and their team were among the first people to study western lowland gorillas. A prerequisite to developing their research programme, a mutual respect must be built between the researchers and the gorillas requiring daily visits to a specific group over about three years. By 2002, they had identified 10 social groups with a population of 143 in the northwest of Republic of Congo.

The team continued their conservation research programme and initiated a pilot gorilla tourism programme in the Ngaga-Ndzezi area, with the blessing of the communities, in an effort to drive awareness and support for the region following the Ebola outbreak.

Here, Ngaga Camp was founded to the south-west of Odzala-Kokoua National Park with one of the focal research gorilla groups. The Congolese government soon wanted to look into opportunities to grow tourism here and held a meeting of great minds to discuss the opportunities within the region. Sabine Plattner was one such mind and founded the Congo Conservation Company as an actor for true conservation within the region through the development of tourism.

Research at Ngaga found a new approach with the support of the Sabine Plattner African Charities, and later the Congo Conservation Company, joining communities, science and tourism on the grounds of conservation. By opening up a second research gorilla family to tourism and establishing two more camps within Odzala-Kokoua National Park, each within a distinct biome, an incredibly unique and important destination was created.

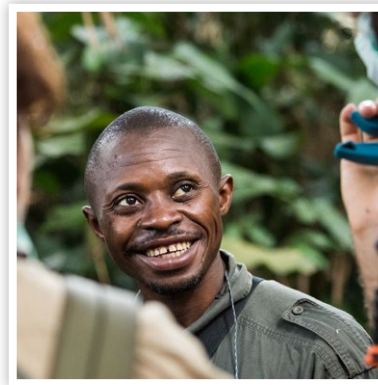
Through the tourism developments, conservation has been given a higher value by the communities within and surrounding the national park as a result of job creation and investment in the area. Together - community, research and tourism are working towards a stronger future for the Republic of Congo and all its inhabitants.





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The people of Odzala-Kokoua National Park



RESEARCHERS, GUIDES AND TRACKERS

A team of permanent researchers and trackers from nearby communities work with the gorilla families on a daily basis. Guest researchers working on shorter term projects are frequently welcomed by our team.

Guests of Odzala are led on expeditions into the Marantaceae forest in search of the critically endangered species, the western lowland gorilla. Treks entail 3-4 guests as well as a guide and a tracker from our treasured team of researchers in an untamed forest with the gorillas going about their usual activities (often seen in the trees).

Following a devastating disease outbreak that reduced gorilla populations in the early 2000s, the team is fastidious about the health of the gorilla families and this is why we request pre-arrival medical checks and wear medical masks - to protect the gorillas against the airborne diseases to which they are very susceptible. With this in mind, Ngaga Camp has become one of Africa's most important gorilla trekking destinations offering an opportunity to engage with science and nature through exploration.



COMMUNITY & CONSERVATION DEVELOPMENT

Leading on from this gorilla conservation programme, Magda is helping to create a growing international academic network named Apes Research For Conservation which is supported by Sabine Plattner African Charities known as ARC-SPAC. Linking 7 universities and 20 scientists with top flight expertise in movement ecology and evolutionary and conservation biology, this project hopes to generate international exposure and broader collaborative research for the benefit of conservation.

The Sabine Plattner African Charities was founded by the philanthropic owner of Congo Conservation Company and the organisation also supports the communities of the national park and surrounds. For the 80 000 people living in the Odzala-Kokoua region, education is the key to their future as well as the conservation of rainforest and its animals. Projects focus on holistic education schemes, improving the limited access to infrastructure, driving local action to preserve the rainforest in a local context and both supporting and strengthening regional structures for environmental protection through tourism development.

