BEST OF THE WILD: WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY and

THE CONGO BASIN COAST
THE CASE FOR CONSERVATION

WCS ENVISIONS a world in which people value and embrace the diversity of life, live sustainably with wildlife, and ensure the integrity of the natural world. We focus our conservation efforts on the best of the wild—landscapes and seascapes that are rich in biological diversity, and where long-term conservation of wildlife and the natural processes they depend upon can be achieved. Our global portfolio of 75 Best of the Wild sites, including the Congo Basin Coast, gives us a leading role in saving some of the wildest places that remain on Earth.

The Congo Basin Coast is like no other place on Earth: here 1,400 miles of pristine beaches and lagoons lie alongside the world’s second-largest intact forest. The waters of the Congo Basin Coast are alive with ocean giants—whales, turtles, dolphins, and sharks—while its unspoiled coastal beaches and lagoons safeguard manatees, crocodiles, and hippopotamus. Even elephants and buffalo emerge from the nearby forests of the Congo Basin to roam these beaches and frolic in the surf. Here, on the western edge of Central Africa, WCS has made a major commitment to conservation.

Increasingly, this wild coast is threatened by intensive overfishing and burgeoning offshore oil and gas development. Successful conservation of the Congo Basin Coast and its wildlife can only be achieved by strengthening and connecting protected areas along the coast, improving law enforcement, and assisting governments and private industry to put conservation at the heart of development planning. Having played an integral role in creating Gabon’s ambitious new national protected area system, WCS is well positioned to provide the scientific and conservation leadership needed to ensure a future for this coast’s awe-inspiring wildlife.

Cover: Humpback whales travel from Antarctica to use the Congo Basin Coast as a safe place to rear their young.

Inside cover: Located alongside one of Africa’s most intact forests, the beaches and lagoons of this coast are regularly visited by elephants, buffalo, and even surfing hippos.

Previous page: Much of the Gabonese section of this coast is virtually uninhabited by humans and dotted with quiet lagoons where hippopotamus populations thrive.
ALONG THE WEST COAST OF AFRICA, inland tropical forest merges with unbroken expanses of wild beach. This is the Congo Basin Coast, where whales and sharks cruise through emerald waters, joined by the world’s largest recorded group of rare Atlantic humpback dolphins. Pristine beaches draw the world’s largest population of critically endangered leatherback sea turtles to safe nesting areas, and thousands of humpback whales travel from the Antarctic each year to breed in shallow and productive waters. Nearby tropical forest extends down to the coast, producing a sight seen few other places on Earth: hippopotamus at play in the surf and elephants ambling across the sand.

The coast’s network of mudflats and salty lagoons provides a crucial staging post for tens of thousands of migratory and resident birds. Dense mangrove forests – rapidly disappearing in other parts of the world – safeguard local livelihoods by anchoring fragile coastlines and providing a sheltered nursery area for many species of fish. Expansive tidal lagoons and estuaries are home to West African manatees and Atlantic humpback dolphins and hold the key to conservation of the region’s hippopotamus. Alongside this ocean wilderness lie forests and savannas that are among Africa’s great natural sanctuaries for forest elephants, gorillas, chimpanzees, monkeys, buffalo, and wild pigs.

The Congo Basin Coast’s 56,000 square miles span the coastlines of Gabon and Congo, covering an area the size of New York State. Human population density is low and centered in three cities, leaving beaches and wetlands almost completely undeveloped. Small fishing communities dot the coast, and their livelihoods depend on access to fresh water, natural protection from storms and floods, and healthy, productive stocks of fish.

Only a small fraction of this magnificent wild place is protected, and the coast is increasingly threatened by poorly planned development and unregulated...
extraction of its rich natural capital, including over-fishing by trawlers and unsustainable hunting of manatees, crocodiles, dolphins, and hippopotamus to supply the bushmeat trade. Expansion of oil and gas extraction with little regard for potentially destructive impacts on marine wildlife and their coastal habitats poses great peril to the coast. However, with new investments in the work of WCS over the next decade, we can achieve our vision: that the waters of the Congo Basin Coast remain a haven for ocean giants, such as humpback whales, leatherback and green turtles and humpback dolphins, while its coastal beaches and lagoons safeguard manatees, crocodiles, and hippopotamus, allowing them to thrive in perpetuity alongside one of Africa’s premier forest landscapes.
UNDOERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES & RISKS

GEOGRAPHIC AND POLITICAL ISOLATION has kept the Congo Basin Coast largely intact. Today, with the expansion of trade links to Europe, Asia, and North America and the development of new extractive industries, there are fresh challenges to conservation.

Unregulated and unsustainable industrial fisheries are the most significant threat. Increasing numbers of domestic and foreign fishing boats venture into coastal waters to fish illegally. Fish are caught at unsustainable levels, and vulnerable populations of sea turtles and coastal dolphins are victims of unintentional bycatch.

On a much smaller scale, community fisheries now operate at unsustainable levels as the region’s growing human population seeks ways to make a living. As coastal fish and oyster stocks are depleted, an important source of protein for local communities and wildlife is lost. With few livelihood options available, fishing communities turn to bushmeat, putting additional pressure on hippopotamus, crocodiles, turtles, dolphins, and manatees, which are already stressed by commercial poaching to supply illegal wildlife markets.

Oil spills and destructive exploration practices extend across the seascape. Noise pollution from offshore petroleum operations can impact whales and dolphins in important breeding and nursery areas. Chemical pollutants produced by drilling operations constantly spill into the ocean, causing damage to delicate marine food webs. Light pollution caused by flaring gas at oil rigs disorients sea turtles traveling to nesting beaches and returning to the sea. Beaches and lagoons become increasingly inhospitable to wildlife as coastal development grows, and trash and logs wash ashore from nearby shipping lanes.
Gabon’s extensive system of national parks and Congo’s national protected area system feature only five coastal and marine protected areas (MPAs), leaving most critical habitat unprotected. The few existing MPAs are small and severely under-resourced, with insufficient technical and financial capacity to respond to illegal fishing, habitat destruction, and wildlife poaching. At present, these small, isolated “islands” of conservation lack resilience to large-scale disturbances, such as climate change, and fail to meet the needs of species that range great distances. Ensuring that conservation programs secure connectivity for ocean wildlife across the entire seascape is a core challenge of our work on the Congo Basin Coast.
VISION FOR THE FUTURE

WCS’S VISION is that the waters of the Congo Basin Coast remain a haven for ocean giants, such as humpback whales, leatherback and green turtles and humpback dolphins, while its coastal beaches and lagoons safeguard manatees, crocodiles, and hippopotamus, allowing them to thrive in perpetuity alongside one of Africa’s premier forest landscapes.

To realize this vision in the next 10 years, WCS holds itself accountable for achieving the following conservation objectives:

- Marine and coastal protected areas expand to cover more than 20% of territorial seas, safeguarding connectivity between protected forest, beach, and waters along the coast.
- Populations of hippopotamus, manatees, and crocodiles within protected areas are stable or increasing.
- Atlantic humpback dolphin populations are stable or increasing.
- At least 80% of identified leatherback turtle nests are protected, ensuring that the Congo Basin Coast remains the most important leatherback nesting ground in the world.
- Protection of humpback whale breeding areas meets International Whaling Commission targets and contributes to the global recovery of the species.

Successful conservation of the Congo Basin Coast and its whales, dolphins, sea turtles, hippopotamus, manatees, and crocodiles can only be achieved by strengthening and connecting protected areas along the coast, halting unsustainable resource use, and assisting governments and private industry to put conservation at the heart of development planning.
WCS AND OUR PARTNERS will address threats to the Congo Basin Coast through strategic actions to achieve five management outcomes.

To ensure that the Governments of Gabon and the Republic of Congo expand and strengthen the marine protected area (MPA) network, WCS will:

- Identify and help establish a large network of new MPAs that protect sea turtle nesting areas, humpback whale breeding grounds, and key habitat for dolphins, hippopotamus, manatees, and crocodiles.
- Work with governments, the private sector, and communities to manage MPAs using information generated from sound science.
- Train MPA authorities in law enforcement to reduce illegal fishing and poaching of hippopotamus, dolphins, turtles, manatees, and crocodiles.

To ensure that science-based management and enforcement programs meet the needs of the key species across the seascape, WCS will:

- Monitor trends in key wildlife populations and the threats they face to inform management.
- Promote reduced consumption of bushmeat through media outreach and enforcement in markets and restaurants.
- Promote adoption of common management strategies and law enforcement across national boundaries.
- Link conservation across the region through partnerships like the Gabon Sea Turtle Partnership.
- Conduct targeted outreach and training programs to build support for informed conservation decision-making by the general public and government.
To ensure that national governments effectively manage industrial fisheries, WCS will:

- Provide technical support and training to government partners to create, implement, and adapt fishery management plans and rules to prevent illegal industrial fishing, protect key habitats, and sustain long-term fishery yields.
- Promote on-board observer programs and establishment of legal bycatch reduction targets to conserve sea turtles.

To ensure that community-based conservation safeguards fishing-based livelihoods, WCS will:

- Increase fisheries sustainability and stability by helping communities monitor and manage their catch of fish and oysters.
- Develop and promote management tools that vest local people in good management of their fisheries, including improved resource rights for community-based fisheries.
- Conduct participatory value-chain analyses to identify opportunities to diversify local economies, and pilot at least two alternative livelihood options.

To ensure that private industries reduce their impacts on the wildlife of the Coast, WCS will:

- Establish the “Caring for the Coast” partnership to promote best wildlife practices for oil and gas operations, and pilot adoption of conservation business standards.
- Advise the governments of Gabon and the Republic of Congo on impacts to wildlife of increased oil and gas development.
- Explore the development of financial incentive programs, including conservation bonds, to encourage compliance with conservation measures.
- Help industries and governments reduce the number of logs littering sea turtle nesting beaches.
AS THE OLDEST, LARGEST, AND MOST EXPERIENCED conservation organization in the region, WCS is uniquely poised to deliver on the conservation objectives for the Congo Basin Coast.

Twenty-five years of work on the ground – applying science to wildlife management, building strong partnerships, and pursuing a clear conservation vision – have yielded accomplishments ranging from our leading role in the creation of a new national park system in Gabon, to developing innovative ways for oil companies to minimize impacts on whales, to creating the region’s first effective sea turtle conservation partnership with activities ranging from Equatorial Guinea through Gabon and the Republic of Congo.

WCS worked closely with the Government of Gabon to create the country’s first national park system, designed to save the country’s magnificent tracts of intact forest and abundant wildlife. In a major triumph for conservation in 2002, thirteen new national parks were created. WCS is an active conservation and management partner in two of these Gabonese national parks that have marine and coastal components – Loango and Mayumba – as well as in the coastal and marine protected area of Conkouati-Douli National Park in the Republic of Congo.

Recognizing the enormous threat posed by an unregulated fishing industry, in 2003 WCS joined with partners in Gabon’s Fisheries Department, its National Parks Agency, and the U.S. Navy to conduct at-sea fisheries surveillance. Two coastal patrol vessels operate in Gabon and one in the Republic of Congo, preventing illegal vessels from entering the National Parks and accumulating more than 120 illegal fishing violation reports that have been submitted to central governments as the basis for enforcement actions. WCS, in partnership with the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), has also...
CONGO BASIN COAST

successfully led the region’s first at-sea trials of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) in the shrimp industry. TEDs protect sea turtles from being killed as bycatch in fishing nets. Their adoption as mandatory equipment along the coast will likely save the lives of hundreds of sea turtles every year.

With demonstrated conservation progress in Gabon and the Republic of Congo and into neighboring Equatorial Guinea, WCS is uniquely positioned to successfully influence the conservation of the magnificent wildlife that move between the beaches and waters of the countries of this coast.

Top: Two humpback whales propel themselves out of the water near a WCS research team off the coast of Gabon.
Left: Ecoguards setting off to patrol the open beaches and dense forests of the Congo Basin Coast.
ABOUT WCS

WCS SAVES WILDLIFE AND WILD PLACES by understanding critical issues, crafting science-based solutions, and taking conservation actions that benefit nature and humanity.

WCS conserves critical landscapes and seascapes by helping governments, national organizations, and communities establish and manage parks and protected areas, and integrate them with the complex matrix of surrounding land uses. We conserve species of conservation significance – those that are vulnerable, important to humans, and powerful icons of nature – and, with partners, set conservation priorities across their range. And we build alliances to address four global conservation challenges: the interdependence of conservation, sustainable development, and human livelihoods; natural resource extraction; the interface between wildlife, domestic animal and human health; and climate change.

During a century of conservation, WCS has helped to establish more than 150 protected areas around the world, including Gabon’s expansive new national park system and the first no-take marine reserve in Belize. We helped save the American bison from extinction and attracted global attention to the plight of Mongolian gazelle, mountain gorillas, humpback whales, and tigers. We created the first international veterinary program focused on free-ranging wildlife. We believe in vesting people in conservation, and have established innovative partnerships with communities in Zambia, Cambodia, and Bolivia to ensure that people benefit from conservation. WCS field conservation activities are enhanced by our four zoological parks and an aquarium in New York City, which connect people to nature and build a powerful US constituency for wildlife conservation.

WCS is committed to save the Best of the Wild – 75 landscapes and seascapes in 60 countries around the world.* Please join us in this mission.

Top: Dolphins, like other coastal wildlife, will benefit from new marine protected areas, stronger environmental stewardship, and efforts to curb poaching.

Next page: Evening on a coastal beach draws shorebirds, many of whom use these beaches as a critical refueling stop on their migrations from Europe and Asia.

*For a full list of the WCS Best of the Wild Scapes and other Best of the Wild publications, please visit www.wcs.org/bestofthewild
WCS is grateful to the following for leadership support of our work on the Congo Basin coast:

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The Wallace Research Foundation  
US Fish and Wildlife Service  
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

WCS’s success on the Congo Basin coast can be attributed in part to our strong partnerships:

ACPE-Ibonga  
Association des Pêcheurs et des Revendeurs d’Huitres de Mayumba (APRHM)  
Aventures Sans Frontières  
Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program  
Central Africa World Heritage Forest Initiative (CAWHFI) of UNESCO  
Commission des Forêts d’Afrique Centrale (COMIFAC)  
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