0141711: Survey of Nigeria-Cameroon Chimpanzee in the Oban Hills, Nigeria

Host country: Nigeria

Project site: Oban Hills Division Cross River National Park, Cross River State
Project Duration: September 2011- April 2012

Participating organizations: Cross River National Park and Wildlife Conservation Society, Nigeria

Project Goal: To assess the population status and threats facing the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee in the Oban, Cross River National Park Nigeria

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Management of the Cross River National Park (CRNP)

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SECTION 1

PROJECT SUMMARY

A survey of Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzees *Pan trogolydes ellioti* in the Oban division of Cross River National Park (CRNP) was conducted from September 2011 to March 2012. During the survey, 36 reconnaissance "recce" transect paths were walked with transect lengths ranging from 2km to 11.4km. A total distance of 175.34 km was covered during the survey. Direct searches were also carried out in specific areas where locals had previously encountered chimpanzees. This survey identified rocky forest hills of the Oban as the preferred habitat of chimpanzees as all chimpanzee signs were encountered only in such habitats. Thirteen major threats were identified and classified as direct threats to species or indirect threats through habitat alteration. Local attitudes towards the chimpanzees in the Oban division Cross River National Park was assessed using questionnaires and interviews. Based on these assessments and surveys, members of some local communities were selected for a conservation education and awareness workshop. Secondary school students from six surrounding communities were engaged in lectures/discussions on the importance

of the chimpanzees and the Oban hills forest. A television programme which focused on conservation was aired and a newspaper article on the chimpanzees was published in several national newspapers to sensitize the general public on the urgent need to conserve the species.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee is one of the rarest apes on earth, and is endemic to Nigeria and Cameroon. It is designated as an endangered species by the International Union of Conservation of Nations (Morgan et al 2011). To effectively manage and conserve this species and prevent its extinction, it is important to obtain reliable population estimates and identify major threats to its survival in areas where it is known to occur. Such data will aid plans and management decisions for the conservation of the species in line with the recent regional action plan launched by Nigeria and Cameroon towards the conservation of this chimpanzee.

This project is aimed at providing baseline data on the population status of the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee in the Oban Hills; identifying threats to the species and creating awareness on this endangered chimpanzee in Nigeria. It is intended that the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee to be used as a flagship species to draw attention to other species of conservation importance in this research-deficient biodiversity hotspot in Nigeria.

Cross River National Park (CRNP) is one of the most important protected areas within the internationally recognized Gulf of Guinea biodiversity hotspot (Myers *et al*, 2000; Oates *et al.*, 2004). It includes the southern Oban Division encompassing the Oban Hills and the Okwango Division. The Oban division has been neglected as there have been very few recent studies in the area. This region is thought to be the last stronghold of a significant portion of pristine tropical forest in Nigeria and is said to be the most diverse protected forest in West Africa (Eniang *et al.,* 2008). It is part of the sites known to have high numbers of non human primate species in Nigeria (Kormos 2003).

This project from the onset was funded by the Conservation Leadership Programme (CLP). Additional funding was also received from the Rufford Small Grants Foundation (RSG)

The management of the CRNP, under the Nigerian National Park Services (NNPS), provided support for this project by facilitating research permit and releasing its staff to work with us.

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Nigeria having been actively involved in primate conservation in the southern region of Nigeria for some years provided the much needed support in this project as well as some field equipment needed by the team.

Financial support towards team training before the project began was also received from Mr Phillip Hall then chairman governing board of the A. P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute (APLORI), Jos Nigeria.

Leaders of eleven communities living within and around the Oban division of the CRNP helped to get the cooperation of members of their communities which greatly facilitated the conservation education and outreach programme. They also provided field porters that worked with the team in different parts of the study area.

BACKGROUND

The Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee (*Pan trogolodytes ellioti*) is the most endangered chimpanzee and current knowledge of its population is scant and based mostly on rough estimates (Morgan *et al.,* 2011). Hunting of chimpanzees to supply the bush meat trade is considered the greatest threat to their survival but habitat loss is also significant. A recently prepared IUCN action plan for the species lists the Oban Hills as an Exceptional Priority Site (Morgan *et al.,* 2011). Consequently, there is need to assess the population status and threats facing the species in the Oban hills. An awareness campaign is needed in surrounding communities to focus on the chimpanzee as a flagship species.

PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS

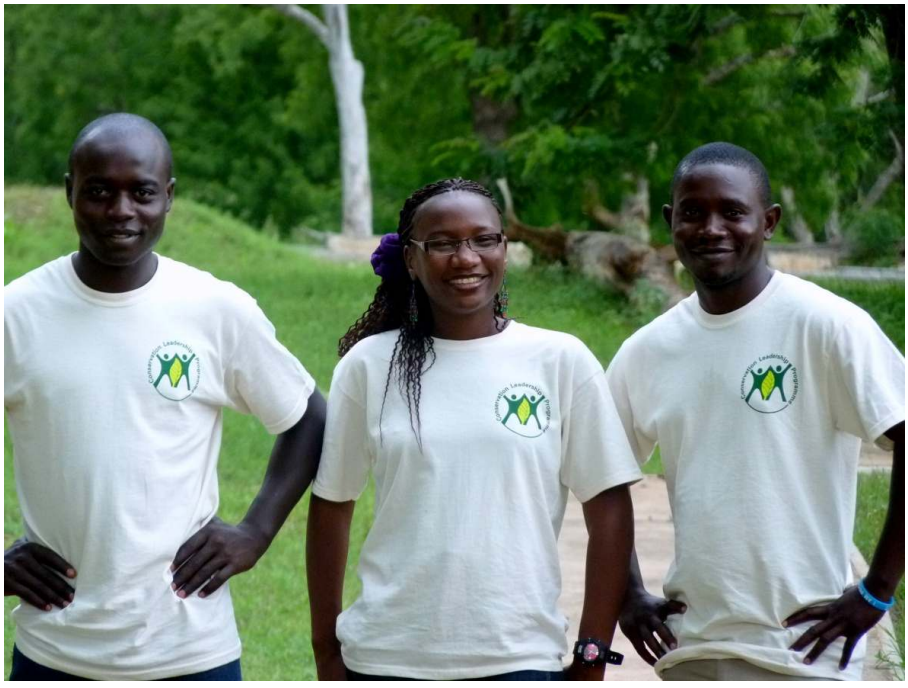

Figure 1: Project Team – Gwom (L), Jennifer (M) and Paul (R)

Jennifer Arubemi Agaldo – Project team Leader

Jennifer studied Botany at the University of Jos, Nigeria and went on to do an MSc in Applied Conservation Biology where her interest in biodiversity conservation developed. She is passionate about conservation and always eager to participate in biodiversity conservation research as well as implementing research informed conservation actions. As team leader Jennifer was responsible for the overall coordination of this project. She liaised with the different stakeholders involved, oversaw the team's welfare, logistics, field research activities and report production. At the end of this project Jennifer did an internship on data management the University of St Andrews Scotland. She is currently seeking opportunities to actively participate in biodiversity conservation as well as do a PhD in Conservation Biology to further equip her for a research, teaching and active involvement in Biodiversity Conservation.

Gwom Thomas Gwom

Gwom is a young scientist who obtained a B.Sc in Zoology in 2007 and later graduated in 2010, from the A. P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute, with a Masters degree in Conservation biology. He was able to bring to bear his experience in data management and analysis, and Conservation education during this project.

Paul Tersoo Apervega

Paul is a graduate of Zoology with an MSc in Conservation Biology. After graduation in 2010 from the A.P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute (APLORI) in Jos, he engaged in a consultancy project with the Federal Department of Livestock, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development on the role of domestic ducks in outbreaks of Highly pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) virus in Nigeria for Nigeria Avian Influenza Control and Human Pandemic Preparedness and Response Project (NAICP). He also worked on the Population Biology of Cattle egrets (*Bubulcus ibis),* where he was active in blood sampling for its characterization using genetic markers. During this project, Paul was responsible for community sensitization and negotiations for its smooth running. He is presently seeking for a PhD position in Molecular Genetics

SECTION 2

2.1 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this project was to improve knowledge of the conservation status of the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee in the Oban Hills by providing baseline information on the species in the area and use it as a flagship species for by providing information on conserving the Oban Division of the CRNP. The specific objectives were:

1. To determine the population status of the Nigerian-Cameroon chimpanzees and their associated threats in Oban.

2. To assess local attitudes towards the chimpanzees and their habitat

3. Based on this assessment, to develop and implement a conservation education campaign to improve levels of conservation awareness of the chimpanzee.

4. To develop the knowledge, skills and research capabilities of the three team members, national park rangers and local people involved.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

Study site

The Oban division of (CRNP) is one of the forests in West Africa known to be part of the gulf of guinea biodiversity hotspots of conservation concern (Myers *et al*., 2002) covering an area of 2800km^2. (Latitudes 5^{0}15' and 5^{0}25' N, and longitudes 8^{0}30' and 8^{0}45' E). It makes up a core of the larger zone of the Cross River National Park (CRNP) which also borders the Korup National Park (KNP) Cameroon. It is part of the region thought to have the last stronghold of significant portion of pristine tropical forest in Nigeria and said to be the most diverse protected forest in West Africa (Eniang *et al.,* 2008).

The vegetation type is described as lowland and submontane rainforest which has an annual rainfall of 3000mm, elevation ranging from 200m-1000m and temperature range of 23◦C-37◦C. The forest is known for its species richness as well as home to some endemic species of conservation priority. It is one of the most ornithologically diverse sites in Nigeria and home to over 350 bird species, hence it is one of the Important Bird Areas (IBA) in the country (BirdLife., 2012). The area is surrounded by about 25 villages and enclave communities and a few of the enclave communities are situated within the boundaries of the National Park.

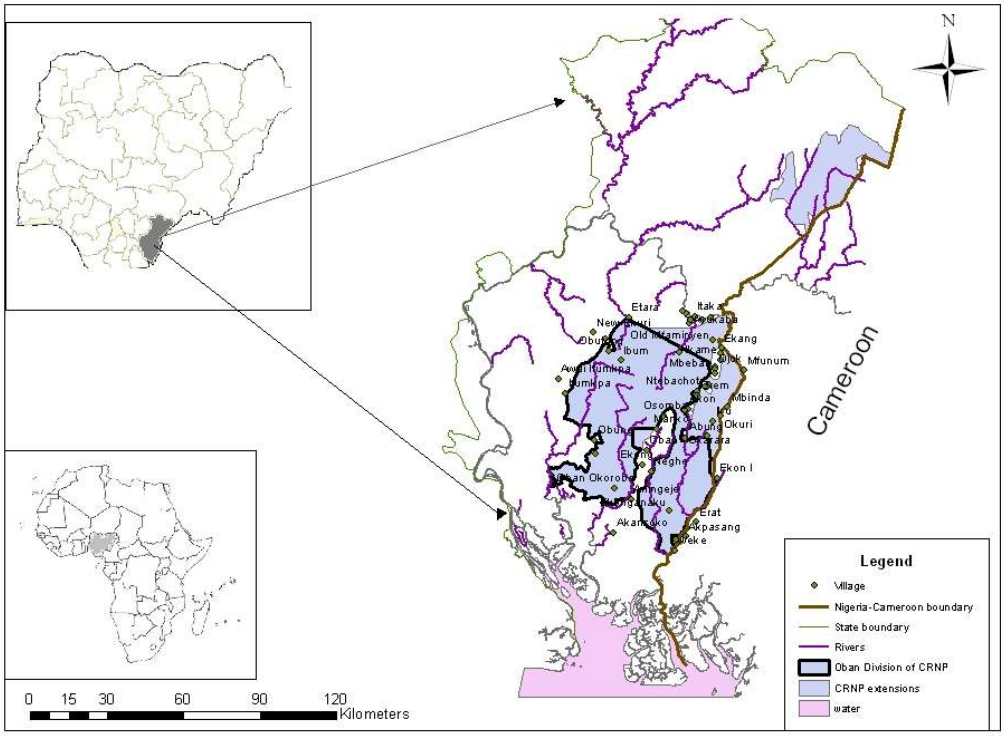

Figure 2: Map of Nigeria showing the Oban Division CRNP.

2.2.2 Preliminary Surveys

This entailed visiting leaders of local communities closest to part of the park scheduled to be surveyed to inform them of our presence in their locality, indicating intent to interact with members of their community, identifying/engaging local field assistants and subsequently strategizing for a suitable camp location within the study area for the survey team.

During such visits, tokens of wine were offered to the leaders of the communities as it is a customary requirement when visiting local communities in southern Nigeria for the purpose of collaboration.

The team was granted permission to interact with members of the community, engage a local field assistant and administer questionnaires/interviews with the aim of assessing local attitudes towards the chimpanzees and the Oban forest.

2.2.2 Materials Used

Hand-held GARMIN 60® and GARMIN CSx® Global Positioning Systems (GPS) were used to mark chimpanzee nest encountered as well as other signs. A compass was used to guide transects walks. A Sony camera was used to capture interesting and significant images during field surveys.

2.2.3 Survey Technique

The guided reconnaissance "recce" walk survey method was used. This is based on the line transect survey method and it is considered more informative than the travel "recce" which is a random walk that allows deviation of any degree (Kühl *et al*.,2008). Recce walks are therefore a linear foot survey along predetermined compass bearings with deviations from the line of less than 40°. During the survey, deviations from predetermined directions were kept to a minimum except when terrain or vegetation made it impossible to continue in a straight line. When difficult terrain was encountered; such as rivers and vegetation requiring large deviations (> 40°), a transect walk was ended and another begun.

To be able to cover a good representation of the large study area, recce walks and direct searches were strategically carried out in most of the study area using 11 communities situated within/around eastern and western Oban to access the different parts of the area.

2.2.4 Data collection

Data was collected between the period of September 2011 and March 2012. Along each guided recce walk, all chimpanzees, other primates and mammals, large birds (which include Hornbills, Turacos, Parrots and Guinea fowls) and their signs (sighted, calls, dung, nest, foot prints/trails) observed were recorded. All evidence of human activity heard and seen was recorded. Distance covered during each walk was noted.

Figure 3: Chimpanzee feeding sign found beneath an idenfitied chimpanzee nest

Figure 4: Chimpanzee nest

2.2.5 Statistical Analysis

Data was compiled using the Microsoft Excel® 2007 spread sheet. Encounter rates of faunal species and possible threats observed were also calculated using the same software. ArcGIS® was used to digitize a scanned copy of the map of Oban and create a map showing the study area and distribution map of chimpanzee nests encountered during the survey.

2.3 OUTPUTS AND RESULTS

Fourteen chimpanzee nests were encountered during the survey and chimpanzee calls were heard on three different occasions. Three of the nests were found during the guided recce walk survey while 11 were encountered during direct searches carried out based on information from hunters. All nests encountered were found in the rocky forest habitat at two different sites. A map showing where these nests were encountered within the Oban division in the CRNP was made (Figure 5).

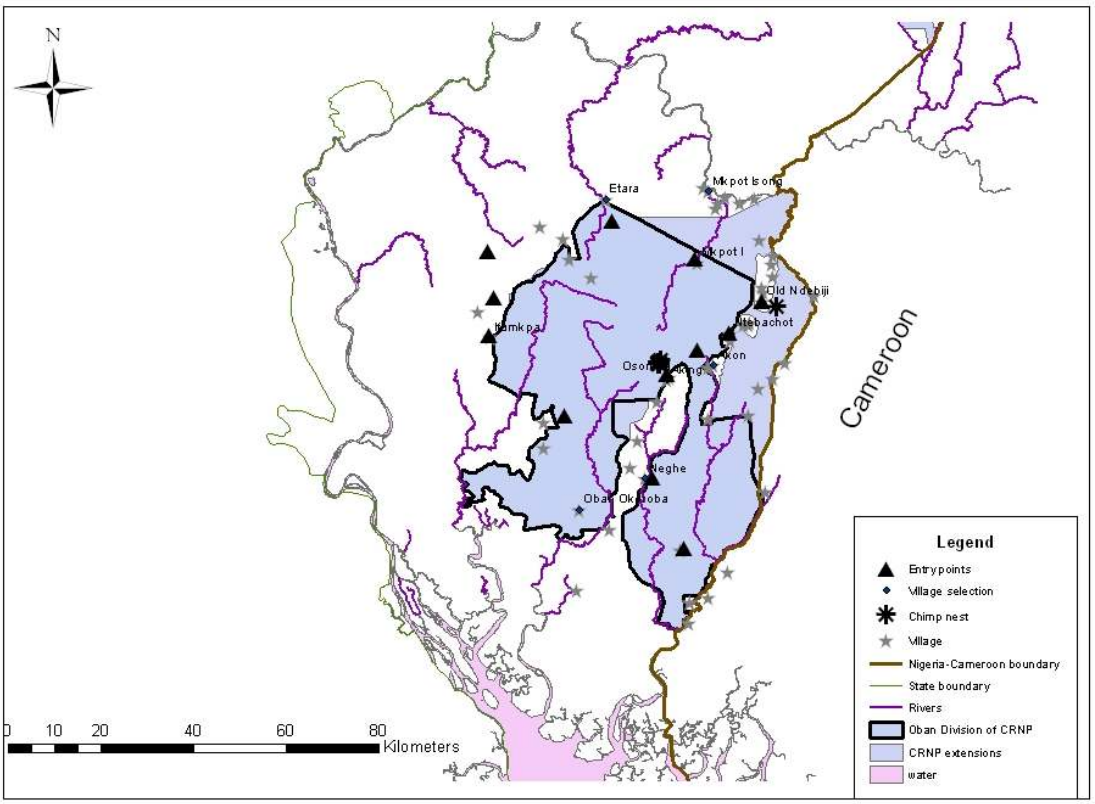

Figure 5: Chimpanzee Nest Locations, Oban Forest, CRNP.

A total of thirteen potential threats to the Oban forest were identified during the guided recce walk survey (Table 1). Encounter rates of these threats were calculated and threats with an encounter rate of ≥0.5km^2 were considered as the greatest threats to the chimpanzees and other fauna of the Oban forest. These include: spent cartridges, presence of wire snares, farms and logged trees. Spent cartridges and hunters snares indicate high hunting pressure while presence of farms and logged wood indicate habitat disturbance and degradation.

Figure 5: Spent Cartridges in the Oban forest CRNP.

Figure 7: Carcass of Red-rumped putty nosed monkey shot by poacher

Figure 8: Poachers shed in Oban Forest, CRNP.

Figure 9: Logged wood in the Oban forest, CRNP.

Figure 10: Young chimpanzee and its mother killed by a poacher

Table 1: Identified threats and encounter rates

S/n	Disturbance variable	Number encountered	Encounter rate (km_2)
1	Farms	118	0.673
2	Logged wood	127	0.724
3	Non Timber Forest Product (NTFP) collection	26	0.148
4	Chainsaw heard	14	0.079
5	Poachers shed	13	0.074
6	Bush meat (Animal Carcasses)	16	0.091
7	Trails (foot/tractor)	75	0.428
8	Individuals encountered	70	0.399
9	Fuel wood collection	14	0.078
10	Spent Cartridges	164	0.935
11	Gun shots	8	0.046
12	Snares	160	0.912
13	Other(Evidence of human presence)	15	0.085
	TOTAL	**820**	**4.676**

Encounter rate > 0.5 km_2 highlighted in yellow.

Local attitudes towards the chimpanzees and the Oban forest was assessed, and from interactions with members of local communities within and around the Oban, it was discovered that about 80% of individuals from (15 individuals from each community) 7 communities (Osomba, Aking, Mpkot, Old ndebeji, Oban Okoroba, Ekonganaku and Neghe) interviewed knew little about the status of the chimpanzee as an endangered species with a declining population. Ninety two per cent admitted eating bush meat; 5% of this group said they ate all kinds of meat except chimpanzee while, 88% ate all kinds of bush meat including chimpanzee.

Figure 11: Team conducting interviews and administering questionnaire in a local community

Four communities; Aking, Osomba, Oban-Okoroba and the Old Ndebeji communities were selected for conservation education and workshop as 3 of which were closest to the parts of the park where chimpanzee signs were observed (Table 2).

Figure 12: Conservation Education and reaching out to youths of Osomba Community

Figure 13: Team with leaders of Aking and Osomba community after workshop

Figure 14: Reaching out to young people in the community secondary school Aking

Table 2: Summary of conservation education and awareness activities carried out within selected local communities

Community	Activity	Targeted audience	Number participants	Participating organization	Materials distributed
Aking/ Osomba	Workshop	Community leaders/young Adults	73	Rangers CRNP	T-shirt
Aking	Talk	Children	126	Rangers CRNP	Notebooks and T-shirts
Old Ndebeji	Workshop	Adults	15	Rangers CRNP	T- shirts
Oban Okoroba	Workshop	Community leaders	15	Rangers CRNP	T-shirts

2.4 ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPACTS

The team was able to strategically survey the Oban division of the CRNP assessing the status of the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee and found only 14 nests at two sites, suggesting that this species is in need of urgent attention to prevent it from being eliminated from the area. Rocky forest hills of the Oban were identified as the likely preferred habitat of chimpanzees in the area as all chimpanzee nests encountered during the survey were on such hills. Hence subsequent surveys should pay close attention to this part of the forest. Data on scale abundance of other primates, mammal groups and birds selected as indicator species was also collected and reported giving an idea of encounter rate of faunal species in the area. We report 13 potential threats to the chimpanzees and the forest with their encounter rates providing information on the current status of the forest as up-to-date information on the area had been lacking (Eniang *et al.,* 2008).

Through a Conservation Education and awareness workshop, 4 communities were sensitized on the need to conserve the species and leaders of a key community (community living in close proximity to one of the identified chimpanzee habitats) confirmed their willingness to collaborate with us to develop ways to mitigate illegal activities (hunting and logging) for protection of the chimpanzee and the forest.

Interaction with secondary school students of one of the communities near the study area resulted in the establishment of the first conservation club in the school. With the necessary funding, the team will be happy work with the students to improve their knowledge about the environment and actively engage them in protecting the Oban Forest. Students volunteered as helpers for subsequent field surveys.

A strong relationship was established between the team and the research and protection unit of the CRNP and this is seen as vital to future collaborative efforts for the conservation of the Oban.

Articles on the chimpanzee and the threats to their survival were published in 4 National newspapers in Nigeria. Further emphasis was placed on their conservation as a priority in Nigeria and the Oban forest through a talk show aired on television by the Cross River Broadcasting Corporation. These generated a lot of interest in the chimpanzees among the general public evidenced by calls and e-mails from people wanting to know more about the chimpanzees and indicating interest to work with the team on future projects.

SECTION 3

3.1 Conclusion

This project was able to confirm the presence of the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzees in the Oban division of CRNP amidst concerns about their current status in this area. However, the few nests encountered, feeding signs and chimpanzee calls heard suggest that chimpanzees in this forest occur at very low densities in a narrow range of rocky forest hills which are not easily accessible to humans.

The greatest threats facing the chimpanzee and other faunal species in the Oban were identified to be hunting evidenced by spent cartridges and hunters' snares encountered and habitat degradation by farming and logging activities observed in the forest. These threats are thought to have direct and indirect effects on the chimpanzee and other faunal species abundance in the forest. The overall 4.676/km^2 encounter rate of threats compared to overall 2.829/km^2encounter rate of faunal species (which mostly included large forest birds) is alarming showing that on every kilo meter work approximately 5 different threats to the forest and its species were encountered while only 3 faunal species were encountered. This calls for urgent tightening of protection enforcement activities of the Oban.

Awareness of the status of the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzees among members of local communities within and around the Oban is low as hunting and trading of the chimpanzees and other faunal species for bush meat is ongoing. As such, strategic conservation education in this region is needed to reduce human induced impact on the chimpanzees and the Oban forest.

Collaborative action involving the NNPS, CRNP, Scientific community, Conservation non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), local communities and the general public is required to protect remaining population of the chimpanzees from local extinction in the Oban as well as other species in the forest. Protection and conservation of the chimpanzees in the

Oban will not just be beneficial for the survival of the species but also for the survival of other primate and mammals species of conservation importance in this remaining fragment of the most diverse tropical rain forest in Nigeria.

3.2 Problems encountered and lessons learnt

At the end of a preliminary survey, the team discovered that the proposed distance line transect survey method was unsuitable for this survey in the Oban. This was due to low chimpanzee and chimpanzee sign encounter rate as well as the obviously sparse distribution of these species and their signs, which would not provide sufficient data for reliable density estimate analysis using the Distance® software. As such an alternative and more suitable method known as the guided reconnaissance transect walks also based on the line transect survey method was adopted.

Unfavourable weather conditions expressed in frequent rainfall affected the commencement of field surveys as planned; fieldwork started 2 weeks later than the scheduled start date. These weather conditions and difficult terrain of the study area slowed the pace of fieldwork.

The team was unable to survey some parts of the Oban due to difficult terrain, time and financial constraints as well as lack of field guides who knew the area well enough to guide the team to these parts.

Lack of sufficient field equipment at the initial stage of the project also affected the pace of work. This was overcome by obtaining additional funding from the Rufford Small Grants foundation (RSG) to purchase more equipment.

Most of the park rangers assigned to work with the team lacked adequate knowledge of the study area. This affected their effectiveness as field assistants/guides to the team. To overcome this problem, additional field guides were hired from local communities as they had better knowledge of the study area.

Since additional field assistants and porters which were not budgeted for were hired, the funds for their remuneration were insufficient at the initial stage. This would have been a major set-back to the completion of the project but for an additional grant obtained from the Rufford Small Grants.

The lessons learnt include: experience in project design, planning, execution and management; Exposure to different methods for primate survey was very important as different methods were tried out before a suitable method for the study area and the species was chosen. Additional field experience on conservation/ecological research in forested areas was also gained. Firsthand experience on interacting with local communities

and working together to protect species and habitats was also gained. This skill was lacking in the team and we realized it would be useful to include such training in the curriculum for conservation studies in our schools.

Collaboration with different stakeholders such as CRNP, WCS, media and local communities was also learnt as the team realised that some collaborations work while some may not work and is still learning how to engage in meaningful collaborations with different stakeholders to achieve goals of common interest.

3.3 In the future

Findings from this project will be disseminated to scientific community through scientific publications in peer-reviewed journals on status of the Chimpanzees and threats to its survival in this key biodiversity-rich region and presentations in relevant seminars and conferences to raise the much needed awareness for the neglected Oban division of CRNP. In addition, social media will be targeted to raise awareness on the plight of the chimpanzee and gain public support.

Collaborations formed as a result of this project with the different stakeholders and new interested stakeholders such as the media will be built upon as discussions with these stakeholders are on-going to develop an informed continuation strategy for the conservation and protection of the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee in the Oban and other regions of Nigeria where they occur. This will be developed and hopefully executed in line with the recently developed action plan for the species in Nigeria and Cameroon by the IUCN.

As a result of threats associated with the Oban division of CRNP, the team seeks to encourage and contribute to planning for strategic protection programme in collaboration with management of CRNP and interested conservation NGO's to save this biodiversity rich area from further degradation.

Some young Nigerian conservation scientists and social scientists have indicated interest in participating in future projects. New team members will be co-opted to form a larger team as well as build the capacity of more young Nigerian ecologists through participation in this project.

SECTION 4: APPENDICES

4.1. Table 3: Summary of Chimpanzee signs encountered during the recognisance survey walks and direct search.

s/n	Chimpanzee sign	GPS coordinates	Habitat type	Assess Community	Nest type	Altitude
1	Call		Forest	Osomba		
2	Nest	N5 27.744 E8 37.314	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	411
3	Nest	N5 27.731 E8 37.314	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	413
4	Nest	N5 27.701 E8 37.221	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	415
5	Feeding sign			Osomba		
6	Call		Rocky forest Hill	Osomba		
7	Nest	N5 34.448 E8 50.933	Rocky forest Hill	Old-ndebeji	Tree	661
8	Nest	N5 27.851 E8 37.292	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	344
9	Nest	N5 27.839 E8 37.287	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	349
10	Nest	N5 27.809 E8 37.255	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Ground	401
11	Nest	N5 27.809 E8 37.255	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Ground	401
12	Nest	N5 27.790 E8 37.252	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	410
13	Nest	N5 27.790 E8 37.252	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	410
14	Nest	N5 27.789 E8 37.187	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	491
15	Nest	N5 27.789 E8 37.187	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	491
16	Nest	N5 27.808 E8 37.178	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	591
17	Nest	N5 27.814 E8 37.167	Rocky forest Hill	Osomba	Tree	525

4.2. Table 4: List of Species/signs observed in the Oban Forest on reconnaissance walks during the survey

Mammals			
s/n	**Common Name**	**Scientific Name**	**Encounter rate (km_2)**
1	African Forest Elephant	*Loxodonta cyclotis*	*0.057*
2	Mongoose	*Herpestidae spp*	*0.416*
3	Pangolin	*Manidae spp*	*0.045*
4	Porcupine	*Hystricidae spp*	*0.216*
5	Duiker	*Cephalophus*	*0.228*
6	Red-river hog	*Potamochoerus porcus*	*0.125*
7	Squirrels	*Sciuridae spp*	*0.114*
8	Tree hyrax	*Dendrohyrax dorsalis*	*0.005*
Primates			
1	Cross River Allen's galago	*Galagoides alleni*	*0.005*
2	Demidoff's galago	*Galagoides demidoff*	*0.051*
3	Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee	*Pan trogolydes ellioti*	*0.062*
4	Mona Monkey	*Cercopithecus mona*	*0.028*
5	Red-capped Mangabey	*Cercocebus torquatus*	*0.005*
6	Red-rumped potty nosed monkey	*Cercopithecus nictitans ludio*	*0.222*
Birds			
1	African grey Parrot	*Psittacus erithacus*	*0.100*
2	African pied Hornbill	*Tockus fasciatus*	*0.205*
3	Black-Casqued Hornbill	*Ceratogymna atrata*	*0.826*
4	Guinea fowl	*Guttera pucherani*	0.005
5	Hadada Ibis	*Bostrychia hagedash*	*0.017*
6	Senegal Parrot	*Poicephalus senegalus*	*0.070*
7	Yellow-billed Turaco	*Tauraco macrorhyncus*	*0.011*
Reptiles			
1	Monitor Lizard	*Varanus spp*	*0.005*
2	Nile Crocodile	*Crocodylus niloticus*	*0.011*
3	Short boa(Snake)	*Ophidia sp.*	*0.005*
		Total	**2.829**

4.3. Media article

Home | Newsextra | **Alarm over chimpanzee extinction**

Alarm over chimpanzee extinction

By Damisi Ojo, Akure 18/01/2012 00:00:00
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There are fears that one of the endangered and recently recognized sub-species of chimpanzees seen only in Nigeria and Cameroon would soon disappear.

The alarm was raised by Nigerian conservation biologists who called on Nigerians to preserve the remaining few for posterity.

The biologists added that it was only in the last decade that "scientists recognized this specie as a distinct one," thereby correcting the initial impression that it was the same species of chimpanzees found in other parts of Africa.

The Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, whose scientific name is Pan troglodytes ellioti, is among the great apes found occurring naturally in the two countries hence the biologists' appeal for the urgent need of collaborative action involving all stakeholders and other well meaning individuals and organizations for its preservation.

According to Miss Jennifer Agaldo, leader of the team which carried out a survey in the Oban Hills division of Cross River National Park in the tropical rain forest belt of south-southern Nigeria, it has been observed that this rare chimpanzee specie has now become very difficult to spot in their habitat suggesting that there might be very few remaining.

The survey she disclosed was supported by the Conservation Leadership Programme (CLP), a partnership of four conservation organizations – BirdLife International, Conservation International, Fauna & Flora International, the Wildlife Conservation Society, whose goals are to promote the development of future conservation leaders and provide them with the capacity to address the most significant conservation issues of the time.

Agaldo said their mission was to assess the population status of the Nigerian-Cameroon chimpanzee and the threats to the species and their habitat and urged citizens not to leave the task of preservation to government alone as "government alone cannot provide the number and maintenance of rangers in protected areas, which is needed for effective patrols to minimize illegal hunting of the chimpanzees and other species and destruction of their habitat".

The team leader noted that the major threats facing the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee are the destruction of their habitat by cutting down trees in the forests for farming and timber purposes and hunting for protein needs of local communities living within and around the forests.

She maintained, “These chimpanzees are a national heritage and Nigerians should know that we are blessed and privileged to have these rare chimpanzees in the country and we should work towards protecting them and their habitat.

“Preserving these species, could potentially attract tourists as people around the world would be interested in visiting to see them. This would lead to global interest and more research opportunities within the country and the next generation of Nigerians would not just be told that such a species once existed in our country but rather witness them”

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Distribution list

Cross River National Park

Nigeria National Park Services

Wildlife Conservation Society

Selected and Interested media personnel