

# Wildlife Security in Central Africa

*USFWS support has provided seed funding to launch and expand upon an effective regional model to tackle wildlife crime.*



**Ivory and guns confiscated from illegal wildlife traffickers in Gabon.**

Credit: Richard Ruggiero/USFWS

To address the commercial trade in illegal wildlife, USFWS is supporting the creation of a network of innovative partnerships with African governments aimed at not only improving the application of wildlife laws but also the larger issue of ineffective legal systems.

In 2003, the Last Great Ape Organization (LAGA), in collaboration with USFWS, developed a new national level approach to address wildlife law enforcement in Cameroon. Building upon the need to match civil society activism with government enforcement capacity, LAGA has developed a model partnership approach to improve investigations, prosecutions, outreach, and deterrence of wildlife crimes.

Since 2005, USFWS has awarded \$644,305 through seven grants to LAGA, which was leveraged by \$924,947 in matching funds. Based out of Yaounde, LAGA assists and develops the replication of this model in other countries to also address the problem of wildlife law enforcement at the regional and international level, as many wildlife crimes occur across national borders.



**A gorilla arm is sold for bushmeat in Gabon.** Credit: Richard Ruggiero/USFWS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) supports innovative projects that improve the application of wildlife laws to



protect threatened species in Africa especially throughout the Congo Basin. This region has experienced increased demand for live animals, bushmeat and wildlife products such as ivory in recent years. Many species are exceedingly threatened as a result; forest elephants for example have declined by more than 60% over the last decade.

Historically, illegal poachers and wildlife traffickers in Central Africa enjoyed relative impunity from prosecution. Although elephants, apes, and other threatened species are protected by national laws and international treaties throughout their range, the enforcement of these laws has been weak or non-existent, providing little or no value in deterring wildlife crimes. In fact, until 2003, not a single wildlife crime was prosecuted

successfully in any Central African country.

This lack of enforcement of existing forestry and wildlife laws, exacerbated by widespread corruption and poor governance, has led to a rampant rise in illegal trade by increasingly sophisticated criminal networks. This not only impacts the survival of threatened species, but also results in increased political and economic instability for already marginalized human populations.

While it is important to promote long term solutions at the local level (e.g. developing alternative income and protein sources to communities that depend on bushmeat), the rate of decline in wildlife populations due to commercial poaching for ivory and bushmeat has become a crisis. There is a very real risk that by the time long-term solutions are implemented there will be few or no viable wildlife populations left to conserve. Clearly, it is the major dealers of the commercial trade in illegal wildlife who need to be deterred through increased and effective law enforcement.

*The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service supports innovative projects to improve the application of wildlife laws throughout the Congo Basin.*

**The current LAGA model involves four main components:**

**I. Investigations**

Specific information is gathered by investigators, undercover agents, and informers for law enforcement officials to arrest individuals illegally gathering or selling products from threatened species.

**II. Operations**

The non-governmental organization (NGO) assists country governmental agencies to arrest perpetrators and provide evidence in complaints to courts. The NGO also focuses on combatting corruption and bribing attempts, which have occurred in 85% of LAGA's operations thus far.

**III. Legal Assistance**

The NGO assembles a legal team which aids in carrying out administrative procedures of prosecuting legal cases pertinent to wildlife crime. For example, the legal team follows through from the police report to ensuring punishments are carried out; fighting corruption is crucial in this stage, as LAGA has witnessed corruption in 80% of its cases thus far.

**IV. Media**

The NGO encourages media coverage of the trials and processes associated with wildlife crimes. For example, the NGO seeks coverage in national television news, national radio news, and print. Media coverage informs the public that the law is actively enforced and educates them about the consequences of engaging in wildlife crimes.

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**LAGA staff work on wildlife crime cases in Cameroon.** Credit: Ofir Drori/LAGA

This project proved it is possible for a country to shift from a baseline of zero wildlife prosecutions to effective prosecutions of major illegal dealers at a rate of one per week. From 2003 to 2012, in Cameroon alone, more than 400 traffickers were arrested with a conviction rate close to 100%, and imprisonment rate average of 90%.

With USFWS support, the model is now being replicated throughout Central Africa.

**Gabon: Wildlife Law Enforcement Support Project (AALF)**

Through the organization Conservation Justice, the LAGA model is being replicated in Gabon. The Gabonese model targets logging companies that engage in illegal practices. USFWS awarded \$68,790 to Conservation Justice in FY 2012, which has leveraged over \$75,000 in matching funds.

**Republic of Congo: Project for the Application of the Law for Fauna (PALF)**

Since 2008, USFWS has awarded \$109,914 to The Aspinall Foundation, which has leveraged \$105,248 in matching funds to carry out PALF.

These efforts in the Republic of Congo and Gabon and have led to the apprehension of an additional 200 major commercial wildlife traffickers.

While this is not a panacea for solving illegal wildlife exploitation, the approach continues to demonstrate significant results while increasing the capacity Central African institutions to reduce the illegal trade in wildlife. As noted in 2006 by the U.S. Ambassador to Cameroon, the effort is “driving a sea change in wildlife enforcement in Cameroon.”



**ANPN staff in Gabon conduct a roadblock to search vehicles for illegal wildlife.** Credit: Richard Ruggiero/USFWS