

# **Gabon's natural wonders: Operation Loango**

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# Gabon's natural wonders: Operation Loango

**Chasing Loango** ■ A unique jewel for nature lovers  
**In this precious parkland, tourism funds conservation**

A small sliver of forest tucked near Loango's Lefou in one of Gabon's national parks. This is the beginning of an adventure holiday for the tourists, and it is also a sign that the ambitious Operation Loango is up and running, earning money and heading for self-sufficiency.

The theory behind this venture is that conservation — essential if Gabon's unique treasure house of wildlife and virgin forest is to survive — cannot simply depend on a flow of government money and overseas aid. There have to be visible benefits and profits, and an insistence on high standards that comes with business discipline.

Operation Loango is a partnership between a private company, South African-based operator Conservation Society, and the Gabon state department of fish and wildlife, Eaux et Forêts (Water and Forests).

It began as an idea dreamed up by a Netherlands engineer and businessman, Rombout Swartbom, more than five years ago. A huge boost came in 2001, with the much-praised decision of Gabon's president, El Hadji Omar Bongo, to create 13 national parks, comprising 10 percent of Gabon's land space.

Of all the parks, Loango National Park is the most suited for eco-tourism development because it contains all the elements that are essential for the success of ecotourism: It has forest and savanna grasslands stretching down to sandy beaches; forest rivers and lagoons; concentrations of elephants, gorillas and chimps; buffaloes and antelope; hippos that can sometimes be seen playing in the surf; whales offshore; fish waiting for an angler, and enough birds



Orophed gorillas form a family of their own as they adjust to life in the semi-wilderness.

to set a bird-watcher's heart fluttering. In recent years, almost \$7 million has been invested in Operation Loango, much of it in obtaining accreditation for eco-tourism. The park has been built: it elegantly designed buildings cater to single people, couples and families, and a lounge, bar and dining area overlooking a lagoon would be at home in a luxurious hotel. (The expense of getting to Gabon ensures that this is eco-tourism at the top end of the market.) Five outposts

clashed, to the Loango Lodge for a back-to-civilization dinner. A bird-watcher in the party is thrilled by the sight of a white-created tiger heron and Pel's fishing owl.

In the evening, the group visits a local village to watch a wild and exciting fire dance, which forms part of the Bwiti-sect initiation ritual. The music comes from drumming and the playing of a large mouth harp, an instrument unique to the area.

**Walk in the forest**

Another activity is forest walk near the Akaka waterfall, with a local guide who explains the importance of the various huge and aged trees and describes how the forest is developing. This interests the tourists, benefits the boatman — who walks the path regularly observing the same trees to note seasonal changes — and provides an opportunity for training guides.

The visitors also participate in a game drive across a patchwork of broad savanna grasslands and forest to Bassi, which reveals sights of chimps and buffalo. There the tourists have a rendezvous with young students, who are part of a team from the Max Planck Institute studying gorillas and chimps. Their immediate task is to "habituate"

one chimpanzee and two gorilla groups — that is, to accustom them to being observed so that eventually the presence of onlookers does not distort their behavior. Cordia and chimp watching will be a major draw for visitors, especially in conjunction with the unique opportunity to see whales breaching and big game on the beach.

Kayaking on 'Lout' Lagoon leads to a sandy beach, with elephants and buffalo in the distance. There, one can fish or swim in a warm sea. In the evening, a freshly caught fish joins meat to be cooked on a log fire as part of a beach picnic. This is not the season for the beach-watching, which is a major attraction.

But these tourists, standing next to their grilling fish and watching the sun go down on a scene far removed from the troubled industrial world they will return to, feel a lasting peace settle on them. This is an unequalled African experience.

KEN WOODRIDGE ■ Paris

# Loango dreaming: One man's idea became a reality

Rombout Swaborn's parents are Dutch, but he spent part of his childhood in Gabon, not far from the area that became the Loango National Park. His father, worked for Shell, and his mother taught at a local school. Swaborn came to Gabon as a young man to be a teacher. He saw the degradation that was threatening the unspoiled natural beauty there, mostly through uncontrolled logging (asked by the right of a lagoon clogged with glass logs floated down from the forest). He also became aware that if the world could witness Gabon's environmental richness, the tourism potential would be huge.

While working in the oil industry, Swaborn developed a simpler and efficient way for oil rigs to separate oil from water and other impurities. Highly valued by the oil companies, this system has enabled Swaborn

born to set up a profitable company of his own devoted to engineering development and technological research. As a result, he is at age 44, able to command the sort of investment: Operation Loango needs.

As conservation of the environment was his principal aim, Swaborn approached non-governmental international organizations in the field. While the World Wildlife Fund was slow to respond (through the WWF is involved in new Loango projects), an enthusiastic partner in early 2000, Operation Loango was born. The next year, President Bongo, spurred on by the WCS and the American conservationist Michael Fay (with Swaborn playing a role), made his historic decision to create 13 national parks in Gabon, one being Loango. This was highly encouraging to Operation Loango, which has enjoyed close government cooperation ever since.

In an interview at Loango Lodge, Swaborn

said that the efficiency derived from business practices has been apparent from the start. It would be normal for a non-governmental organization to take as long as 10 years to get this sort of venture off the ground. Operation Loango was operating within three years and is now on course to fulfill its plan to break even within five — that is, by the end of 2005.

Ambitious plans for expansion look toward attracting investment of as much as \$40 million by 2010. At Loango itself, the main necessity is expanding the means of transporting tourists into and around the park, by air, boat or vehicle.

Smith African Airways may (it is hoped) introduce a direct Johannesburg-Libreville-New York flight. This could make life much easier for American tourists, who now have to travel via Paris. Construction is also continuing at Loango Lodge and the five outposts that will house tourists in different parts of the park, as well as on walkways

and observation platforms. All the buildings are carefully designed — mostly by a Gabonese architect — so as not to clash with the forest environment. Internationally renowned architects will design future structures.

Plans are about to spread similar operations to other national parks — Minkébé in the north, Ivindo in the center and the Bateke Plateaus in the east, being first in line. Swaborn says the plan is to be able to provide 500,000 nights a year (to use a tourist industry measure) by 2010. This means some 50,000 people coming to Gabon each year. (Prospectus from this would be spread beyond the national parks — to Libreville's hotels, shops, cultural activities and nightlife, for instance.)

If Operation Loango continues to progress past the break-even point at the end of 2005, it will begin to be profitable. It is right that investors should get a return, Swaborn says. In fact, it is essential if more

## Sustaining national parks ■ Economic benefits abound

# A win for nature, a win for visitors

René Adiloheno, who heads the CNPN, the government department in charge of Gabon's 13 national parks, continued in an interview that the government is entirely behind the Operation Loango initiative. President Bongo's decision to create the 13 parks placed Gabon in the lead among African countries taking conservation measures, he says, and Operation Loango is pointing the way to further development. While statistics about the future are only speculative, Adiloheno foresees the possibility of 100,000 tourists a year coming to Gabon by 2015. He says he thinks tourism might eventually contribute as much as 8 percent to Gabon's gross domestic product.

However, Gabon's prosperity would always be based on oil (about 40 percent of GDP), mining (notably of manganese and uranium) and logging (which causes environmental problems). He cautions about oil's diminishing asset and might run out in 12 years. (Known reserves in 2004 were estimated at 2.5 billion barrels, while production runs at about 290,000 barrels a day). Adiloheno says gloomy predictions, which have been made for years, have always been proved wrong.

For more information on Loango, see its Web site: [www.operation-loango.com](http://www.operation-loango.com) Tel: 00 31 26 370 5587

Much work is being done in finding new oil fields to exploit.

Logging presents a complicated problem. The wood in the forests represents a huge natural asset. One tall tree (probably hundreds of years old) of the prized dougou wood could be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, but cutting it down causes not only the loss of a beautiful tree, it causes a rent in the forest canopy, changing the light and atmosphere of a large area and spreading destruction.

Logging requires roads and tracks through the forest that can result in large-scale erosion and loss of topsoil (and an encroaching threat to people, especially on slopes). It also disrupts the migratory patterns of wildlife and makes it easier to commercially exploit bush meat.

What is the answer? Logging is banned in all 13 parks, which helps. Also the logging companies have been encouraged to practice in the areas bordering the parks a type of sustainable logging that minimizes damage. The prospectivity brought by the discovery of oil in the early 1970s had been real. Gabon's per-capita GDP is four times higher than that of most other sub-Saharan African countries. This obviously brings benefits to the Gabonese citizens, in terms of health care, schools, roads and more. Bou Adiloheno says, the difficulty with the oil, mining and logging industries is they don't require much local employment and don't change the quality of life for Gabon's people.

The development of tourism — together with other activities con-

investment is to be attracted. But making money has never been the main aim.

"The emphasis has always been on conservation," he says, "on making protection of the environment independent of ad-

In addition to conservation, he says, the Operation Loango priorities are: 1) involvement of the local population, by providing training, education and jobs (he is pleased to be reaching the stage where Gabonese are taking over middle-management responsibilities in the organization); 2) cooperation,

## Employing local guides ■ Their role is priceless

# Helping tourists and scientists

Loango National Park, 16 young men (aged from 20 to 35) have completed an initial three-month training program to become eco-guides.

The full complement of 21 will be filled soon. Similar training programs are on course in Gabon's 12 other national parks. The Loango 16 are now undertaking basic tourist guiding, by 4x4 vehicles, boats, kayaks and on foot. They also know

beautiful parts of the forest, savannas and meadows, and on sportfishing occasions.

In time, they will develop specialist knowledge in some fields to help bird-watchers spot and identify rarer species, explain in scientific detail why turtles lay their eggs on the beach, describe how eating the root of the iboga plant can produce psychedelic reactions — which explains the abnormal behavior of elephants in some areas — and more.

The eco-guides are also there to assist scientists doing research in the national parks. Help is often needed, for instance in the delicate and complicated operations involved in taking DNA samples from whales and attaching collars with GPS/radio transmitters to elephants. Both activities help the scientists learn about the migratory habits of whales and elephants, which is important for their protection, when they migrate beyond the borders of the park. Eco-tourists regularly in the areas, as well as mounting various Operation Loango satellite camps — established as joint tourist bases and scientific data gathering for eco-guides, it also enables them to act as the eyes and ears for the park con-

servationist (chief warden) and the state department of the CNPN Eaux et Forêts (Water and Forests) reporting illegal fishing, hunting, logging and more.

Eco-guides spread among the local people (both officially during meetings and especially socially among their families) information about the parks, their boundaries and their purpose. The basic mes-

## This one won't go on the trophy wall: Fishing ethics

The lagoons of Loango National Park and the sea of its coast are exceptionally rich in fish. This is because of the reef, mangrove-combination diversity habitat of the enormous lagoon systems, coupled with Gabon's low population density, meaning that the waters have not been overfished, as they have been elsewhere in Western Africa. An angler says he caught more in one hour in the lagoon at Loango than he had in a year elsewhere. Fishing in a similar region of weekends (though in the lagoon trophy catches larger than 27 pounds are returned to the water. Special equipment is provided to encourage tourism and stress to the fish during the hauling and release process. The fishermen get to keep a photograph. A picture is worth a thousand words.



Atlantic tarpon — the one that got away. All catches over 22 pounds (9.97 kilograms) are released.

OPERATION LOANGO

Rombout Swaborn, who spent much of his childhood in Gabon, was the mastermind behind the conservation and tourism project Operation Loango, within the country's Loango National Park.

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with scientific research projects, currently concerning whales, goniads, elephants, crocodiles, marine turtles, artisanal fishing and forest botany; 3) the maintenance of a high level of quality in everything delivered and done; and 4) the observance of strict business principles and practices.

Swaborn now devotes some 20 percent of his time to Operation Loango, which involves making several visits a year to Gabon. "I find it enormously rewarding," he says.



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