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Congo Basin Nature-Based Tourism Assessment

Gabon

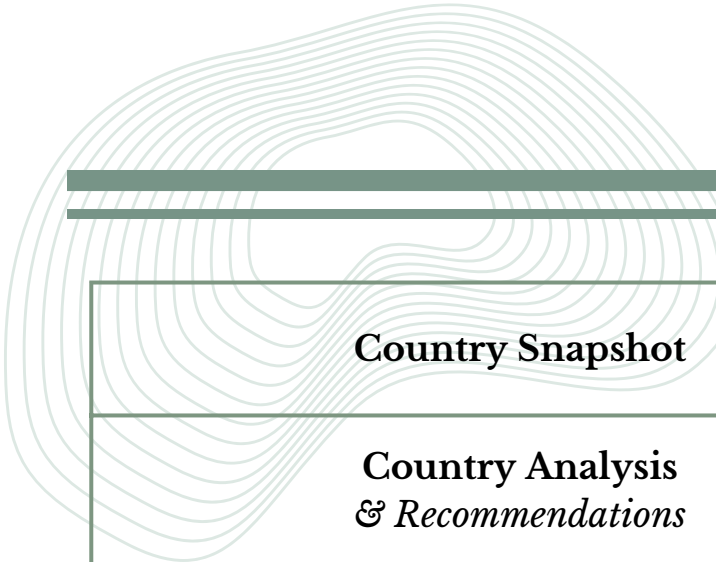
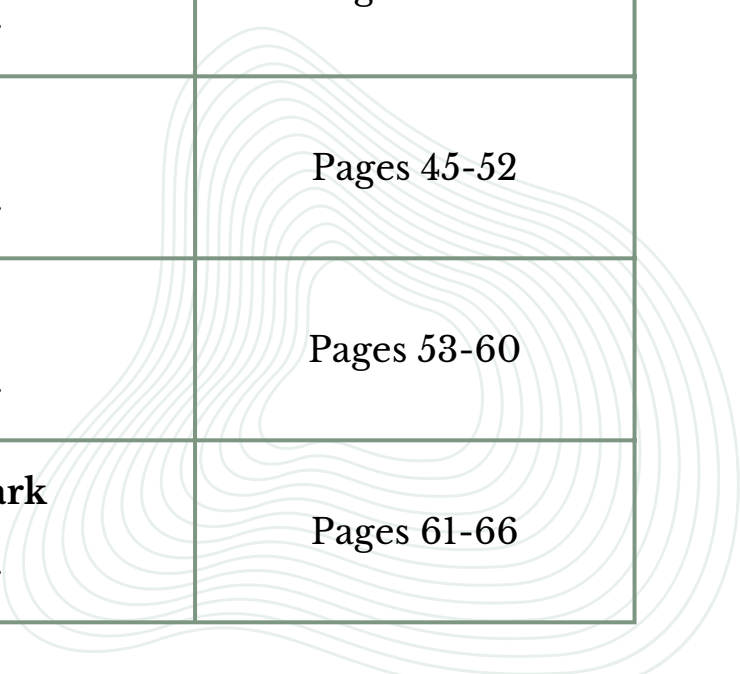


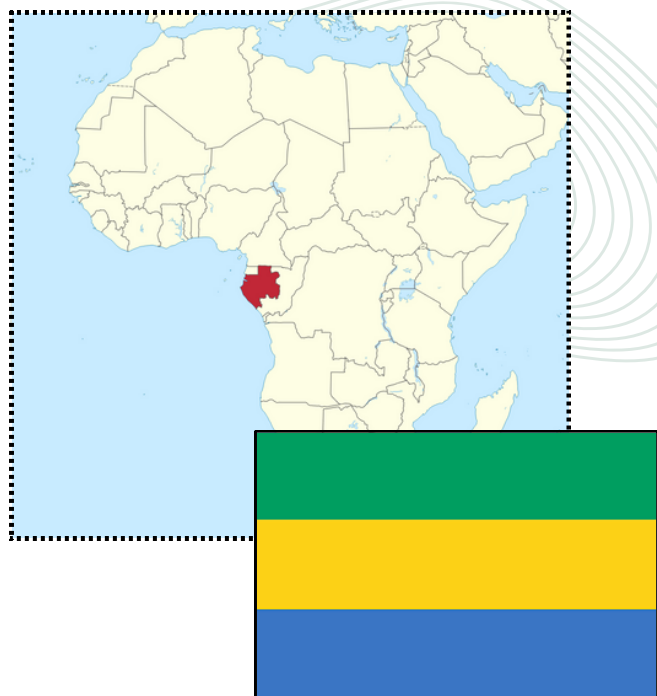
Table of Contents

Country Snapshot	Pages 1-2
Country Analysis & Recommendations	Pages 3-10
Priority Site Packets	Page 11
Destination Snapshot Key	Page 12
Ivindo National Park <i>Site Snapshot, Site Scorecard, Site Analysis, & Recommendations</i>	Pages 13-20
Lopé National Park <i>Site Snapshot, Site Scorecard, Site Analysis, & Recommendations</i>	Pages 21-29
Loango National Park <i>Site Snapshot, Site Scorecard, Site Analysis, & Recommendations</i>	Pages 30-37
Moukalaba-Doudou National Park <i>Site Snapshot, Site Scorecard, Site Analysis, & Recommendations</i>	Pages 38-44
Pongara National Park <i>Site Snapshot, Site Scorecard, Site Analysis, & Recommendations</i>	Pages 45-52
Akanda National Park <i>Site Snapshot, Site Scorecard, Site Analysis, & Recommendations</i>	Pages 53-60
Monts de Cristal National Park <i>Site Snapshot, Site Scorecard, Site Analysis, & Recommendations</i>	Pages 61-66



Destination Snapshot:

Target Country Gabon



Tourism Visa Information

E-Visa: ✓
Yes

Tourist Visa Cost:

- US, UK, and EU Citizens:
 - \$92 short stay visa, single entry (<3 months)

Supplementary Requirements:

- For US Citizens: Hotel reservation, agenda from an existing tour guide company, and flight itinerary.

Nuances of the visa process:

E-Visa applications take approximately 72 hours.

As of January 2024, the visa exemption process that was in place for some citizens, e.g. those from Europe and the USA, has been revoked. Visa applications now require a letter of invitation as well as a representative of the organization providing the letter of recommendation to be present at the airport on arrival of the visitor to sign documents.

National Tourism Strategies & Policy

In February 2020, the Gabon Ministry of Tourism, Trade, SMEs, and Industry developed the 2020-2025 National Tourism Strategy.

Due to this proximity to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is unclear how much of this strategy has been implemented.

Gabon's vision for tourism by 2025, as outlined in their National Strategy, is: "Gabon becomes the flagship destination for ecotourism in Africa and the flagship destination for business & events tourism in Central Africa."

6 strategic intervention points are outlined:

- Renovate the institutional and legal framework for tourism & strengthen governance
- Develop a culture of welcoming tourists
- Create the tourist offer and strong destination branding
- Guarantee sustainable financing
- Create zones of tourist interest (ZITs)
- Develop infrastructure and bring tourist facilities up to standard



National Tourism Associations

There were no specific national-level tourism associations found in Gabon. However...

In May 2023, the Gabon Ministry of Tourism hosted the African Sustainable Tourism Meetings, in partnership with the African Network of Tourism Professionals (RAPT), a continent-wide tourism association.

During this event, one of the specified goals was to "Strengthen the capacities of tourism professionals - including associations." It is unclear if this indicates the current existence of national-level associations or forward-thinking regarding future Gabonese tourism associations.

The UNWTO Tourism Dashboard & WTTC's Gabon Country Report

Estimated Travel & Tourism Jobs:
16,900, 3.2% of country total (2019)
15,500, 2.8% of country total (2022)

GDP Contribution:
\$510M USD/2.7% (2019)
\$420M USD/2.2% (2022)

Inbound Arrivals:
No data

International Visitor Spending:
\$60M USD (2019), \$30M USD (2022)

Domestic Visitor Spending:
\$350M USD (2019), \$300M USD (2022)

Top Source Markets (2022):
No data

Destination Snapshot:

Target Country Gabon

Online Presence

TripAdvisor

183 properties listed, low volume
2,129 hotel reviews

Product variation:

Budget: 15, MidRange: 25, Luxury: 5

57 'Things to Do' listed
10 tours linked for booking



Lonely Planet

24 'Must-See Sights'

No linked activities for booking

13 National Parks listed:

Lopé, Loango, Pongara, Mayumba, Ivindo,
Minkébé, Batéké Plateau, Monts de Cristal,
Akanda, Moukalaba-Doudou, Waka,
Mwagna



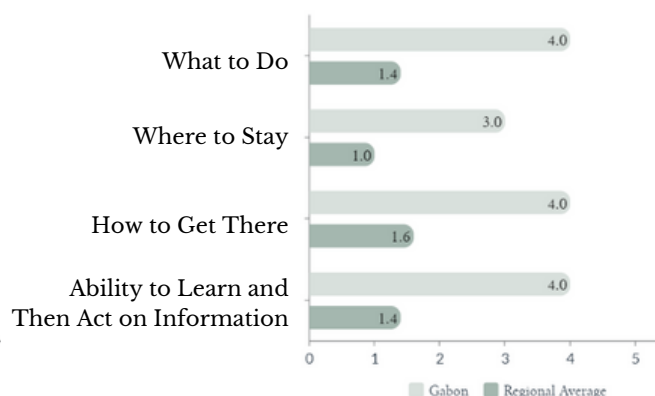
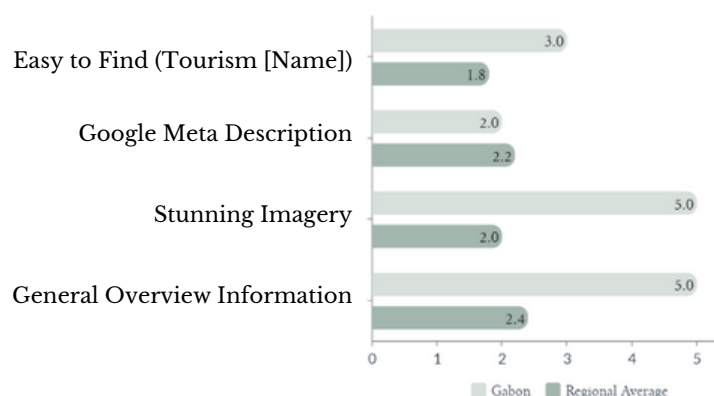
National Tourism Website: 'Discover Gabon'

Site is hard to find (google), but once found is stunning, well laid out and has good information for travelers to act on.

Overall Score: 75%
Regional Average: 35%



Tourism Website Ranking Criteria: 'Discover Gabon'



Major International Hubs

Leon-Mba International Airport (LBV)

Located in: Libreville, Gabon's capital city

Flight Volume: 18 direct destinations



Major routes:

- Paris, France
- Istanbul, Turkiye
- Casablanca, Morocco
- Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire
- Luanda, Angola
- Johannesburg, South Africa
- Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Non-major routes:

- Bamako, Mali
- Lome, Togo
- Cotonou, Benin
- Malabo, Cameroon
- Douala, Cameroon
- Yaounde, Cameroon
- Bata, Equatorial Guinea
- Sao Tome, ST&P
- Brazzaville, Rep. of Congo
- Pointe-Noire, Rep. of Congo
- Kigali, Rwanda

Top National Parks for Tourism, based on traveler content on TripAdvisor (2023)

Ivindo National Park



4.5/5 stars
8 Reviews

Akanda National Park



4.5/5 stars
9 Reviews

Moukalaba-Douou National Park



3/5 stars
2 Reviews

Country Analysis:

Gabon

Overview

Gabon has 62 total protected areas, covering 59,708km², including 13 terrestrial national parks that cover 11% of the country, protecting a mosaic of 6 ecosystems. Protection extends beyond the land, with wetlands and marine reserves contributing to a total protected area covering 22.44% of Gabon's landmass, as reported by Protected Planet. Gabon is ranked #16 globally on the Biodiversity & Habitat Category of the Environmental Performance Index (2022) [1], indicating a strong commitment from the government to protect its natural land-and-seascapes. Notably, the nation maintains an exceptionally low average annual deforestation rate of 0.0004%, the lowest rate in the world for a natural tropical forest.

Gabon has nearly 85% of its landmass covered by heavy equatorial rainforests. There are 885 km of coastline along the Gulf of Guinea and roughly 30 islands off the coast. The country is largely flat, but features 3 distinct landscape regions: “a narrow coastal plain, a hilly interior, and a savanna in the far-east and south.” [2] [3]

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of all the protected areas in Gabon. In some parks they have established concessions with private operators to run tourism facilities. There are no public-private-partnership agreements currently in place for organizations to manage or co-manage parks, as there are in other countries with organizations such as African Parks, although this may be an area for future exploration.

According to limited available public data from the early 2000's, Gabon had a 5-year average of 323,000 visitors a year. Gabon has not reported its national visitor arrivals for the last decade, so current international visitation is unknown. There is a need for better tourism data to support planning and decision making in the country for both government and the private sector. An e-visa system was established in the country to improve the visa application and processing process and facilitate travel to the country along with exemption for G20 member country nationals. However this has recently been rolled back and the application process now requires an official letter of invitation, often with the physical presence of the local inviting “representative” required at the airport. To boost tourism there is a need to re-establish the e-visa and exemption structure.

Since the political changes of late 2023, the new Government has restructured its Ministry of Water and Forests and created a new Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Human-Wildlife Conflict. The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) falls under to Presidency that has delegated it to the Ministry of Water and Forests. The Ministry of Tourism and Crafts oversees the National Agency for the Promotion of Tourism (AGATOUR). A 2020-2025 National Tourism Strategy has been developed that provides a vision for tourism in the country and identifies strategic interventions as well as six regions of Gabon that are a priority for tourism. Several of the protected areas shortlisted in this analysis fall within these areas of focus.

[1] Wolf, M. J., Emerson, J. W., Esty, D. C., de Sherbinin, A., Wendling, Z. A., et al. (2022). *2022 Environmental Performance Index*. New Haven, CT: Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy. [Epi.yale.edu](https://epi.yale.edu)

[2] Gabon Geography Report, CountryReports.org

[3] Gabon Country Profile, WorldData.info

Country Analysis: Gabon

Nature-Based Tourism

The 'Discover Gabon' website and marketing materials provide the country with a strong 'face' in the tourism market, especially compared to regional peers. Gabon has abundant natural resources and a diversity of habitats to attract visitors. Some of the highlights of the country's nature-tourism assets include the largest population of forest elephants in the world, significant populations and diversity of apes, the world's largest leatherback turtle nesting site, 659 species of birds and 10,000 species of plants (15% endemic).

Although tourism is occurring in the country, there is a lot of room for growth within the nature-based tourism sector. There are several significant tour operators and lodging companies operating in a select number of protected parks, but at a national scale the number of operators in the sector is limited. There are needs for service and facility improvements in and around protected areas, as well as general infrastructure improvements, to develop stronger tourism circuits in the country.

Despite Time Magazine rating Loango National Park as a top 50 destination for 2023, Gabon is still relatively unknown in the global tourism marketplace and most of the information currently in front of potential visitors is dominated by recent political changes. Promoting the positive stories of the country and its natural assets will be critical to the growth of tourism in Gabon.

Based on the screening process conducted by the assessment team, seven protected landscapes have significant short and medium-term tourism potential in the country:

- Ivindo National Park
- Lopé National Park
- Loango National Park
- Moukalaba-Doudou National Park
- Pongara National Park
- Akanda National Park
- Monts de Cristal National Park

Country Analysis: Gabon

Enabling Environment

Political Environment

The recent political changes in Gabon may give pause to potential travelers and investors (especially international high-value ecotourists) due to the uncertainty associated with these changes and how it might impact trips. However as this stabilizes these fears will likely subside and opportunity to attract visitors and investment may be more forthcoming. At the time of writing this report it is unclear the level of prioritization the government will give to tourism.

There is a need to see short-term results/impact from the sector to gain greater awareness at the political level. This could be achieved through high profile media and influencer campaigns to give Gabon a positive 'splash' on the global stage and build awareness within the country as well as internationally. This would also help to re-engage with international visitors to position the country as a safe place to travel and highlight the positive aspects that Gabon has to offer. Kenya is a good model for such campaigns, where they have overcome negative global press through effective storytelling about the positive attractions of the country.

Doing Business

According to stakeholder surveys, Gabon is relatively easier to do business in compared to other countries in the Congo Basin. This is however relative and Gabon ranks 169 out of 190 countries globally and 35 in Africa measured for overall 'ease of doing business.' Although low, this is one of the best rankings of the five Congo Basin countries surveyed (Cameroon is ranked 34 in Africa).

Breaking the ranking down further, Gabon ranks 16 in Africa for opening a business (a much better ranking than countries like Uganda and Tanzania, but not as good as Rwanda) and 22 for access to credit. It ranks low on factors such as protecting minority investors (which is a constraint in attracting international investors), taxes, enforcing contracts and registering property.

Gabon also provides some incentives for tourism investment. Investments in tourism are exempt from VAT and corporate income tax (for the first 3 years) when they invest over 300 million XAF (about \$500,000 USD). For companies investing in the tourism sector where investment is less than XAF 300 million, they benefit from a 5% tax credit during their first 5 years. Enacted in 2000 (updated in 2019), the Tourism Investment Code provides tax incentives to foreign tourism investors during their first 8 years of operations. There are also active efforts, such as those mentioned in the previous section to attract investment in the ecotourism sector.

Country Analysis: Gabon

Enabling Environment

Infrastructure, Access & Services

International air access to Gabon is one of the best in the Congo Basin region, with flights to 18 destinations in 16 countries. These include regional peers Cameroon and the Republic of Congo providing opportunities for regional packaging as well as major international hubs such as Paris, Istanbul and Addis Ababa.

The domestic aviation sector has had significant investment recently and improvements to equipment and safety. Gabon's national airlines were removed from the EU's airline 'blacklist' in 2019, eliminating a hurdle for international travel markets. Investment is still needed in park airstrips to facilitate travel, but a lot of progress has been made in this sector in recent years.

Data is limited on the road network in Gabon, but it is reported by stakeholders to be generally degraded and in need of improvement. It is estimated that there are about 14,300 km of roadways in the country and it was reported in 2022 that 20% of these roads are surfaced. This would equate to 5.34km of roads for every 100km² of land area in the country, which is on par with Cameroon but much lower than the Republic of Congo which has 55.5 km of roads for every 100km² of land area.

As with many of the countries in the Congo Basin, access to trained staff is a challenge. There is a need to improve workforce capacity in the country, from accommodation and restaurant staff to guides and drivers. Stakeholders report that there is considerable interest from Gabonese youth in the sector and language skills, especially English are quite good in comparison with neighboring countries. With a small but strong tourism private sector, training programs should focus on collaborations with these organizations, who can guide what skills are needed and how best to deliver trainings.

Country Analysis:

Gabon

Enabling Environment

Other Enablers

Building on the work of the Government and partners to create the national parks network in the early 2000s, in recent years a Pilot Tourism Committee was created with the support of the international conservation NGO Space for Giants, through its Giants Club initiative which assists national governments to build their country's nature-based economy through a conservation investment platform that seeks to transform protected areas into engines for revenue generation.

At the time, this Tourism Committee consisted of a Ministerial-level Working Group and a Technical Working Group, although this will likely be restructured with the current government. Themes and agenda points of the Technical Working Group focused on creating the enabling environment for conservation and tourism investments, including:

- E-visa improvement and tourist entry
- Domestic aviation improvement - Aircraft Operator Certification, operationalization and infrastructure
- Investor pathway and roadmap - prospectus, incentives, guidelines and a delivery unit
- Marketing and communications - including Discover Gabon destination marketing campaign
- New investments - promotion of ecotourism concessions, tourism product development, circuits, investor/operator outreach
- Nature-based tourism benchmarking - regional and continental
- Visits to Gabon for potential investors, media and influencers
- Priority tourism development segmentation, mapping, assessments, alignment and communications
- Fundraising and partnership development
- Human resources - capacity building, skills training, professional development
- Securing habitats - park management plans, park protection technology, etc.

Key milestones achieved by the technical working group from 2021-23 included:

- Investment prospectus
- Publication of 'Investor Journey' roadmap, guidelines for investment in national parks and concession models
- Creation of an 'Investor Delivery Unit'
- Launch of '*Discover Gabon*' destination marketing campaign and website

Country Analysis: Gabon

Recommendations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

****Produce/harmonize a national master plan for nature-based tourism and through this process re-establish the Tourism Committee and its working group, according to new government structure. The planning process would be used as a catalyst to form the Committee and an initial project of the Committee. The plan would incorporate existing plans, strategies, prioritized tourism zones, etc. as well as the new government's goals into one cohesive vision for nature-based tourism in the country. Components of the plan would include investment and tourism product development, infrastructure, services, capacity needs, as well as policy, regulatory and tax issues/incentives that would facilitate investment in the sector.**

The planning effort should also result in quick action to build momentum in the sector, so it is recommended that a marketing and storytelling campaign be designed as a part of the planning effort and implemented immediately upon completion of the plan. This would focus on promoting the positive image of Gabon's natural assets and attractions to local, regional and international visitors through content creation (video/images/text), direct engagement with tour operators and media/influencer/tour operators familiarization trips.

Review, improve and re-establish e-visa system as well as visa exemptions to make it easier (and therefore more attractive) for travelers to visit Gabon. This includes clarification of concerns with the previous system to ensure it aligns with government objectives and investment in hardware/software fixes as well as training for staff involved in the system.

****There is a need for comprehensive assessment, prioritization and cost analysis of the infrastructure and facility needs across the seven protected areas identified as priorities in this study. The goal of the assessment is to establish a strong foundation for nature-based tourism to grow and to further develop tourism circuits in the country. This would include road, water and air (airstrip) assets for each park. This could be aligned with the potential World Bank loan and may be modeled on similar World Bank projects in Tanzania where they supported the government to lay the foundation to strengthen the southern tourism circuit in the country.**

Investment and policy actions that could facilitate tourism in the short-term include relaunch of the 'Investor Delivery Unit' with an updated portfolio of potential private sector investments within target protected areas alongside investment prospectuses. With these updated materials the Unit could re-engage with international investors/operators who had shown previous interest in Gabon as well as engage with domestic/resident investors on the tourism opportunities within the priority protected areas. The investment portfolio would include concessions within parks, such as lodging and activities, as well as the transportation, such as the domestic aviation sector.

Country Analysis:

Gabon

Recommendations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Investment promotion efforts should build on the work of the 'Investor Delivery Unit' to package potential investments in parks, attract and engage with investors (foreign and domestic) as well as facilitate the process to get investors into the parks. As the type of investors may be different, the Unit may take a market type and circuit based approach, clustering into two circuits that would be promoted to different investor types:**

- Primarily domestic/resident market tourism products around a Pongara, Akanda and Monts de Cristal National Parks cluster
- Primarily higher-spending international markets around a Ivindo, Lopé, Loango and Moukalaba-Doudou National Parks circuit

In parallel to the investment promotion efforts there is a need to identify modalities and structures for community engagement and ownership in the tourism industry. Where donor funds are used to incentivize investment into sites (e.g. challenge grants that match investor funds), these funds should be structured as community equity in the investment, with a return to the community from the operation of the facility. Additional benefits for communities should also be integrated into investments, including minimum local employment requirements and conservation linked social programs.

****Infrastructure and facility improvements are needed across the priority protected areas. Once the assessment, prioritization and cost analysis is complete along with the nature-based tourism plan (see short-term recommendation), investments should be made in each parks infrastructure, with a focus on drive in travelers for Pongara, Akanda and Monts de Cristal National Parks and fly-in travelers for Ivindo, Lopé, Loango and Moukalaba-Doudou National Parks. This may include development/improvement of airstrips, boat access points/equipment and roads as well as visitor centers/entrance facilities, viewing platforms, camp sites and possible site preparations for private investment into the parks.**

Country Analysis:

Gabon

Recommendations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions (*continued*):

Alongside large investments in facilities and infrastructure there is also a need to develop the tourism activities and experiences for visitors, ideally linked to communities in the landscapes where tourism occurs. This may be done at the site level (e.g. specific parks), but where investments are being made across multiple landscapes simultaneously it also makes sense to layer this component onto these activities. Developing a program modeled on the Uganda open source Ukarimu Academy (<https://ukarimuacademy.org/downloads/>) or similar programs, that could support the development of a critical mass of tourism experiences in each landscape would enhance the overall 'package' for visitors and compliment larger investments.

Marketing Gabon as a travel destination is also critical. A multi-year campaign should be designed and implemented that targets domestic/resident markets and separately international nature-based tourism markets. Both campaigns will have a focus on generating high quality content to tell the stories of the parks and targeting tour operators that can help package and promote trips to the parks. Partner tour operators would learn about each destination, have access to materials and content they can use to promote and sell as well as have support in itinerary building efforts. Familiarization trips would also help these operators experience and understand the parks. The program would then support tour operators to promote the parks/itineraries to their markets. By leveraging partnerships in promotional efforts the impact can be scaled and the program would be helping to establish the sales channels for travel that will continue after the campaign is complete.

There are several needs to improve the capabilities of this working in the tourism sector.

- There is a need to enhance the capacity of staff within government departments so that they have the skills to manage and implement the national tourism strategy. This may take the form of formal trainings as well as study tours to learn from what other peer countries are doing and bring that knowledge back to Gabon.
- There is also a need to improve the skills and capabilities of the tourism workforce. As the tourism private sector are the ultimate employers it's imperative that they are engaged in guiding the types of training that are established in the country and that it is practical for their needs. A model such as the Ukarimu Academy in Uganda could be employed for this effort as it is a more practical and less costly approach to localized training than more formal training institutions.



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Gabon: Priority Protected Areas

Destination Snapshots, Scorecards, Site Analyses, & Recommendations



Destination Snapshots Key

Accessibility:

International Air = The closest &/or most popular international airport for tourists to the park

Domestic Air = The closest domestic airports or local airstrips for travelers to the park

Ground & Water = Details roads and waterways used to access the park, including route information from airports and nearby cities

Within Parks = How travelers move within park boundaries, including relevant roadways, waterways, hiking paths, and relevant modes of transportation

Destination Maturity Scale:

None = No tourism facilities or tourist infrastructure in the park

Basic = Only simple, self-service facilities in the park

Limited = One serviced tourism facility operating in the park

Diverse = Multiple serviced tourism facilities & touristic infrastructure in the park

Destination Maturity Definitions:

Nearby park headquarters = Within 5-10km of park boundary

Self-serviced accommodations = no staff, basic facilities. **Serviced accommodations** = Comes with some type of formal touristic service (i.e., staff, a restaurant, etc.)

Visitor activities special request =

They need to be organized through an NGO or other organization and are not readily commercially available

Visitor activities openly available =

They are commercially available to visitors, without the need for special connections

Geographic Features:

Standout, iconic, or distinctive geographic features in or around the park

Wildlife:

Key species that can be found in the park

Human Capital:

Description of the technical expertise available in and around the park (i.e., conservation partners & NGOs) as well as the tourism capacities of local communities and residents.

Seasonality Icons:

Sun = Dry season(s)

Rain = Wet/Rainy season(s)

When relevant, also includes important wildlife seasons and/or the 'best' time to visit.

Destination Snapshot:

Ivindo National Park, Gabon

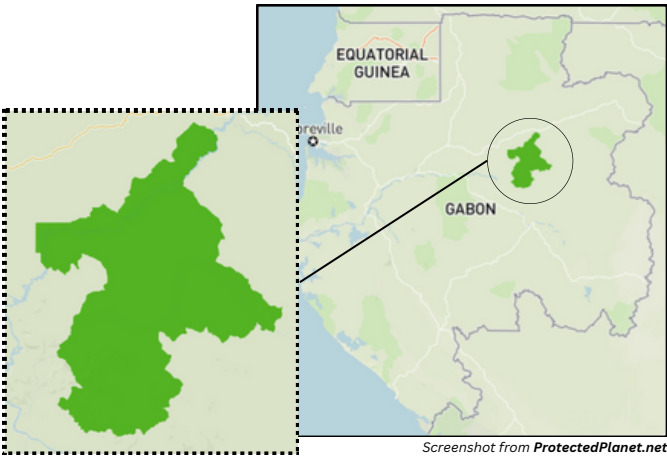
Quick Facts:

- 298,758 Hectares
- Old-growth rainforests
 - Expansive river systems and waterfalls
- IUCN Category - Not Reported
- UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site
- Park Entry Fee: Unknown
- Primate Habituation: No

Seasonality:

- ☀ June-August, January
- ☔ September-December, February-May

The best time to visit Kongou Falls is November-April



Accommodations & Facilities

Gabon Wildlife Camps & Safaris used to operate Kongou Forest Camp & Langoué Base Camp in Ivindo, however, it appears that these are no longer operational and GWCS is no longer present in Ivindo.

As of January 2024, the website which mentions these camps' existence is outdated and does not reflect the realities of available accommodations in the park.

Ipassa Research Camp

Located outside of Makokou and occasionally hosts travelers.

There is a camp within the park being managed privately. Additional information on this camp and its potential for enabling tourism is unknown.

Accessibility:

Int'l Air	Léon-Mba International Airport (Libreville) 20 km drive to Owendo Train Station Most itineraries recommend travelers stay a night in Libreville before either taking the train or a charter flight to the park.	
	Makokou Airport: Private charter flights To Ivindo: -3 hour canoe trip into the park	Park staff meet travelers at the Makokou airport for transfer into the park
Domestic Air	Airstrip sites within the park are feasible, but none exist at present	
Ground	Trans Gabon Railway Daily access to the park <i>3 seat class types available</i> On train: Owendo Port Station (in Libreville) to Booué Station (50km west of park boundary): -7 hours on average From Booué to Kongou Falls: 5 hour drive to Makokou, then a 3-hour journey to Kongou by motorized pirogue (noted as dangerous).	
	Some travelers have reported that driving from Libreville to Ivindo is possible, but it is long (~12 hours) and far less comfortable than the train.	
Within Park	Limited road infrastructure within park. River systems offer amazing boat access throughout, by pirogue or motorized boat. Walking trails to all the popular waterfalls.	

Transportation Infrastructure	Fair
Park Headquarters	Offsite
Availability of Accommodations	Self-service
Accommodation Product Variation	Low
Visitor Activities	Special Request
Activity Product Variation	Medium
None Basic Limited Diverse	

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Destination Snapshot:

Ivindo National Park, Gabon

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Wildlife:

Western Lowland Gorillas, Common Chimpanzees, Forest Elephants, Forest Buffalo, Pangolins, & Red River Hogs.

Almost all of the forest birds found in Gabon can be found within Ivindo National Park.

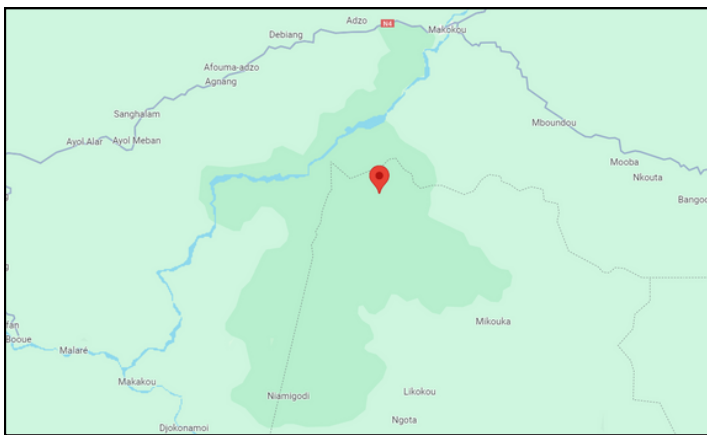
~420 species of birds. Ipassa (within Ivindo) is designated an **Important Bird Area** by BirdLife International.

Geographic Features:

Largely intact rainforest landscape, featuring a plethora of picturesque rivers, waterways, and rapids.

Three fantastic waterfalls: **Kongou, Mingouli, & Djidji Falls** - Nicknamed the *'Wonders of Ivindo.'*

Other notable features: **Ipassa Makokou Biosphere Reserve** falls within Ivindo's boundaries, **Langoué Baï** is considered one of the 5 most important forest clearings in Central Africa, and the **Ivindo River's** riverbanks are picturesque.



Google Maps (2023) Ivindo National Park.

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★
2 Total Reviews

TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●●●
8 Total Reviews

"The places we visited were amazing and totally worth the journey."

"It's a long and grueling trek to reach Ivindo. I wouldn't recommend it for people who are unfit or weak walkers. It's only for hardened travelers."

"The bai is just fabulous you'll have the opportunity to see elephants, gorillas, and red river hogs all in the same place. The bird watching is also fantastic."

"One of the last virgin forests to explore in the world."

"It's a great experience once in a lifetime."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2019 - 2023

Human Capital

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of the protected areas. Though they have not ceded full management responsibilities to outside organizations, they do curate tourism concessions and other partnerships within the parks.

The Institute for Research for Tropical Ecology (IRET) runs the Ipassa Research Station.

The International Foundation for Gabon Ecotourism (FIGET) works in Ivindo.

FIGET's two main goals are: Promote environmentally friendly ecotourism & Promote sustainable development opportunities for the benefit of local populations.

"Ivindo NP is definitely not cheap. It's also not easy to reach by any stretch of the imagination [...] Worth every penny."

"This is probably the remotest place on Earth that I've ever visited. The wildlife watching and hearing is sublime. It truly feels like an Eden."

"The guides and rangers were extremely helpful and accommodating, and the food was surprisingly tasty for such a remote location."

"This is the place to go in Gabon to see the magnificent waterfalls that you may have seen pictures of."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2018

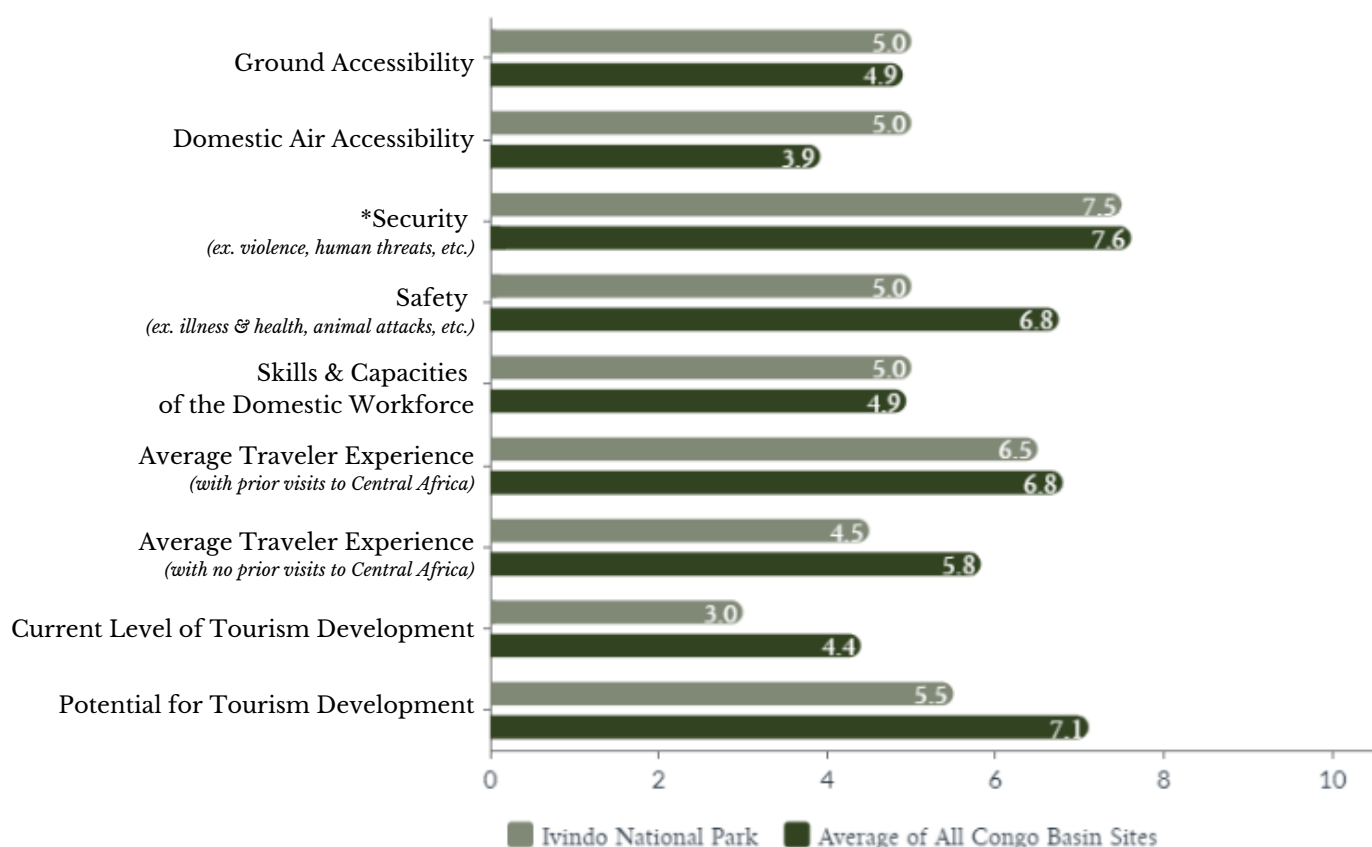
Destination Scorecard: **Ivindo National Park, Gabon**

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

'1' represents relative weakness in the field and '10' represents strength in the field.

Ivindo National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Key Takeaways:

- Ground accessibility, security, and skills of the local workforce rank the same as the regional average.
- Current level and potential for tourism development both fall below the regional average, signaling that this might be a Gabonese park to focus on in the medium-term.
- Domestic air accessibility falls above the regional average, signaling potential for fly-in, fly-out tourism in the shorter-term.

Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is some tentative interest from tourism investors in tourism in Ivindo National Park.
- When accessing the park via boat, there are over a dozen rapids to navigate, making it a quite dangerous route.
- Two words used to describe the park are 'Unique' & 'Captivating.'
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Lope, Loango, and Pongara National Parks
 - Mwagna National Park

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

*For additional information on security, see site analysis below.

Site Analysis: --- --- Ivindo National Park, Gabon

Overview

Ivindo National Park (INP) is located in Northeast-Central Gabon near the equator, with a core area of nearly 300,000 hectares, encircled by an 180,000-hectare buffer zone [1]. The park extends north to include the Ipassa Makokou Biosphere Reserve, which constitutes 15,000 Hectares within the larger INP [2]. The lands are totally uninhabited and approximately 90% remain as intact old-growth forest [3]. Recognized by UNESCO for its unparalleled integrity, biodiversity, and conservation significance, it stands as a prime example of Gabon's preserved natural heritage. INP is part of the Trinational Dja-Odzala-Minkébé (TRIDOM) landscape, a biodiversity stronghold spanning the Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and Gabon, safeguarding 10% of the Congo Basin Rainforest [4].

This largely intact forest landscape comprises old-growth rainforests and wetlands, crisscrossed by pristine river networks. The Ivindo and Djidji wetlands form iconic waterfalls and rapids within the park. Nicknamed, *'the Wonders of Ivindo,'* the three main waterfalls are the Kongou, Mingouli, and Djidji falls. In the southern sector of the park there is another iconic natural feature, the Langoué Bai, a marshy forest clearing where wildlife come in vast numbers to feed, drink, and socialize.

At the bai, most of Central Africa's key species can be found; forest elephants, gorillas, forest buffalo, and red river hogs. During peak seasons, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has recorded up to 90 elephants visiting the bai per day [5]. INP is also quoted as being "one of Africa's best locations for forest birding" [6], especially in the northern Ipassa Reserve, where all but eleven of Gabon's over 659 bird species can be found in one place [7].

While INP is not subject to any specific travel advisories, the U.S. Department of State has issued a *'Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution'* travel advisory for Gabon as a whole (a similar level to France and the UK) [8]. In and around INP, there are very low risks of crime or other security threats. Though it is not considered as remote as other Central African parks, its location within the country's geographic interior shields it from some of the recent civil unrest which affect Gabon's major cities. A stakeholder from the park stated that there are "no dangerous areas" in and around the park which would affect tourism development.

[1]https://carpe.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/4010001_MP_SD_IvindoNP_ManagementPlan_Strategy_2008.pdf

[2] <https://en.unesco.org/biosphere/africa/ipassa-makokou>

[3] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1653/>

[4] <https://pfb-cbfp.org/news-partner/landscape-financelab.html>

[5] <https://programs.wcs.org/langouebai/>

[6] Gabon Vision, 2007

[7] <https://datazone.birdlife.org/site/factsheet/ipassa-strict-nature-reserve-iba-gabon>

[8] <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/gabon-travel-advisory.html>

Site Analysis:

Ivindo National Park, Gabon

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of all the protected areas in Gabon. As the ultimate manager of the park, ANPN is responsible for all tourism activities, unless otherwise ceded to a tourism concessionaire, which is not currently the case in INP. Although Ivindo is not mentioned as one of the parks of focus in the short-term in the National Tourism Strategy (2020-2025), its potential for tourism development is recognized in the medium-term.

The International Foundation for Gabon Ecotourism (FIGET) is active in Ivindo. One of the NGO's primary goals is to "Promote environmentally friendly ecotourism, guaranteeing local populations satisfactory income, without destroying their natural capital." [9] FIGET has received support for the development of viewing platforms, equipment, trail development and community engagement in the past, however it is unclear what the organization is currently doing in INP. They may be a partner for future tourism development in the landscape.

The remarkable natural assets of Ivindo NP offer significant potential for nature-based tourism development. Langoué Bai, the fifth largest clearing in equatorial Africa [10], provides exceptional wildlife viewing of Central Africa's iconic species, a major draw for potential travelers. With a well-constructed viewing platform capable of accommodating overnight tents, visitors can experience the thrill of falling asleep to the sounds of the jungle while safely above the forest floor [11]. Facilitating tourism experiences at Ivindo, particularly overnight stays at the bai when elephants are more active, presents a compelling opportunity for travelers seeking immersive wildlife encounters.

The water features in Ivindo NP present a powerful draw for adventurous global travelers. Including the iconic Kongou Falls, known as "Gabon's answer to Niagara," [12] These features are largely unmatched across Central Africa, giving INP a unique competitive advantage in potential nature-based tourism offerings. Opportunities exist for the redevelopment of former campsites near the falls, like the Kongou Forest Camp which was once operated by Luxury Green Resorts in collaboration with Gabon Wildlife Camps & Safaris.

Unlike many other parks in the Congo Basin, Langoué Bai and Kongou Falls are listed attractions on LonelyPlanet and appear to have greater market awareness than their peers in the region. In addition to access by charter flights or road (~12 hours), the Trans-Gabon Railway connects Libreville with Booué Station about 50 km from the park in about 7 hours. The train is an affordable way to connect to the park and is scheduled to travel daily, although this is not guaranteed and the service has mixed traveler reviews. The train presents an opportunity to attract a new market of middle-income adventure travelers, broadening the park's appeal beyond the luxury segment typically targeted by other parks.

[9]<https://www.programmeppi.org/beneficiaire/figet-fondation-internationale-gabon-ecotourisme/>

[10]<https://gabonwildlifecamps.com/gabon-parks-camps/ivindo-national-park/>

[11] <https://www.steppestravel.com/accommodation/langoue-bai-platform/>

[12]<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/gabon/eastern-gabon/ivindo-national-park/attractions/kongou-falls/a/poi-sig/1559036/355304>

Site Analysis:

Ivindo National Park, Gabon

Enabling Environment Constraints

Accommodations

Currently, the accommodation and touristic infrastructure in INP are extremely basic, requiring prioritization for tourism development. Apart from basic options like camping at the Langoué Bai observation platform or bunking at the Ipassa Research Station, there are little-to-no other choices for travelers visiting Ivindo. Increased investment in accommodation and related infrastructure is crucial for competitiveness and success in the market. Potential investments include revitalizing the former Kongou Forest Camp, enhancing the Langoué Bai platform experience, establishing new campsites near key natural features, developing safari-style luxury tented camps, or constructing an eco-lodge near Park HQ.

Tourist Services & Activities

While INP boasts magnificent natural features, its associated touristic activities are currently limited. Moreover, the park's main attractions, Langoué Bai and Kongou Falls, are located far apart, necessitating significant tourism planning to better integrate these experiences. Beyond mere observation, there is a need to develop additional activities that capitalize on these features. Birding tours could become a key attraction in the northern sector, particularly within the Ipassa Biosphere Reserve. Safari drives and boat rides also present promising opportunities. However, until more activities are introduced or existing ones revitalized, this limitation (along with the availability of accommodations) will continue to hinder the park's tourism development and growth potential.

Air Accessibility

Traveling to INP by road or train are both feasible, but take time and can be unreliable; requiring built-in flexibility in travelers itineraries. This is often possible for the low and mid-budget travelers, but not attractive for the higher-end of the travel market. To attract the higher-spending market, air accessibility is the most viable option. Presently, Makokou Domestic Airport accommodates private charter flights, requiring an additional three hours by pirogue to reach Ivindo and its attractions. Although multiple sites within INP are suitable for airstrip development, there are currently no plans in this regard. As noted by a park stakeholder, 'for as long as there are no reasonable aviation solutions [in Ivindo], there's no way to sustainably invest in tourism here.' If higher-end accommodation is to be developed, this would likely have to be in tandem with the development of an airstrip.

Political Environment

To leverage the opportunity for tourism within the park, investment is needed in tourism facilities and services. The recent political changes at the national level may give pause to potential investors (especially international high-value ecotourism brands) due to uncertainty about the future. This is discussed in more details in the country level analysis of Gabon.

Site Analysis:

Ivindo National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

****Development of a tourism master plan for the park that lays out actions to be taken to energize tourism in and around the park. This would include sites and strategy around accommodations, activities/experiences for visitors, market profiles, capacity needs for staff and communities, tourism management frameworks and standard operating procedures to effectively manage tourism development. This document would help to set the groundwork to attract greater interest in tourism at the park from the national government (e.g. provide actions that would feed into the national tourism strategy when it is next updated), donors and private investors.**

Conduct specific assessments of the birding and sport fishing potential of the park and landscape and engage with specialist operators in these areas to define what they look for in a destination and generate interest in the park

Once the plan is complete, develop investment briefs and tendering documents to attract potential tourism investors to the park as well as actions that directly promotes the park to investors, engages with potential investors to initiate their interest and fosters that interest to the point where they are ready to tender for tourism investment in the park

Study tours for park staff to understand how other protected areas in the county or elsewhere have gone about their planning and development efforts as well as how they manage their tourism

Site Analysis:

Ivindo National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Establish a challenge grant program, accompanied by technical assistance, to incentivize investment in accommodations in the park. The focus would be on upgrading existing sites and/or new sites/activities. The technical assistance would include help with market analysis and planning for upgrades/development of accommodation sites as well as attractions/activities.**

As private investment funds are scarce and hard to attract, the grants would help to 'buy down' the risk for investors. International investors would be a target, but also long-term expat residents and higher-net-worth Gabonese could also be a focus. With this more local segment, rather than seeking one large investor, fractional ownership models may be appropriate, especially if circuits with other parks are being developed. Investors would be able to buy into a portion of the company in exchange for an allocated number of nights per year at the facility, as well as potential investment returns from their investment. This way each investment is more manageable for investors, there are benefits beyond investment returns (a holiday retreat), risk is more diversified and the investors themselves can act as ambassadors to promote the facility with their networks. Corporate investment (such as oil companies) at this scale may also be possible, where they can provide 'incentive' trips for their employees through their ownership in the lodging facility.

Leveraging the tourism plan, engage donors and other potential supporters in a 4-5 year program to establish the foundation for tourism in and around the park, including investment in base infrastructure, such as access roads, boats, airstrip, trails, signage, viewing platforms and camping sites. On the management side, training will be needed for park staff to plan and manage tourism activities as well as guides (ideally in partnership with local communities). This program would also identify and structure partnerships with potential tourism operators who could be attracted to invest in the site (see previous complimentary recommendation).

Establish visual and written content that can be used to promote the landscape and its tourism attractions.

Develop a brand and marketing/storytelling campaign to position the park on the Gabon tourism circuit. Through this program, help to raise awareness of the park as a tourism destination with local tour operators and travelers as well as with international tour operators.

Destination Snapshot:

Lopé National Park, Gabon

Quick Facts:

- 494,200 Hectares
- Mixed monsoon rainforest & open savannahs
- IUCN Category - Not Reported
- UNESCO Mixed Natural Heritage Site*
- Park Entry Fee: Unknown
- Mandrills, gorilla and other primates

Seasonality:

-  May-September
-  February-May

Accommodations & Facilities

Gabon Wildlife Camps & Safaris used to operate 'Moabi Tented Camp' in Lopé, however, it appears that this is no longer operational and GWCS is no longer present in Lopé.

As of January 2024, the website which mentions this camp's existence is outdated and does not reflect the realities of available accommodations in the park.

WCS-Managed Research Center
Occasionally hosts travelers.

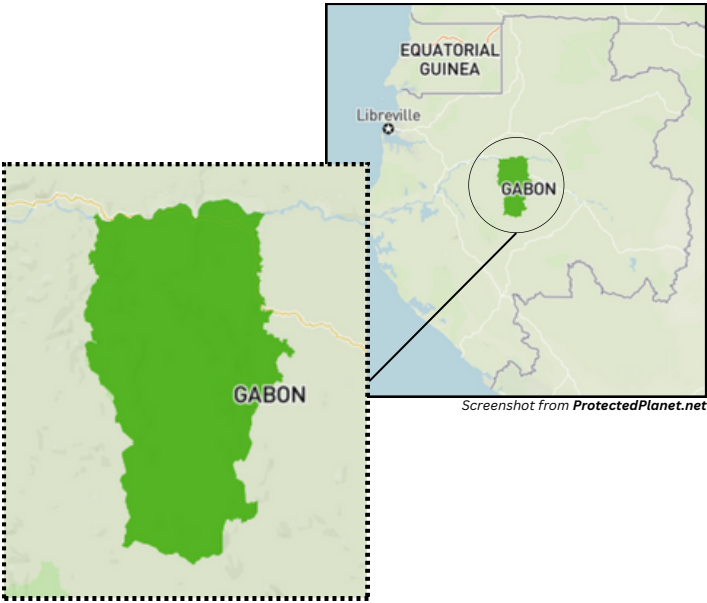
Lopé Hotel

Described as offering "surprising luxury considering the remoteness of the location."

The property features 40 individual bungalows with views of the surrounding parkland and Mount Brazza. Bungalow types range from standard, chalet, and luxury VIP, though traveler reviews suggest renovation and maintenance.

All bungalows are equipped with hot water, electricity, and A/C.

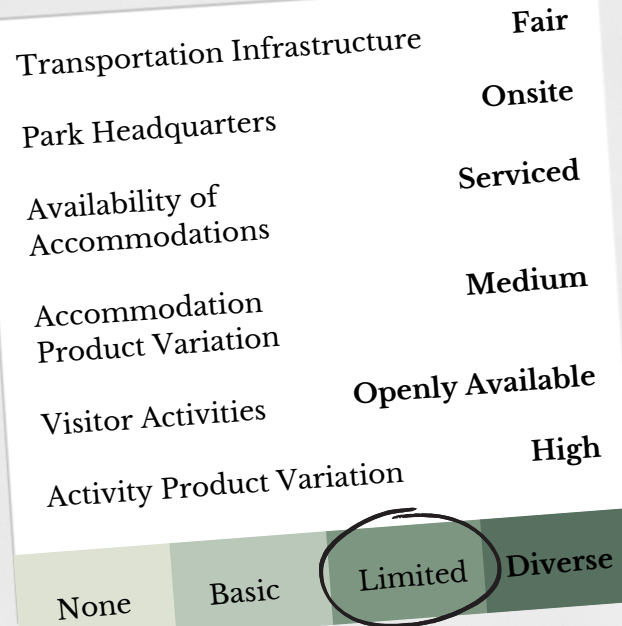
Also on property is a communal swimming pool, bar, and restaurant, serving varied international & local dishes of decent quality, though many travelers have said quality has decreased in recent years.



Screenshot from ProtectedPlanet.net

Accessibility:

Int'l Air	Léon-Mba International Airport (Libreville) 20 km drive to Owendo Train Station Most itineraries recommend travelers stay a night in Libreville before either taking the train or a charter flight to the park.	
Domestic Air	Within park: Small grass airstrip near Lopé Hotel Requires maintenance, could land helicopters potentially.	Miele Mimbale Airstrip: ~20 km from the park's northern border. Operationality is unknown.
Ground	Trans Gabon Railway Daily access to the park, 3 seat class types available On train: Owendo Port Station (in Libreville) to Lope Station: ~6 hours	From train station: ~20-minute walk to Lope Hotel. Making this walk at night is discouraged, with travelers opting to schedule a pick-up instead.
	Some travelers have reported that driving from Libreville to Lopé is possible along very bad roads, but it is long (~8-10 hours) and far less comfortable than the train.	
Within Park	Internal gravel road and tourism tracks throughout. Travelers have mentioned that there is a park-owned car which can be leased out.	



Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

*UNESCO Recognizes the 'Ecosystem and Relict Cultural Landscape of Lopé-Okanda' as a Mixed Heritage Site, of which the National Park is included.

Destination Snapshot:

Lopé National Park, Gabon

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Geographic Features:

Mosaic of forests & savanna, recognized by UNESCO for the **unique savanna-forest transitional ecosystem**.

Bordered on the north by the **Ogooué River**.

Hikes to **Mount Brazza** available.

Wildlife:

Considered a vital refuge for ~1300 **Mandrills**, Western Lowland Gorillas, Chimpanzees, & Sun-tailed Guenons.

Leopards, Red River Hogs, Forest Buffalo, Giant Pangolins, and Tree Pangolins.

~380 species of birds.

Designated an **Important Bird Area** by BirdLife International.



Google Maps (2023) Lopé National Park.

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★
194 Total Reviews

TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●●○
22 Total Reviews

Human Capital

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of the protected areas. Though they have not ceded full management responsibilities to outside organizations, they do curate tourism concessions and other partnerships within the parks.

In 2022, UNESCO signed an agreement with ANPN to support ecotourism development in the park.

WCS Gabon operates their dedicated training center ('CEDAMM') in Lopé, building capacity in a hands-on learning environment,

"The visit was terrifying since on the first day of arriving, men entered my friends' room and stole money, clothes, and shoes."
"This place is sumptuous and very rich in fauna, flora and history of the country."
"The big attraction of [Lopé] is the mandrills [...] The birding was also good."
"This isn't a location for people unless they have been to Africa before."
"I felt let down by a local service provider who did not match the reasonable expectations of myself or the other organizers."

TripAdvisor Reviews 2018 - 2023

"Discovering Gabon without the Lopé reserve would be a big mistake."
"Excursions on foot are the most vibrant: waiting, discovery and with luck, encounters with wildlife."
"Overall the price is a little high but it's definitely worth it."
"We therefore recommend a visit to this park!"
"Several excursions are possible and the guides are specialized depending on the excursion."

TripAdvisor Reviews 2015 - 2016

"While the accommodation could do with a good renovation, the wildlife makes up for the inadequacies of the sleeping areas. The rugged charm makes it desirable to stay and takes you to the nostalgia of what the first explorer had to put up with."
"This adventure is highly recommended for adventurous South Africans who are yet to experience the last Eden."
"The guide knows the forest, its fauna and flora very well and it was a real pleasure to benefit from his insight."

TripAdvisor Reviews 2017 - 2018

Destination Scorecard:

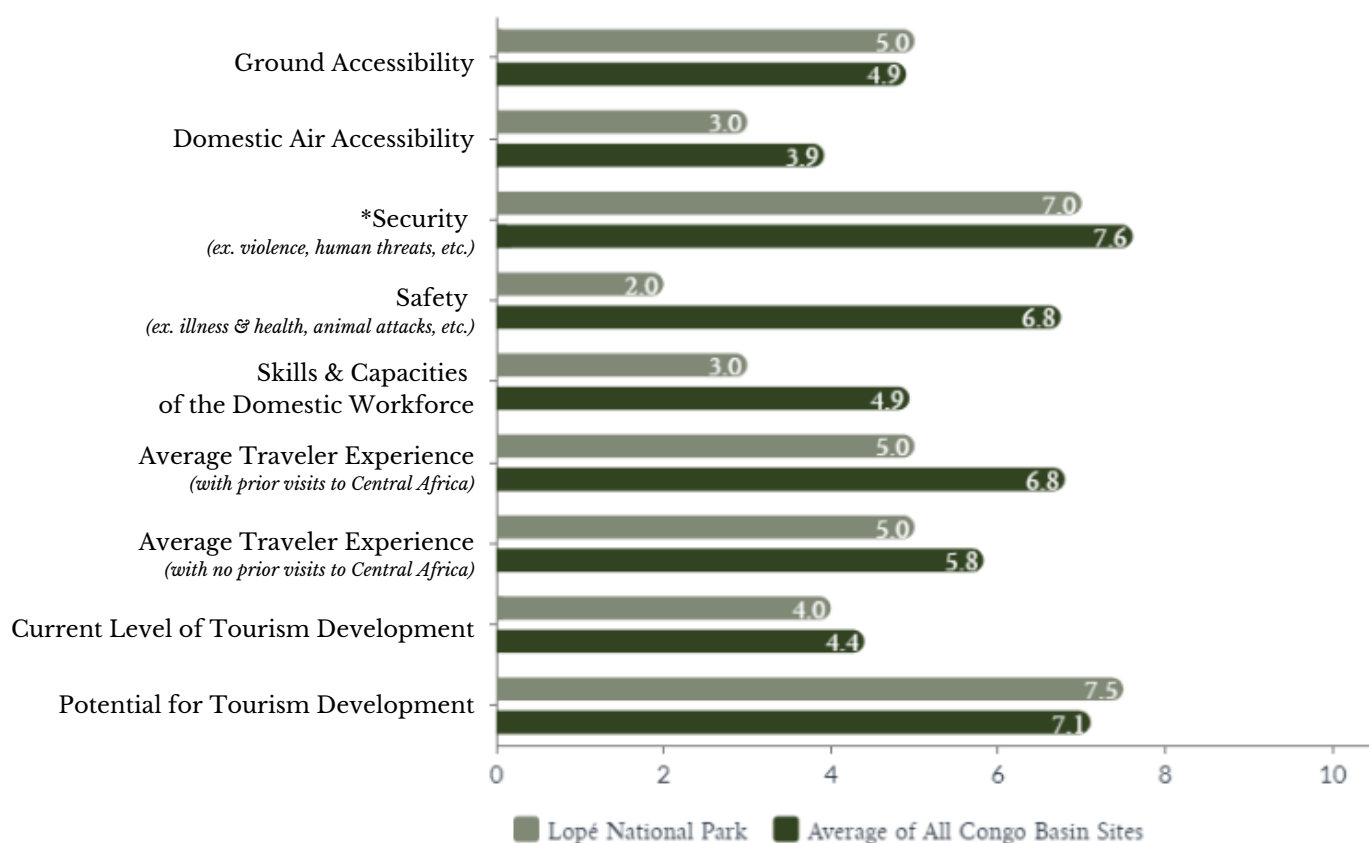
Lopé National Park, Gabon

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

‘1’ represents relative weakness in the field and ‘10’ represents strength in the field.

Lopé National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is some tentative interest from tourism investors in tourism in Lopé National Park.
- Currently, ‘tourism is not a priority.’
- Lopé has been a ‘tough sell’ for traditional tourists in the past.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Short-term: Loango and Ivindo NPs
 - Medium-term: Moukalaba-Doudou NP

Key Takeaways:

- The potential for tourism development in Lopé is higher than the regional average, signaling a positive future for the park with appropriate attention and investments.
- Safety falls below the regional average, however, this category relied on limited survey responses.

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

**For additional information on security, see site analysis below.*

Site Analysis:

Lopé National Park, Gabon

Overview

Lopé National Park (LNP) is located in Central Gabon and covers an area of 494,200 Hectares[1]. It is surrounded by a 5 km-wide buffer zone, which includes protection for 6 historical complexes in the Ogooué Valley as well as Mont Iboundji, totaling an additional 170,700 Hectares [2]. UNESCO recognizes this landscape as a Mixed Heritage Site due to both the ecological importance and anthropological value of the area [3], making it one of the most unique landscapes recognized in Central Africa.

LNP boasts a diverse landscape, with lush, misty savannah and patches of gallery rainforest. The park is bordered by the legendary Ogooué River and Mount Brazza to the north. As one of Africa's oldest biospheres, it's rich in cultural sites, showcasing prehistoric antiquities and vibrant culture [4]. Recent discoveries, such as petroglyphs and artifacts that represent the oldest evidence of human presence in the Congo Basin (600,000 years old), underscore its historical significance.

LNP boasts impressive wildlife, notably as the best place in Africa to observe mandrills, with a population of around 1,300 total individuals [5]. In July/August 'gatherings' of up to 800 mandrills can be observed at one time. It's a prime habitat for primates, including gorillas, chimpanzees, and various monkey species, with some of the highest concentrations worldwide [6]. Lopé is also said to be home to more elephants per square kilometer than anywhere else in Africa [7]. Its avian diversity is equally remarkable, with over 380 bird species earning LNP the moniker "the laboratory in the sky" [8].

While LNP is not subject to any specific travel advisories, the U.S. Department of State has issued a '*Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution*' travel advisory for Gabon as a whole (the same level of France and the UK) [9]. The park and its surroundings carry very low risks of crime or security threats due to their remote location. Situated in the country's geographic interior, LNP is shielded from some of the recent civil unrest which affect Gabon's major cities.

[1]<https://www.protectedplanet.net/303875>

[2]<http://world-heritage-datasheets.unep-wcmc.org/datasheet/output/site/ecosystem-relict-cultural-landscape-of-lope-okanda/>

[3]<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1147/>

[4]<https://gabonwildlifecamps.com/gabon-parks-camps/lope-national-park/>

[5]<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/gabon/attractions/lope-national-park/a/poi-sig/1558174/355302>

[6]<https://www.naturalworldheritagesites.org/sites/ecosystem-relict-cultural-landscape-lope-okanda/>

[7]<https://www.thetravel.com/what-to-know-about-lope-national-park-in-gabon/>

[8]<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/gabon/attractions/lope-national-park/a/poi-sig/1558174/35530>

[9]<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/gabon-travel-advisory.html>

Site Analysis:

Lopé National Park, Gabon

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of all the protected areas in Gabon. As the ultimate manager of the park, ANPN is responsible for all tourism activities, unless otherwise ceded to a tourism concessionaire, which is not currently the case in Lopé NP. However, ANPN does recognize the potential for tourism development in LNP in the National Tourism Strategy (2020-2025). The Tourism Strategy includes a strategy of the creation of 'Zones of Tourist Interest' (ZITs) which is "an area of [Gabon] presenting strong potential for tourism development due to its endowment with exceptional natural or cultural sites." 'ZIT de la Lope' is one of 6 proposed ZITs in the national strategy.

In 2022 UNESCO entered into an agreement with ANPN to foster ecotourism and income-generating activities in Lope National Park [10]. This collaboration is set to conclude in late 2024, with UNESCO supporting the realization of a long-term vision for the park benefiting the communities in and around LNP. WCS Gabon also operates a primary training center in Lopé known as 'CEDAMM', serving as a hub for regional stakeholders involved in conservation efforts. Training programs offered cover various themes, with potential to support tourism development, including training conservation professionals, ecological monitoring, local development management, and concessions monitoring.

There is opportunity to leverage these existing partnerships. Continued support and investment in projects identified by ANPN and UNESCO, particularly for community-based nature tourism offerings, should be prioritized. WCS Gabon's training center in Lopé could also be utilized as a training center for park staff on tourism, with additional investment and involvement from WCS or other parties. This existing training center presents an excellent opportunity not only for LNP but also for surrounding Gabonese national parks, who aim to increase the training, skills, and capacities of their local workforces.

[10]<https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2440>

Site Analysis:

Lopé National Park, Gabon

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities, *continued*

Lopé NP is ripe for further tourism development, given its existing array of tourist activities and its potential. Several tour operators offer itineraries encompassing wildlife viewing and tracking, birding, forest excursions, and hiking Mount Brazza [11], which is renowned for its trail to the summit [12]. Investing in infrastructure, facilities, marketing, and expanding product offerings for these activities presents a significant opportunity for the park's nature-based tourism industry.

La Lopé Hotel stands out as a notable accommodation choice just outside the park, with a dedicated TripAdvisor page and a variety of guest reviews. Relative to other more rugged, basic accommodations in Central African protected areas, this hotel is described as offering 'surprising luxury considering the location's remoteness.' Guests also commend the panoramic views and beautiful location [13]. However, recent reviews also indicate areas for improvement, such as the need for maintenance, enhanced staff training to elevate hospitality standards, and upgrades to dining options. Despite these challenges, the hotel holds significant potential for growth and development. With strategic investment and enhancements, it can further capitalize on its advantageous location. The potential for additional accommodations also exists.

The Trans-Gabon Railway also provides opportunities for relatively easy and affordable access to the park. Trains are scheduled to connect Libreville and Lopé station daily, although this is not guaranteed and the service has mixed traveler reviews. The Lopé station sits along the northern portion of the park [14] and is very close to the Lopé Hotel. The train presents an opportunity to attract middle-income adventure travelers and domestic visitors, broadening the park's appeal beyond the luxury segment typically targeted by other parks.

[11]<https://www.mikongo-vision.info/Pages/eng%20-%20excursions.html>

[12]<https://ecoadventuresafaris.com/hiking-mount-brazza/>

[13]https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g488097-d2230073-Reviews-Lope_Hotel-Lope_Wildlife_Reserve_Ogooue_Ivindo_Province.html

[14]<https://stujarvis.com/2018/07/28/guide-to-the-trans-gabon-railway/>

Site Analysis:

Lopé National Park, Gabon

Enabling Environment Constraints

Air Accessibility

Interviewed stakeholders unanimously agree on LNP's tourism potential, limited primarily by accessibility. While reachable by train or car from Libreville (an 8-10 hour drive on bad roads), air access is vital for attracting wealthier markets and facilitating circuits with other parks. A grass strip near Lope Hotel offers potential, though requires investment to make it operational for small planes. Miele Mimbale airstrip about 20km from the park is also a possibility, but further research is needed to determine which option is best to invest in and what specifically is needed.

Marketing & Promotion

Marketing LNP presents challenges due to its limited recognition within tourism markets, despite its impressive natural and cultural assets and reasonable accommodation and access options relative to many other parks in the Congo Basin. While the park attracts domestic travelers, particularly expats from Libreville, it remains relatively unknown to the international market. Marketing and storytelling as well as circuit development with other parks are therefore needed to 'put Lope on the map.'

Pricing

While travel to remote destinations is typically more costly, particularly in the Congo Basin, high prices in LNP are a top complaint on TripAdvisor. It's not solely the prices themselves, but rather the perceived value received for the cost paid. Common grievances include food quality, service, room rates, activity pricing, and transparency issues with pricing. The base operational costs of operations are not something that can be changed much, but improving the quality of the experience to match the price point is an area where improvements can be made. Additional competition would also help to improve the correlation between price and quality of service.

Political Environment

To leverage the opportunity for tourism within the park, investment is needed in tourism facilities and services. The recent political changes at the national level may give pause to potential investors (especially international high-value ecotourism brands) due to uncertainty about the future. This is discussed in more details in the country level analysis of Gabon.

Site Analysis:

Lopé National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

**Implement a product development and training program, building on the visioning work with UNESCO and work already initiated by WSC and their training facility in the landscape. The product development component would look at activities and experiences already offered as well as new ones (especially those with communities) and provide the training for communities, park staff and hotel staff to improve skills and offer higher quality services. This may include guiding, hospitality, how to engage with and host visitors, tour development, waiter and front office training, etc. This could employ open source tourism training materials, such as that offered in Uganda at Ukarimu Academy (<https://ukarimuacademy.org/downloads/>)

**Develop a branding, marketing and storytelling strategy for the park, centered on key distinguishing factors, such as tracking mandrills (especially during the time when they gather in large groups) and cultural heritage sites around the park. Additional focus on the wildlife, birds and scenery should also be included. Initial actions should also be taken to create buzz and interest around the park, including working with influencers who can help to tell the story of the park. Additionally, collaboration with local tour operators that are promoting packages to the park to boost their promotional efforts around these packages.

Conduct a study of the airstrip and other infrastructure in the park to develop an investment plan and indicative costing for needed improvements as well as prioritization of the needs.

Site Analysis:

Lopé National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Strategic investment promotion to attract private investment in the park, including upgrading of the Lope hotel and possibly new investment in accommodations within the park. These should be linked to the revenue sharing arrangements with local communities to ensure they have a long-term stake in tourism in the park. This should also include a financial grant element to attract investors, buy down the investment risk and provide ownership in the operation for local communities (the grant being the communities equity stake in a tourism investment, although the private operator would maintain management control).**

****Based on the UNESCO visioning work with ANPN, invest in basic visitor infrastructure, such as trails, signage, camping facilities, etc. as well as further product development and training for park staff and communities to manage and host tourism.**

Co-op marketing & storytelling campaign with investors and tour operators promoting the park. This would include a travel trade outreach program targeting international markets as well as domestic/regional travelers to inform, engage and excite them about the park. Actions will be based on the Branding, marketing and Storytelling recommendation described earlier and may initially include:

- a. Direct outreach and sales visits to target tour operators in key international markets to increase awareness and help these operators package and sell the destination.
- b. Collaboration with Gabonese and regional tour operators (e.g. Cameroon, ROC, Nigeria) to package trips for domestic and regional visitors, as well as a social media campaign to inform potential visitors and promote packages.
- c. Familiarization trips for target tour operators so that they can understand and sell the tourism experience.
- d. Engage with an intrepid A-list celebrity or influencer to explore the region and highlight the travel experience to their network. This may be combined with recommendations for parks in ROC (where WCS is also involved) as a combined effort for the whole region. This should be tied to current conservation activities that the celebrity can get involved in for a more meaningful story (for example, the 'Friend-a-Gorilla' campaign with Hollywood celebrities that ran in Uganda in 2010, generating over \$4 million in free media coverage or Katmai National Parks in Alaska where they have a funny 'Fat Bear Week' social media tournament, where instagram users can 'vote' for the fattest bear.

Destination Snapshot:

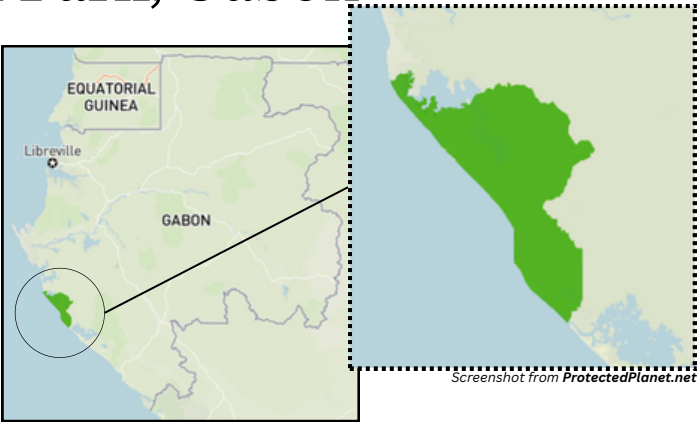
Loango National Park, Gabon

Quick Facts:

- 151,000 Hectares
- Mixture of dense forest, savannah, and an expansive lagoon system (86km of coastal beach)
- IUCN Category - Not Reported
- Park Entry Fee: ~25 USD for internationals
- Gorilla Habituation: One successful family
- ‘Beachcomber’ elephants & ‘surfing’ hippos

Seasonality:

- Dry Season: July-Mid September
Green Season: Mid November - January
Transition Seasons: Mid Sep.-Mid Nov, January-June
- Nov.-March: Arrival of nesting turtles & hatchlings
 - Nov.-April: Elephants & hippos venture to beaches
 - July-Sep.: Whale watching season



Accessibility:

Int'l Air	Léon-Mba International Airport (Libreville) Most itineraries have guests flying into Libreville first, then flying to Port-Gentil for the transfer to Loango. The Libreville-Port Gentil flight is ~30-45 mins.	
	Port-Gentil International Airport (Port Gentil) <i>Extremely limited international arrival destinations</i> Loango Camps staff have two scheduled transfers from Port Gentil to the camps (2023): Mondays at 09h00 and Thursdays at 09h00 Scheduled <i>return transfers from the camps back to Port Gentil</i> : <i>Mondays at 13h00 and Thursdays at 13h00</i>	
Domestic Air	Sand and grass airstrip in park, ~780 meters. Airstrip is not drained, so it is inoperable during & after heavy rains.	Gamba Airport ~50kms to Sette Cama Weekly charter from Libreville Airport to Gamba Airport
	Some experts explain that seaplanes can land on the Ndougou and Iguela lagoons, potentially viable for touristic purposes.	
Ground	From Port Gentil: 3-4 hour drive on rough roads, “imperfect,” and the ability to hire vehicles “could be improved.”	There are no direct or paved roads from Libreville to Loango.
	Stakeholders agree that ground access is not viable for tourism in Loango except for the most intrepid travelers, unless transfer is via professional pick-up services (like Loango Camps staff).	
Within Park	Good network of forest tracks throughout. Depending on the activity, transportation within the park is either by motorized boat, pirogue, 4x4 safari vehicle, or by foot. Most all touristic itineraries feature some type of long hiking and trekking for activities. Getting to Yatouga Research Camp (Starting point for gorilla trekking): ~ 1.5 hour boat ride from Loango Lodge.	

Transportation Infrastructure	Good
Park Headquarters	Nearby
Availability of Accommodations	Serviced
Accommodation Product Variation	Medium
Visitor Activities	Openly Available
Activity Product Variation	High

None Basic Limited **Diverse**

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Accommodations & Facilities

Luxury Green Resorts, partnered with Gabon Wildlife Camps & Safaris, has **four different accommodation options** within the park:

Akaka Forest Camp, Louri River Camp, and Tassi Savannah Camp

All three feature 5 fully-equipped safari tents mounted on platforms, each with 2 single beds and an ensuite bathroom. (*Tassi is the rainy-season mobile camp*). There are also several discreet electrical connections.

Loango Camps (Recently renamed to ‘Ndola’)

Located in the northern end of the park on Iguela Lagoon.

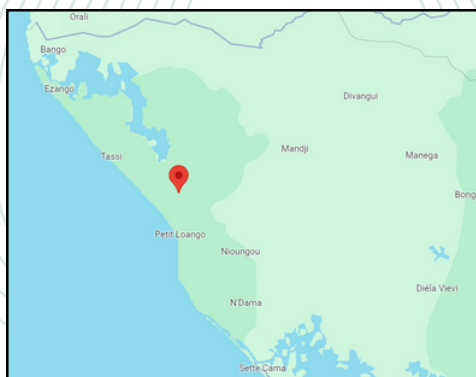
Named “one of the more luxurious offerings of any wilderness-based lodging in Gabon.”

Accommodation options include: 8 private luxury tents/bungalows and 4 suites with extra facilities. All bungalows and suites are equipped with A/C, laundry service, and ensuite bathrooms with shower, basin, and toilet.

There is also a communal dining area & bar with a connected ‘Internet facility’ for guests.

Destination Snapshot:

Loango National Park, Gabon



Google Maps (2023) Loango National Park.

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★

1 Total Review

*TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●●●

38 Total Reviews

"The guide(s) did their work professionally and had a particularly good eye for both flora and fauna."

"All in, the safari experience at Loango was completely unique - you don't have the swathes of 'big 5' seen in other areas of Africa, but what you do have is the chance to be some of the only visitors to a truly wild place, with some animals you can't see elsewhere."

"The logistics of getting there, while multi-step, went seamlessly. That's no mean feat."

"The guides were knowledgeable and the care and respect for the National Park evident. I work in conservation so this is an important aspect for me."

TripAdvisor Reviews 2022 - 2023

"Another highlight was the trip to see the lowland gorillas. The gorilla guides were really good and very respectful of the gorilla's personal space."

"When you finally arrive at Loango, you feel like you're in a scene from a movie or the pages of a travel magazine. An almost flawless idyllic setting, it scarcely seems real."

"Gorilla Trekking. Surprisingly inexpensive when compared to other such experiences around the world and very well put together, this was undoubtedly the highlight of our entire trip."

TripAdvisor Reviews 2020

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Wildlife:

Most famous for the unique 'beachcomber' forest elephants & 'surfing' hippos.

Forest: Western Lowland Gorillas, Chimpanzees, & Forest Buffalo.

Marine: Migrating Whales, Dolphins, & Sea Turtles.

~200 species of birds.

Petit Loango (within the park) is a designated **Important Bird Area** by BirdLife International.

Geographic Features:

Diverse coastal & jungle forest ecosystems.

~100kms of 'wild' Atlantic coastline.

Almost half of the famous **Iguéla Lagoon** resides within Loango, unique in that this is the only typical western African lagoon system protected within a national park.

Rivers & estuaries - *Sports fishing tourism*.

~17km hike between Sette Cama lagoon to the northern portion of Loango's lagoon - *Strong tourism circuit potential*.

Human Capital

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of the protected areas. Though they have not ceded full management responsibilities to outside organizations, they do curate tourism concessions and other partnerships within the parks.

The Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology was established in the park to habituate gorillas for the Loango Gorilla Project.

The **Ozouga Chimpanzee Project** is another research program in Loango, focusing on Chimpanzee behavior, behavioral ecology, and conservation.

Luxury Green Resorts is the National Park tourism concessioner in Loango (as well as other Gabon parks).

"[Loango NP] is a pristine, magical wonderland, the likes of which unfortunately almost do not exist anymore. Do yourself a favor and if you are able to, please visit and support one of the last remaining true edens of this world."

"Being a solo traveller was no issue."

All the staff are friendly and keen to please, but still learning their craft as Gabon is young in terms of tourism."

"The wildlife experience here is just fantastic. [...] The boat trips were just fantastic."

"The journey there is part of the adventure..."

"We spent in the park 4 nights, which was nice to see and do different things Loango has to offer (savanna drives, boat rides on lagoon, gorilla trekking, forest walks)."

TripAdvisor Reviews 2019

**Note: The park itself does not have its own dedicated TripAdvisor page.*

These reviews instead are pulled from the 'Loango Lodge' page, as many users refer to the park in full.

Destination Scorecard:

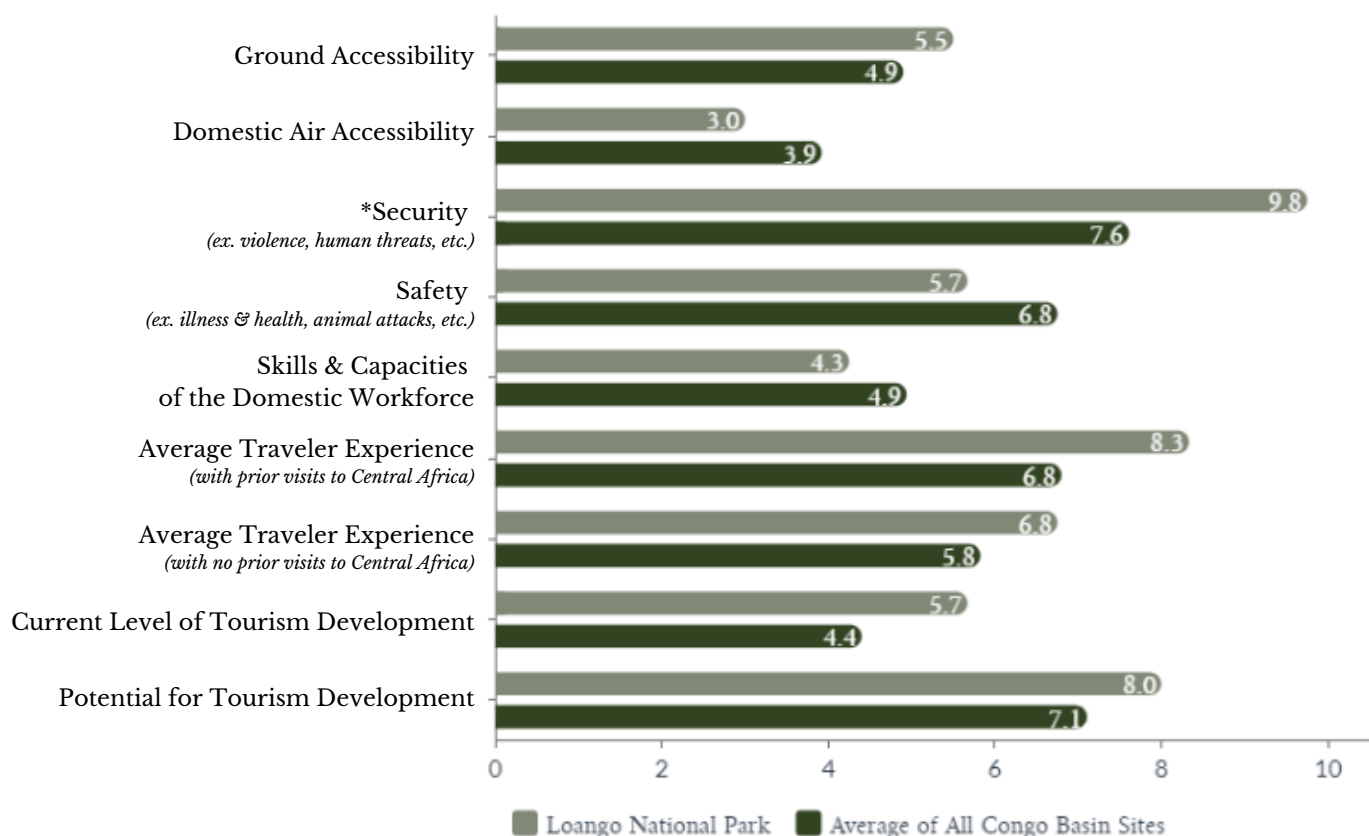
Loango National Park, Gabon

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

'1' represents relative weakness in the field and '10' represents strength in the field.

Loango National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Key Takeaways:

- This park received a nearly perfect score for security, indicating extremely high confidence that stakeholders have in this park's security for travelers.
- The average traveler experience for those both with and without prior visits to Central Africa is higher than the regional average, indicating that a broader array of travelers could be targeted in the short & medium-terms.
- Current level and further potential for tourism development rank higher than the regional average, signaling that this park should be prioritized in the short-term.

Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is formal interest from tourism investors and opportunities for expanded tourism in Loango National Park.
- The airlift to the park could be improved.
- Some of the words used to describe the park include: Primates & gorillas, wilderness, sustainable, undeveloped, unique, and exceptional.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Well-developed circuit in Gabon: Lope, Ivindo, Pongara, Mouklalaba-Doudou, & Mayumba National Parks.

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

*For additional information on security, see site analysis below.

Site Analysis:

Loango National Park, Gabon

Overview

Loango National Park (LoNP), nestled along Gabon's southwest Atlantic coast, spans about 151,000 hectares [1], boasting 85 kilometers of coastline [2] and enveloped by a 10-kilometer-wide buffer zone [3]. Approximately 30% of the park is designated for conservation and tourism activities, prioritizing minimal infrastructure development [4]. Situated just north of Sette Cama, a renowned hunting and fishing protected area [5], LoNP forms part of the Gamba Protected Area Complex, celebrated as the 'Eden of Gabon' for its pristine habitats and species diversity [6]. LoNP is currently under consideration for UNESCO recognition, reflecting its outstanding ecological value [7].

LoNP has an incredibly diverse and globally valued landscape, prompting its inclusion on the Time's 'World's Greatest Places 2023' List [8], marking this park as one of the few in Central Africa receiving this kind of international praise and recognition. The park features savanna, rainforests, mangroves, and beaches, as well as other water-features such as lagoons and riverways. Nearly half of the famous Iguéla Lagoon is located within LoNP boundaries, making this uniquely the only western African lagoon system that is protected within a national park [9].

The park's diverse landscape houses an equally diverse wildlife inventory, with iconic land and marine species. On land, Loango has leopards, buffalo, and nearly 1,500 western lowland gorillas, including one group habituated for tourism [10]. LoNP is also one of the top sites in Gabon for forest elephants, with one of the highest estimated densities in the country (1.59 elephants per square kilometer) [11]. In the water, the Loango coast sees dolphins, sea turtles, and migrating humpback whales [12]. However, the most famous of Loango's wildlife are the Hippos, specifically the 'surfing hippos' popularized in global media and docuseries. Also uniquely, 'beachcomber' elephants and buffalo who venture out on the wild, unspoilt beaches [13].

While Loango National Park is not subject to any specific travel advisories, the U.S. Department of State has issued a '*Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution*' travel advisory for Gabon as a whole (the same as France and the UK) [14]. When asked about the safety & security of the park, stakeholders expressed that the park is extremely safe, even during recent civil unrest which affect Gabon's major cities.

[1]<https://econservation.jrc.ec.europa.eu/site/9011>

[2] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6593/>

[3]<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9b20/b19fb8672fa780ce5ea2cd45c9a9e670733e.pdf>

[4]https://papaco.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/METT-Gabon_Parc-National-de-Loango.pdf

[5] <https://rsis Ramsar.org/ris/353>

[6] https://www.wwf.gabon.org/en/landscapes/the_gamba_complex/

[7] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ga>

[8]<https://time.com/6261861/loango-national-park-gabon/>

[9]<https://journeysbydesign.com/destinations/gabon/loango-national-park>

[10] <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1260483.shtml>

[11]<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2351989421004443>

[12]<https://wwhandbook.iwc.int/en/country-profiles/gabon>

[13]<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16686544>

[14]<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/gabon-travel-advisory.html>

Site Analysis:

Loango National Park, Gabon

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of all the protected areas in Gabon. As the ultimate manager of the park, ANPN is responsible for all tourism activities, unless otherwise ceded to a tourism concessionaire. Luxury Green Resorts (LGR), partnered with Gabon Wildlife Camps & Safaris, operates in this landscape, partnered with ANPN, as a concessionaire [15]. LGR operates three accommodations and a wide variety of tourism activities in the park, including boat trips, forest trekking, and wildlife viewing [16]. Sport fishing is also offered in the area.

ANPN recognizes the potential for tourism development in LoNP in the National Tourism Strategy (2020-2025). The Tourism Strategy includes a strategy of the creation of 'Zones of Tourist Interest' (ZITs) which is "an area of [Gabon] presenting strong potential for tourism development due to its endowment with exceptional natural or cultural sites." The 'South-Coastal ZIT' is one of the 6 proposed ZITS and includes Loango National Park. Per the Tourism Strategy, some of the plans for the park include building a luxury resort, more camping areas, and strengthening accessibility-related infrastructure.

Another key stakeholder for tourism development in Loango NP is the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology (MPI). MPI has been present in the park since 2005 and they run the Loango Ape Project, a small, permanent field site for gorilla research & habituation [17]. MPI's work contributes to the wider vision of gorilla tourism for Loango NP and Gabon, working closely with ANPN and LGR on ecotourism.

Supporting, expanding, and investing in the current ecotourism products are key near-term drivers for tourism development in this landscape. Habituated gorillas are often the key draws for nature-based tourism in the Congo Basin, of which there is one already in Loango. With additional investment, MPI could begin the habituation process for 2-3 more groups for ecotourism. This is a long and costly process, so would yields results in the medium to long-term. Gorilla tourism has potential in the park, but to be sustainable as a visitor experience multiple groups are needed incase groups break up or are otherwise not accessible to visitors.

Marketing presents a significant need for Loango National Park, leveraging the initial, but still limited, visibility it has achieved in the tourism market through exposure on outlets such as Time Magazine, Netflix Docuseries and LonelyPlanet. The park is a more mature destination, relative to other parks in the Congo Basin, with a variety of accommodations, activities, and decent infrastructure, providing a strong foundation for growth with a marketing push.

[15]<https://gabonwildlifecamps.com/>

[16]<https://gabonwildlifecamps.com/gabon-parks-camps/loango-national-park/>

[17]<https://scienceparcsgabon.weebly.com/max-planck-research-camp.html>

Site Analysis:

Loango National Park, Gabon

Enabling Environment Constraints

Ground Accessibility

Reaching LoNP from Port Gentil involves a 3-4 hour drive on a mix of tarmac and more challenging roads. Accessing the park from Libreville was not even an option considered by stakeholders interviewed or online sources. Currently, LGR offers two scheduled transfers from Port Gentil to the camps, providing convenience and reliability for guests. However, independent travelers face difficulties accessing the park due to limited transport options out of Port Gentil. Investments in road maintenance and improvement, especially for the section of road closer to the park, could improve access for travelers, however the return on investment for such an investment may be limited. If tourism grows and additional investment in the park occurs, a focus on increasing the current scheduled transfer system and open it up to other travelers would likely be more cost effective.

Air Accessibility

In the Congo Basin, private charter flights are the most common way of access most of the parks. Having on-site airstrips for these wealthy fly-in, fly-out travelers is a major enabler for tourism development in these sites as well as for circuit development to other parks. There is a sand & grass airstrip in the park, through it is not drained and is largely inoperable during & after heavy rains. The nearby Gamba Airport, ~50kms from neighboring Sette Cama, is a viable option, though it is outside of park boundaries and require additional transfers. This airport is currently serviced by AfriJet. One operator also uses a helicopter for guests to access the site, although the cost and scalability of this option is limiting.

Some stakeholders believe that seaplanes could land on the park lagoons, which could theoretically be viable for tourism. A solution is needed to increase the viability of air access into Loango National Park and facilitate greater access for tourism markets. This could be enhancements to the current airstrip, development of a new one, exploration of sea plane travel, or building a better road from Gamba airport into Loango.

Marketing & Promotion

A crucial factor for tourism development in LoNP will be effective marketing and promotion efforts. While the park has gained attention through stories of its 'surfing Hippos,' this buzz has not been directly linked with travel to the park. With impressive natural assets and strong accommodation options, marketing is needed to get more 'heads in beds.' These efforts can build on the media exposure already achieved, including Loango's feature on the Netflix docuseries 'Our Great National Parks.'

With the oil industry presence in Port Gentil there is a relatively close market for trips to the park in the town, although the size of the market is limited. Other travelers to the park will likely be transferring from Libreville, which is approximately a \$600 return flight (March 2023). This will limit the travel market to mid and higher end travelers.

Political Environment

To leverage the opportunity for tourism within the park, investment is needed in tourism facilities and services. The recent political changes at the national level may give pause to potential investors (especially international high-value ecotourism brands) due to uncertainty about the future. This is discussed in more details in the country level analysis of Gabon.

Site Analysis:

Loango National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

Conduct a study of the airstrip and other infrastructure in the park to develop an investment plan and indicative costing for needed improvements as well as prioritization of the needs. This may also include an assessment of the viability of seaplane access to the park.

****Develop a branding, marketing and storytelling strategy for the park, centered on key distinguishing factors, such as gorilla trekking, surfing hippos, beach combing elephants, etc.**

Initial actions should also be taken to create buzz and interest around the park, including working with influencers who can help to tell the story of the park. Additionally, collaboration with local tour operators that are promoting packages to the park to boost their promotional efforts around these packages.

Luxury Green Resorts have a strong presence in the park and these investments should be nurtured, however for the park to maximize its tourism potential, other well planned and spaced lodging and activity investments (concessions) are needed. A tourism plan for the park, including zoning of areas for potential public and private investment should be developed. This should focus on supporting LGR's current investments as well as infrastructure, activities and private concessions in other areas of the park.

Site Analysis:

Loango National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Leveraging the planned World Bank project in Gabon or through other avenues, improve the airstrip and park infrastructure enhancements identified in the recommended infrastructure study (*see short-term recommendation*).**

Strategic investment promotion to attract additional private investment in the park, based on the tourism plan identified in the short term recommendations. Private investments should generate funds for the park as well as be linked to the revenue sharing arrangements with local communities to ensure they have a long-term stake in tourism in the park. This may also include a financial grant element to attract investors, buy down the investment risk and provide ownership in the operation for local communities (the grant being the communities equity stake in a tourism investment, although the private operator would maintain management control).

****Co-op marketing & storytelling campaign with investors and tour operators promoting the park (also in conjunction with other parks that can make tourism circuits). This would include a travel trade outreach program targeting international markets as well as domestic/regional travelers to inform, engage and excite them about the park. Actions will be based on the Branding, marketing and Storytelling recommendation described earlier and may initially include:**

- a. Direct outreach and sales visits to target tour operators in key international markets to increase awareness and help these operators package and sell the destination.
- b. Collaboration with Gabonese and regional tour operators (e.g. Cameroon, ROC, Nigeria) to package trips for domestic and regional visitors, as well as a social media campaign to inform potential visitors and promote packages.
- c. Familiarization trips for target tour operators so that they can understand and sell the tourism experience.
- d. Engage with an intrepid A-list celebrity or influencer to explore the region and highlight the travel experience to their network. This may be combined with recommendations for parks in ROC (where WCS is also involved) as a combined effort for the whole region. This should be tied to current conservation activities that the celebrity can get involved in for a more meaningful story (for example, the 'Friend-a-Gorilla' campaign with Hollywood celebrities that ran in Uganda in 2010, generating over \$4 million in free media coverage or Katmai National Parks in Alaska where they have a funny 'Fat Bear Week' social media tournament, where instagram users can 'vote' for the fattest bear.

Destination Snapshot:

Moukalaba-Doudou National Park, Gabon

Quick Facts:

- 445,800 Hectares
- Variety of landscapes:
 - Rainforest, grassy savannahs, & swamps.
- IUCN Category - Not Reported
- Park Entry Fee: Unknown
- Highest concentration of primates in Gabon, including habituated gorilla

Seasonality:

- ☀ May - September (best for Primate Viewing)
- 🌧 October - April (best for Birding)

Accommodations & Facilities

Within the Park:

Extremely basic accommodations.

The Mbani Campsite is used by PROGRAM on their itineraries.

Additional information regarding accommodations within the park is unknown.

Outside the Park

Tchibanga has a variety of accommodation options, where most travelers stay overnight before entering the park.



Accessibility:

Int'l Air	Léon-Mba International Airport (Libreville)	
Domestic Air	Short domestic flight (~ 1.5 hours) from Libreville to Tchibanga are possible, depending on weekly flight schedules.	
Ground	From Libreville to Tchibanga (private vehicle): Drive approx. 9 hours (in good conditions). This is not recommended, unless travelers are working through a tourism circuit with other nearby destinations.	From Libreville to Tchibanga (bus): Drive time approx. 12 hours. This is also not recommended as the trip is very long and less reliable.
	Most travelers meet their tour operators/guides in Tchibanga, who then can drive them into the park. <i>Approx. 2 hour travel time.</i>	
Within Park	No infrastructure within park boundaries. Most current tour itineraries in the park warn travelers of the amounts of walking that will be required and recommend that travelers are "fit enough" for the activities.	

Transportation Infrastructure	Poor
Park Headquarters	Unknown
Availability of Accommodations	Self-serviced
Accommodation Product Variation	Low
Visitor Activities	Special Request
Activity Product Variation	Medium
None Basic Limited Diverse	

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Destination Snapshot:

Moukalaba-Doudou National Park, Gabon



Google Maps (2023) Moukalaba Doudou National Park.

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Wildlife:

Hosts the **highest concentration of primates** in Gabon.

Other key species:

Elephants, hippos, waterbuck, and aquatic birds.

~380 bird species.

This park falls within the 'Gamba Protected Areas Complex,' which is a designated **Important Bird Area** by BirdLife International.

Geographic Features:

Mosaic of coastal ecosystems, rainforests, savannas, and swamps.

Intersected by the Nyanga River & Nyanga plains.

Notably: **Monts Doudou** & the Raphia marshes of Rembo Ndogo.

Human Capital

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of the protected areas. Though they have not ceded full management responsibilities to outside organizations, they do curate tourism concessions and other partnerships within the parks.

In 2014, the local NGO 'PROGRAM' (Protection of the Great Apes in Moukalaba) was appointed with on-the-ground management responsibilities of gorilla habituation, intended for tourism. This aligns with the park's strategic management plan, which identified great ape tourism as a priority pillar.

Communities are largely involved in the tourism sector here, with many trekking activities organized around Doussala with local, experienced guides in charge.

JICA, a Japanese International Cooperation Agency, is also working in the park. Their work relates to biodiversity conservation and ecological monitoring in preparation for ecotourism.

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★
2 Total Reviews

TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●○○
2 Total Reviews

"The gorillas of Moukalaba Doudou Park, unlike those I saw in Uganda, although accustomed to the presence of the 'man, are very shy and tend to move away from invaders, which is why we have never been able to approach less than 20 -30 meters."

"The place is totally isolated from the world even from a communications point of view, and the The nearest town (Tchibanga) is about 2 hours away by car (and in the park there were no machines that could guarantee transfers not previously agreed)."

"The experience can be improved from several points of view."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2022

"The Moukalaba-Doudou park is approached from the town of Tchibanga. You must have made contact and made an appointment with the park eco-guards."

"You have to bring your own food but the eco-guards are experienced."

"We are always safe with a super kind tracker leader who is proud of his team and his gorillas and a research director who is attentive to making sure things go well."

"It's a little expensive but frankly extraordinary."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2019

Destination Scorecard:

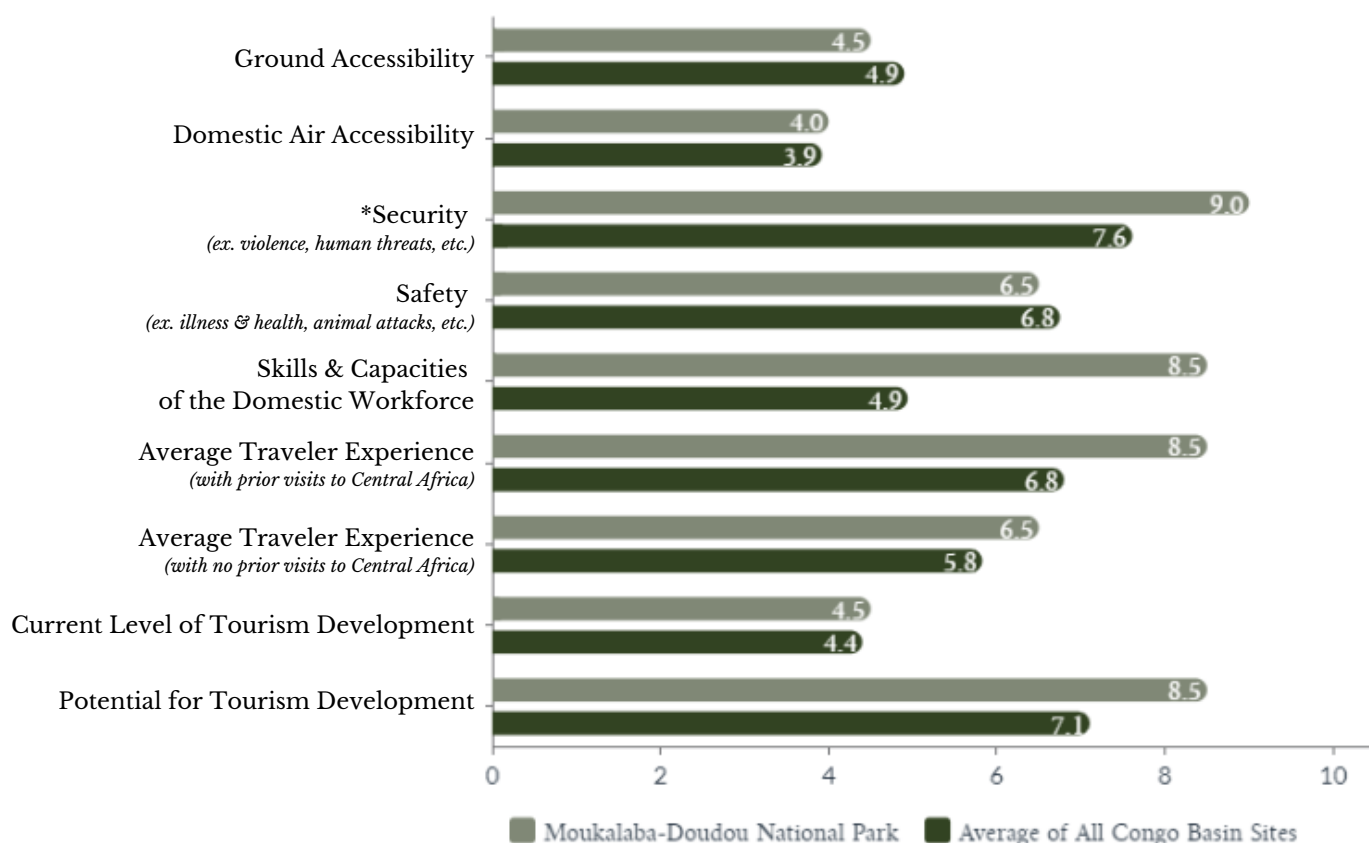
Moukalaba-Doudou National Park, Gabon

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

'1' represents relative weakness in the field and '10' represents strength in the field.

Moukalaba-Doudou National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is some formal interest from tourism investors and opportunities for expanded tourism in MDNP.
- Some of the words used to describe the park include wild, unspoiled, endemism, and grand.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Waka National Park
 - Mayumba National Park
 - Circuit with Gabonese Protected Areas

Key Takeaways:

- Security and skills/capacities of the local workforce are both ranked extremely high compared to the regional averages. The specific reason for the positive skills results is not clear.
- Ground and air accessibility align with the regional averages.
- With both potential for tourism development and average traveler experience (with prior visits to Central Africa) being ranked very high, this signals significant tourism potential.

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

*For additional information on security, see site analysis below.

Site Analysis: Moukalaba-Doudou National Park, Gabon

Overview

Moukalaba-Doudou National Park (MDNP) is located in southwest Gabon, separated by the Atlantic coast by only a few kilometers. It covers roughly 450,000 Hectares [1], fully surrounded by a 5-km wide buffer zone [2]. The park constitutes two former protected areas, 'Moukalaba' and 'Monts-Doudou' [3] and is one of two national parks that make up the Gamba Protected Area Complex, nicknamed the 'Eden of Gabon' for its pristine habitats, species diversity, and ecological importance [4]. MDNP is currently on the UNESCO tentative list for formal recognition due to its outstanding ecological value [5]. The MDNP landscape is varied, representative of the mountainous, valley-forest, and coastal landscapes of Central Africa within one park [6].

MDNP is one of the best places in Gabon to view primates, with a population of over 4,500 great apes, the highest concentration in Gabon [7]. MDNP is one of only two sites in Gabon with habituated gorillas. Other iconic species, including forest elephants, hippos, waterbucks, and Nile Crocodiles can be found in the park. Additionally, the park boasts around 380 species of birds [8] including unique species along the coastline [9].

While MDNP is not subject to any specific travel advisories, the U.S. Department of State has issued a 'Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution' travel advisory for Gabon as a whole (the same as France and the UK) [10]. When asked about safety & security in the park, stakeholders expressed no concerns, mentioning 'no dangerous sites' within the park boundaries.

[1]<https://ga.chm-cbd.net/en/protected-areas/moukalaba-doudou-national-park>

[2]https://carpe.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/2010003_SE_Tourism_Investors_Brochure_Taresika_2007.pdf

[3]<https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6586/>

[4]https://www.wwf.org/en/landscapes/the_gamba_complex/

[5]<https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ga>

[6]<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/gabon/attractions/moukalaba-doudou-national-park/a/poi-sig/1558177/355302>

[7]<https://www.programmeppi.org/en/projects/la-conservation-des-grands-singes-du-gabon-au-parc-national-de-moukalaba-doudou/>

[8]<https://www.yourafricansafari.com/parks/moukalaba-doudou/>

[9]<https://datazone.birdlife.org/site/factsheet/6304>

[10]<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/gabon-travel-advisory.html>

Site Analysis: --- --- Moukalaba-Doudou National Park, Gabon

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of all the protected areas in Gabon. As the ultimate manager of the park, ANPN is responsible for all tourism activities, unless otherwise ceded to a tourism concessionaire, which is not currently the case in Moukalaba-Doudou National Park. However, ANPN does recognize the potential for tourism development in MDNP in the National Tourism Strategy (2020-2025). The Tourism Strategy includes a strategy of the creation of 'Zones of Tourist Interest' (ZITs) which is "an area of [Gabon] presenting strong potential for tourism development due to its endowment with exceptional natural or cultural sites." The 'South-Coastal ZIT' is one of the 6 proposed ZITS and includes MDNP for its rainforest and gorilla offerings. Per the Tourism Strategy, some of the plans for the park include building a luxury resort, more camping areas, creating a more formal entrance to the park, in-park trails, and strengthening accessibility-related infrastructure in the nearby Tchibanga and Gamba towns.

Other entities could significantly influence tourism development in the park. A local NGO named 'PROGRAM' (Protection of Great Apes in Moukalaba) has been entrusted with on-the-ground management of gorilla habituation for tourism since 2014 [11], despite not being an official tourism concessionaire. Aligned with ANPN's management plan, the NGO plays a crucial role in the vision for great ape tourism by overseeing the habituation process, managing gorillas, and ensuring their oversight. JICA (Japanese International Cooperation Agency) is actively involved in conservation and ecological monitoring initiatives, which align with the park's vision for introducing ecotourism [12]. These entities' contributions are integral to realizing the park's tourism potential. Gabon Untouched is also a Libreville-based nature and travel organization working in MDNP and would be a key partner in supporting the development of tourism in the park as well as promoting it.

Due to the remote, hard to access nature of the park, limited infrastructure and no meaningful accommodation facilities, tourism is a medium-term prospect for the park. To catalyze tourism in the park, there needs to be accommodation. This requires attracting a private concessionaire that could develop and run a small, higher-end facility in or near the park (with oversight from ANPN). To incentivize such an investment (and offset the risk involved), exclusive access (at least for a period of time) to gorilla trekking and other primate activities in the region would likely be needed. This should leverage and be done in partnership with the activities of existing partners such as PROGRAM and JICA as well as local communities.

The exclusivity of the tourism experiences (having a park to themselves) would likely be a key selling point for visitors to the park. This would also require continued investment in gorilla habituation, including identifying new groups for tourism as well as ongoing conservation activities.

This would not compete with the existing Mbani campsite, run by PROGRAM. Small scale community-based tourism could also be scaled and enhanced to provide activities and experiences for guests to the tourism concessions and PROGRAM campsite. Currently, local communities are actively involved in the emerging tourism sector, particularly in organizing trekking activities around Doussala village, where local guides lead the way [13].

[11]<https://www.programmeppi.org/en/projects/la-conservation-des-grands-singes-du-gabon-au-parc-national-de-moukalaba-doudou/>

[12]https://www2.jica.go.jp/en/evaluation/pdf/2021_0802827_4_f.pdf

[13]<https://www.yourafricansafari.com/parks/moukalaba-doudou/>

Site Analysis: --- --- Moukalaba-Doudou National Park, Gabon

Enabling Environment Constraints

Accommodations & Tourism Infrastructure

Currently, the accommodation options and touristic infrastructure in MDNP are extremely basic. Prioritizing tourism development in the park requires addressing these factors. While overnight stays are available at the Mbani campsite through PROGRAM itineraries [14], it's unclear if independent travelers can utilize this space. Otherwise, there are no formal accommodation options within the park itself. Travelers typically stay in Doussala and Tchibanga, towns which can host travelers on the front & back-ends of their MDNP excursions. Compared to nearby Loango National Park, which offers multiple accommodation options facilitating multi-day travel, MDNP lacks competitiveness in this market. More investment is necessary in accommodations as well as relating tourism infrastructure (trails, roads, etc.) to effectively compete in the nature-based tourism sector.

Tourist Services & Activities

While MDNP boasts strong natural assets, its touristic activities are limited. Apart from sporadic gorilla trekking activities organized by PROGRAM and local community guides, there are few formal touristic activities available. A thorough analysis of potential tourism services and activities, followed by the creation of a tourism development plan is needed.

Air & Ground Access

Access remains a major constraint for tourism development in the park, with either a 9+ hour drive or a 1.5 hour charter flight to Tchibanga, followed by a 2-hour drive on rough roads to the edge of the park. No airstrip exists within or next to park boundaries. To leverage the potential as a higher-end more exclusive type tourism experience, options should be assessed for fly-in access directly to the park or park border.

Political Environment

To leverage the opportunity for tourism within the park, investment is needed in tourism facilities and services. The recent political changes at the national level may give pause to potential investors (especially international high-value ecotourism brands) due to uncertainty about the future. This is discussed in more details in the country level analysis of Gabon.

Site Analysis:

Moukalaba-Doudou National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

****Develop a brief tourism strategy for the park that focuses on the feasibility, location and needed investment for a higher-end accommodation and activity concession for the park and how this can be structured to support the park. This would also include exploration of a component of community ownership and involvement in the investment (most likely through donor grants) modeled on similar examples, such as Clouds Lodge in Uganda. Additional tourism activities and support services should also be assessed as well as other opportunities that may be identified through further study on the ground. The goal of this document would be to provide the concept and rationale that could be used to engage with potential investors.**

Study for a potential airstrip in or near the park (and near to where a potential lodging facility would be located).

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****The plans and studies outlined in the short-term recommendations would be followed with an analysis of costs for development of the airstrip, infrastructure (roads, signage, trails, etc.) and other supporting investments that would attract a lodging investor to the park.**

****The tourism strategy and costing information could then be used to engage with donors, such as JICA, the World Bank or other partners to support the required investment needed to establish a foundation for tourism in the park. This is likely a key step before private investors will engage.**

Once a supporting partner (donor) is identified a process of investment promotion can commence. Strategic investment promotion should utilize the tourism strategy and costing information but will also require the development of specific investment promotion and tender documents. Attracting an anchor tourism facility should ideally be linked to a grant component that would 'buy down' the risk for the investor and be used as community ownership in the lodge, ensuring the local community have a clear stake in tourism in the landscape.

Support to ongoing and expanded gorilla habituation efforts through PROGRAM to build the number of habituated groups to three.

****Critical Enabler**

Destination Snapshot:

Pongara National Park, Gabon

Quick Facts:

- 96,000 Hectares
- Sandy beaches, estuary swamps, & flooded forests. Maze of mangrove and savannah.
- IUCN Category - Not Reported
- Park Entry Fee: ~15 USD for internationals

Seasonality:

- Whale watching season: June-October
- Turtle viewing season: November-March
- Primate and large animal viewing: Sep-Dec, & Feb-May
- Migratory bird viewing: July-October

Accommodations & Facilities

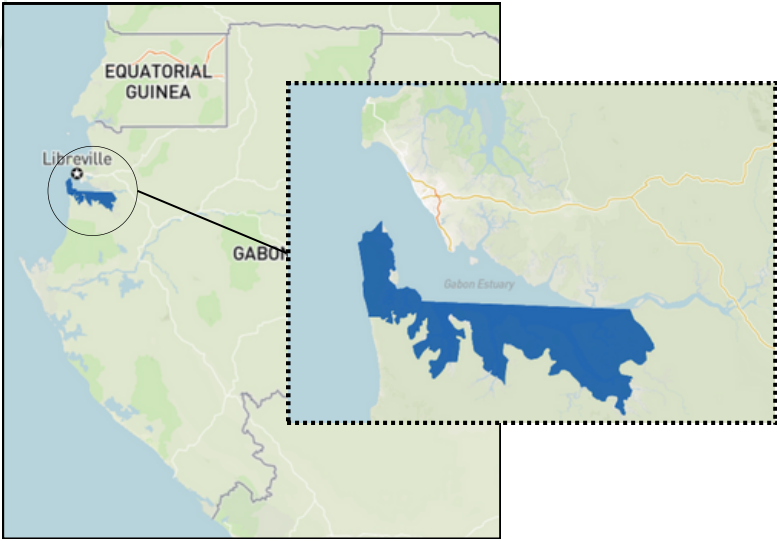
Luxury Green Resorts, partnered with Gabon Wildlife Camps & Safaris, has developed **Pongara Lodge** within the park:

Cluster of 11 units, 6 of which are luxury eco-styled bungalows. Each has queen-sized beds, ensuite bathrooms, A/C, and a private balcony overlooking the beachfront.

26 beds total.

The main lodge has a restaurant and bar, where guest reviews on Tripadvisor praise the excellent food quality and high class hospitality from staff and management. All meals and transfers are included in the price, as well as 2 daily activities. Add-on excursions and activity packages are offered.

Point Denis has a range of additional accommodation options. However, there is a known 'gray area' about the official park boundaries, so whether or not these real estate developments are inside or outside of the park is not confirmed, though only GWCS pays concessions to the ANPN.



Screenshot from ProtectedPlanet.net

Accessibility:

Int'l Air	Léon-Mba International Airport (Libreville)	
Domestic Air	There is space within the park for a heli-pad & runway, but none exist at present.	Port-Gentil Airport (Port Gentil): Some packages include domestic flights for travelers coming from Loango.
Ground & Boat	Boat ride from Libreville: Times vary depending on weather and tides, but the journey is usually less than an hour. (Avg. ~35 mins.)	
	GWC Staff provide transfers from the airport or city hotels to the marina, where travelers can get on the boat to Pongara. Once at the park, GWC staff provide another transfer from the jetty to Pongara Lodge.	
Within Park	Limited forest tracks, but access through beach landings & bai's is possible. Some of the activities include whale watching by charter boat, drift boat mangrove safaris, and guided nature walks.	One true road: Runs from Point Denis to Pongara Lodge, ~20km through the forest.

Transportation Infrastructure	Fair
Park Headquarters	Unknown
Availability of Accommodations	Serviced
Accommodation Product Variation	High
Visitor Activities	Openly Available
Activity Product Variation	High

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

- None
- Basic
- Limited
- Diverse**

Destination Snapshot:

Pongara National Park, Gabon



Google Maps (2023) Pongara National Park.

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★
1 Total Review

TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●●●
19 Total Reviews

"I sailed to the lodge from Libreville by speedboat. Once there, you will be picked up by a small boat and dropped off on the beach."

"You can participate in an activity twice a day. Buggy safari, walking safari, canoeing, all led by a very experienced guide. Of course you can swim in the sea."

"I really liked crossing the forest, with these immense trees, this very dense vegetation, the light which struggles to pass through in places, the adventure begins."

"The lodge is very comfortable, clean, well air-conditioned, all made of wood. A terrace overlooks a plain and the sea behind. Here, no wifi, no network, it's perfect."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2021 – 2023

"The idyllic setting between ocean and tropical forest, the warm Pongara team, delicious and hearty meals, clean and well-made bungalows, entertaining and enriching activities, we could not hope for better for our stay at Pongara Lodge and in Central Africa where we have not yet found an equivalent establishment!"

"Magnificent bungalow excellent meal excellent staff quiet beach an unforgettable weekend thanks to Didier and all the staff at Pongara Lodge"

TripAdvisor Reviews
2018

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Wildlife:

The Estuary & marine periphery act as landing spots for many migratory birds, sea turtles, and other marine mammals.

Marine: **Whales, dolphins, and sea turtles.** *Whale watching tourism.*

Forest: Elephants, monkeys, hippos, duikers, & chimpanzees.

Geographic Features:

Lies along the southside of the Gabon Estuary, with pristine beaches, lagoons, flooded forests, **mangrove swamps**, and inland savannas.

Several rivers: River Remboué, the River Igominé and the River Gomgoué

Pongara hosts some of the world's tallest mangroves. Coupled with Akanda NP, these two parks combined host 25% of Africa's protected mangrove areas.

The most popular geographic feature for tourism, at present, are the **sandy beaches**.

Being only a short boat ride away from Libreville, as well as being connected to the popular 'Point Denis,' are other major geographic assets for tourism.

Human Capital

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of the protected areas. Though they have not ceded full management responsibilities to outside organizations, they do curate tourism concessions and other partnerships within the parks.

Aventures Sans Frontières [ASF] is an NGO opeting in the park, with a focus on research & protection of the area's sea turtles.

WSC Gabon also plays a vital role in the monitoring of fishing activities beyond Pongara's marine reserve.

Luxury Green Resorts is the National Park concessioner in Pongara (as well as other Gabon parks).

"For nature lovers, to do again without [hesitation]."
"This is an amazing but expensive place to visit in Gabon."

"Be aware the three hour trek which is extra charge into the rain forest is very rough, no paths and you will be walking in water up to your waist, walking on log over river and climbing over much debris."

"Guides only speak French so hard to know what more information he was giving to us."

"Totally exotic [...] Impeccable welcome [...] Really a place to discover."

"A 'lost' corner where nature is respected."

"Need an escape, nature in its original state, unforgettable moments of serenity, symbiosis with the forest, the Atlantic Ocean? [...] Pain in the heart on the day of departure."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2015 – 2018

**Note: The park itself does not have its own dedicated TripAdvisor page.*

These reviews instead are pulled from the 'Pongara Lodge' page, as many users refer to the park in full.

Destination Scorecard:

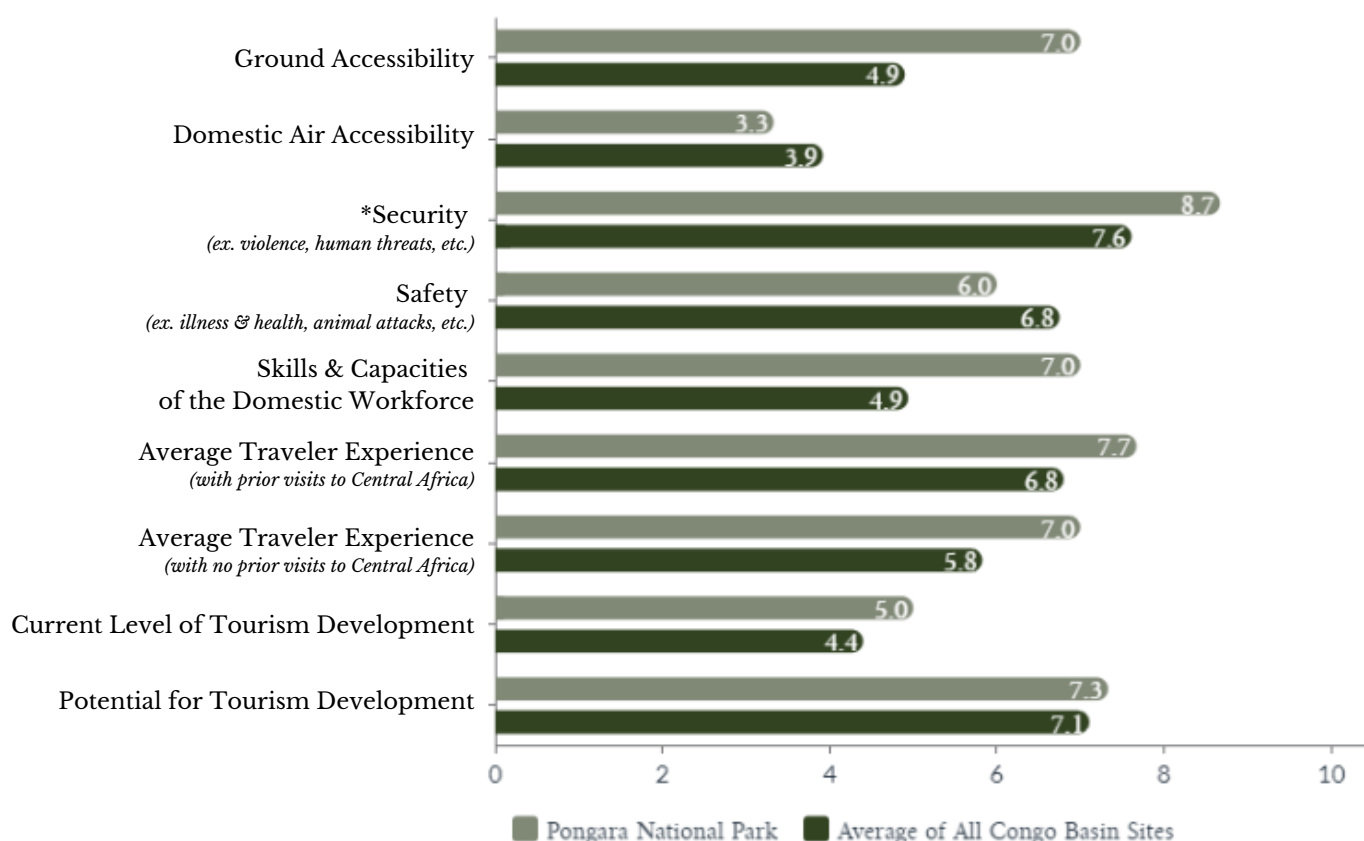
Pongara National Park, Gabon

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

'1' represents relative weakness in the field and '10' represents strength in the field.

Pongara National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is formal interest from tourism investors and opportunities for expanded tourism in Pongara NP.
- When describing the natural assets of the park, turtles & whales were mentioned by every respondent.
- Respondents recommended developing a helicopter landing pad as an access option for wealthier travelers from Libreville.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Loango National Park
 - Odzala-Kokoua National Park
 - Campo-Ma'an and Mount Cameroon NPs

Key Takeaways:

- Ground accessibility ranks high, likely because of the easy access via boat from Libreville. Security and average traveler experience also ranks higher than the regional averages, indicating great potential for further tourism growth.
- Stakeholders report a high potential for tourism development, signaling this park's opportunities for development in the short-term.

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

*For additional information on security, see site analysis below.

Site Analysis:

Pongara National Park, Gabon

Overview

Pongara National Park (PNP) stands as one of Gabon's two peri-urban parks, located in the north-western region of the country, about half an hour's boat ride from the capital city, Libreville. This small 96,000 Hectare park [1] features approximately 35 kms of Atlantic coastline [2] and is surrounded by a 5 km-wide buffer zone [3] into the Gabon estuary on the northern boundary of the park. PNP is recognized by Ramsar as a Wetland of International Importance due to its significance for marine species, its biodiversity, and global ecological importance [4].

Pongara's coastal positioning creates a complete gradient of coastal landscapes, ranging from the sandy beaches, lagoons, mangroves, and swamps to flooded forests, mainland forests and savannas further inland. The parks' 45,000 hectares of mangroves [3] are among the tallest in the world, and coupled with nearby Akanda National Park, they together account for 25% of Africa's protected mangrove area [5].

PNP offers refuge for a wide variety of species. In the coastal and marine segments, migratory bottlenose dolphins and humpback whales come in large numbers from June-August. The beaches are considered a key nesting area for leatherback turtles, hosting around 3,500 nests each year [2]. The estuary region is rich in avifauna, especially migratory birds. Further inland the forests are home to gorillas, monkeys, buffalo, and a forest elephant population, estimated at over 300 individuals [6].

While PNP is not subject to any specific travel advisories, the U.S. Department of State has issued a '*Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution*' travel advisory for Gabon as a whole (the same level as France and the UK) [7]. Reviews on TripAdvisor for Pointe-Denis Beach, located along the periphery of PNP, highlight the safety that guests felt while on the peninsula [8]. When asked about the security of the park, stakeholders working in the landscape report that there are no dangerous areas for tourists and that it is generally extremely safe.

[1]<https://www.protectedplanet.net/303879>

[2]<https://www.conservationleadershipprogramme.org/project/threats-nesting-leatherback-turtles-pongara-national-park-gabon/>

[3]https://rsis.ramsar.org/RISapp/files/35241916/documents/GA1653_mgt1606.pdf

[4]<https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/1653>

[5]<https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/90251/gabons-towering-mangroves>

[6]https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/SSC-OP-060_B.pdf

[7] <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/gabon-travel-advisory.html>

[8]https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293793-d481267-r216797340-Pointe_Denis_Beach-Libreville_Estuaire_Province.html

Site Analysis:

Pongara National Park, Gabon

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of all the protected areas in Gabon. As the ultimate manager of the park, ANPN is responsible for all tourism activities, unless otherwise ceded to a tourism concessionaire. Luxury Green Resorts (LGR), partnered with Gabon Wildlife Camps & Safaris, operates a luxury-style 'Pongara Lodge,' in this landscape as a concessionaire [9]. LGR also operates a wide variety of tourism activities in the park including 4x4 safari drives, beach biking, fishing, kayaking, wildlife viewing, hiking, and savanna picnics [10]. Additionally, they have a meeting space on property for small meetings/events.

ANPN recognizes the potential for tourism development of PNP in the National Tourism Strategy (2020-2025). The Tourism Strategy includes a strategy of the creation of 'Zones of Tourist Interest' (ZITs) which is "an area of [Gabon] presenting strong potential for tourism development due to its endowment with exceptional natural or cultural sites." The 'Libreville ZIT' is one of the 6 proposed ZITS and includes Pongara National Park. Per the Tourism Strategy, some of the plans for the park include building 3 additional luxury properties, 2 formal camping areas, renovation of the Pongara airstrip, mobilization of private tour operators to the landscape, development of formal reception services on-site, and identifying additional innovative tourism products.

Pointe Denis, while not formally within park boundaries, offers additional accommodation options and existing touristic infrastructure. However, according to the park's 2014-2018 Management Strategy, activities and structures in Pointe Denis are not directly connected to the national park in any way. There is a 'gray area' regarding Pointe Denis and the park boundary, with disagreements about its location within or outside the park's buffer zone.

Only LGR pays concessions to ANPN, and Pongara Lodge guests are charged a park fee that is included in their accommodation package. Visitors to Pointe Denis do not pay this fee, nor are they charged when exploring the park. This ambiguity presents an opportunity to define the park's limits, either including or excluding Pointe Denis in the park. If rezoned outside the park boundaries, clear demarcation of the park should be established along with a more formal entrance to the park for Pointe Denis residents, with travelers who wish to explore the park paying an entrance fee.

The park's proximity to Libreville presents a significant competitive advantage. Overnight and day visits from Libreville (and Pointe Denis) are a prime opportunity for further development of tourism for the park, along with fee structures to generate revenue for the park. Further tour packaging (partnering with local tour operators) and marketing along with a strategy around entre fees are needed. High profile events, such as hosting an annual fishing tournament or a kayak race could help raise the profile of the park locally as well as raise funds for conservation.

[9]<https://gabonwildlifecamps.com/>

[10]<https://luxurygreen-resorts.com/en/pongara/>

Site Analysis:

Pongara National Park, Gabon

Enabling Environment Constraints

Access, Fee Collection & Reception

The proximity to the capital city and relatively well-developed systems to access the park from the city mean getting to the park is very easy. For travelers not staying with LGR, there is no formal reception facility or visitor building in which to inform them about the park and charge entry fee. This is critical for visitors from Pointe Denis as well as day-trippers from Libreville. An official entrance is needed at Pointe Denis. For those not passing through Pointe Denis, a system for purchasing entry tickets online or at the point of departure in Libreville could be established, along with enforcement measures.

Marketing & Promotion

Pongara National Park already has strong tourist activities and accommodation and is known as a popular destination for Gabonese nationals as well as expats. There is also a strong opportunity to expand existing international visitation as a part of a country wide circuit, or for business travelers looking for a weekend retreat. TripAdvisor reviews compliment the staff hospitality, food quality, and top-notch environment providing a good foundation for growth. Marketing and promotion efforts, especially partnerships with tour operators that can help promote the park can be expanded, but should also be aligned with an updated fee structure and collection system as outlined above.

Political Environment

To leverage the opportunity for tourism within the park, investment is needed in tourism facilities and services. The recent political changes at the national level may give pause to potential investors (especially international high-value ecotourism brands) due to uncertainty about the future. This is discussed in more details in the country level analysis of Gabon.



Site Analysis:

Pongara National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

******Conduct a feasibility study for the potential for up to three lodging facilities, plus camping and additional tourism experiences (activities) in the park. This will include the possible type and size of facilities (including possible meeting and event facilities), their market mix and any foundational infrastructure/services required to lay the groundwork for private investment. The possibility/feasibility of access modes such as a helipad may also be explored. Based on this study, investment promotion and tender documents will be developed for potential investments.

Engagement with stakeholders on a boundary solution for Pointe Denis to form a consensus recommendation for government approval on how to clearly define the park boundary as it relates to Pointe Denis as well as fee collection plans for the park as a whole to ensure those entering the park are paying an entrance fee. A strategy for implementing the recommendations would also be established.

Working with a local events management company and other relevant partners, establish an annual anchor event that would build the profile of the park and raise funds for conservation efforts. This may include a kayak race, annual fishing tournament or other innovative event that can draw people to the park and build awareness. This could be done in conjunction with Akanda National Park (i.e. one annual event in each park). An example of such an event is the Lewa Safaricom Marathon that has raised \$8.5 million since 2000.

Site Analysis:

Pongara National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Strategic investment promotion to attract tourism concessionaires to the park as well as public and donor investors. On the public/donor investment side, this would include base infrastructure such as campsites, roads, boreholes and other needs that would provide the foundation for other investments by the private sector. The private sector concessionaires would be engaged through direct promotion to potential investors as well as an open tender process.**

Through public funds or donor support, demarcate the boundary of the park based on the conclusion of the engagement process with stakeholders regarding Pointe Denis and where the park boundary is located. This will also include the development of a visitor center and park entry site that can act as the formal entrance for the park. Systems for collecting park entrance fees from all visitors should also be developed.

Co-op marketing & storytelling campaign with investors and tour operators promoting the park (also in conjunction with other parks that can make tourism circuits). This would include a travel trade outreach program targeting international markets as well as domestic/regional travelers to inform, engage and excite them about the park. Actions may initially include:

- a. Direct outreach and sales visits to target tour operators in key international markets to increase awareness and help these operators package and sell the destination.
- b. Collaboration with Gabonese and regional (e.g. Cameroon, ROC, Nigeria) tour operators to package trips for domestic and regional visitors, as well as a social media campaign to inform potential visitors and promote packages.
- c. Familiarization trips for target tour operators so that they can understand and sell the tourism experience.
- d. Circuit development with local tour operators, with itineraries that connect multiple parks.
- e. Engage with an intrepid A-list celebrity or influencer to explore the region and highlight the travel experience to their network. This may be combined with recommendations for parks in ROC as a combined effort for the whole region. This should be tied to current conservation activities that the celebrity can get involved in for a more meaningful story (for example, the 'Friend-a-Gorilla' campaign with Hollywood celebrities that ran in Uganda in 2010, generating over \$4 million in free media coverage or Katmai National Parks in Alaska where they have a funny 'Fat Bear Week' social media tournament, where instagram users can 'vote' for the fattest bear.

Destination Snapshot:

Akanda National Park, Gabon

Quick Facts:

- 54,000 Hectares
- Beaches and mangrove swamps backed by wet evergreen coastal forest.
- IUCN Category - Not Reported
- Park Entry Fee: ~20USD for Internationals

Seasonality:

Cooler periods: May-September
Driest months: December & January
Best time for Turtle Viewing: November



Accommodations & Facilities

Within the Park:

Full breadth of accommodation options unknown. Basic camping appears to be the only choice.

Akanda is usually visited via day-trips - overnight trips are not very common. This could explain the apparent lack of accommodation options.

Cap Caravane

This business operates in Akanda's buffer zone, along the Tsini River. They have 8 overwater bungalows, communal/lounge spaces, recreation activities, and dining options. Notably, they are famous for their 'floating restaurant' as well as day-trips into the park for guests.

Outside the Park

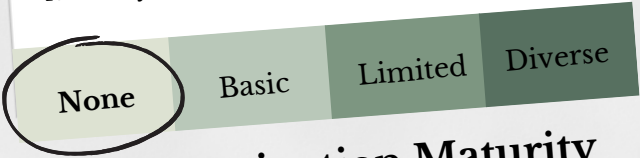
Various accommodation options ~15km outside of the park, hotels with 3-4 star ratings with city-lodging amenities.

A lot of accommodations in nearby Libreville, for those visiting Akanda on a day-trip.

Accessibility:

Int'l Air	Léon-Mba International Airport (Libreville)	
Domestic Air	Due to Akanda's proximity to Libreville, domestic air transportation is largely not considered by travelers making plans to visit the park.	
Ground & Boat	Ground access into the park is viable, a mode of transportation used mainly by the domestic/local visitors. <i>Additional details unknown.</i>	There is also a mini-bus that takes travelers into the park (usually from Libreville hotels), though it is unconfirmed if this process is still operational. <i>Additional details unknown.</i>
	Boat from Libreville: ~1-2 hours depending on tide and weather Access by boat (as opposed to by road/car) is considered the most viable and popular transportation method. As stated by one of Akanda's expert stakeholders, "accessibility is excellent by boat and [only] moderate by car."	
Within Park	Boating is the most common transport method within the park, as most activities are marine or coast-based. Beach walks and savannah walks are also offered, but paths are not clearly marked. <i>Guides are highly recommended.</i>	

Transportation Infrastructure	Poor
Park Headquarters	Unknown
Availability of Accommodations	None
Accommodation Product Variation	Low
Visitor Activities	Openly Available
Activity Product Variation	Medium



Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Reviewing user-generated content and reviews online, many travelers who have been to Akanda (or have attempted to visit the park) note that accessibility is often confusing and unreliable, especially considering how close it is to Libreville.

Destination Snapshot:

Akanda National Park, Gabon



Google Maps (2023) Akanda National Park.

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★
236 Total Reviews

TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●●●
9 Total Reviews

“A well-located city and a friendly population. The local dishes are of your good taste.”

“I certainly enjoyed taking an afternoon boat trip to Akanda National park to watch the sunset.”

“This is a great national resource that is a wonderful attraction. Very good tour guides including bilingual ones. Commendable.”

“Akanda National Park is the must visit place at Gabon.”

TripAdvisor Reviews
2018 – 2023

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Wildlife:

Major stopping point for migratory birds.

~150 bird species, half of which are migratory.

Designated an **Important Bird Area** by BirdLife International.

This park isn't known to have many larger mammal species, but rather is famous for its **birding and marine life** - Major 'ocean safari' & Birding tourism potential.

Geographic Features:

Coastal forest landscape & mangroves. Coupled with Pongara NP, these two parks combined host 25% of Africa's protected mangrove areas.

Bounded by Corsico Bay in the north & Mondah Bay in the east. During low-tide, mudflats are exposed.

Akanda's close proximity to Libreville is another major geographic asset for tourism.

Human Capital

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of the protected areas. Though they have not ceded full management responsibilities to outside organizations, they do curate tourism concessions and other partnerships within the parks.

JICA, a Japanese International Cooperation Agency, is also working in the park. The full scope of their work in Akanda NP is unknown.

Compared to some other parks, Akanda has a surprisingly low number of tour operators who take travelers into the park.

“Boat ride through mangroves, a beach walk to see birds and more time in the boat following birds.”

“The park resists the expansion of the city [...] The routes are signposted and offer many attractive opportunities to explore the diversity of Gabon.”

“It can be a good trip for a day or two for those in the capital of Gabon. When compared to other parks in Africa, this one is less spectacular, but it is still an interesting experience.”

“Unforgettable memories.”

TripAdvisor Reviews
2017 – 2018

Destination Scorecard:

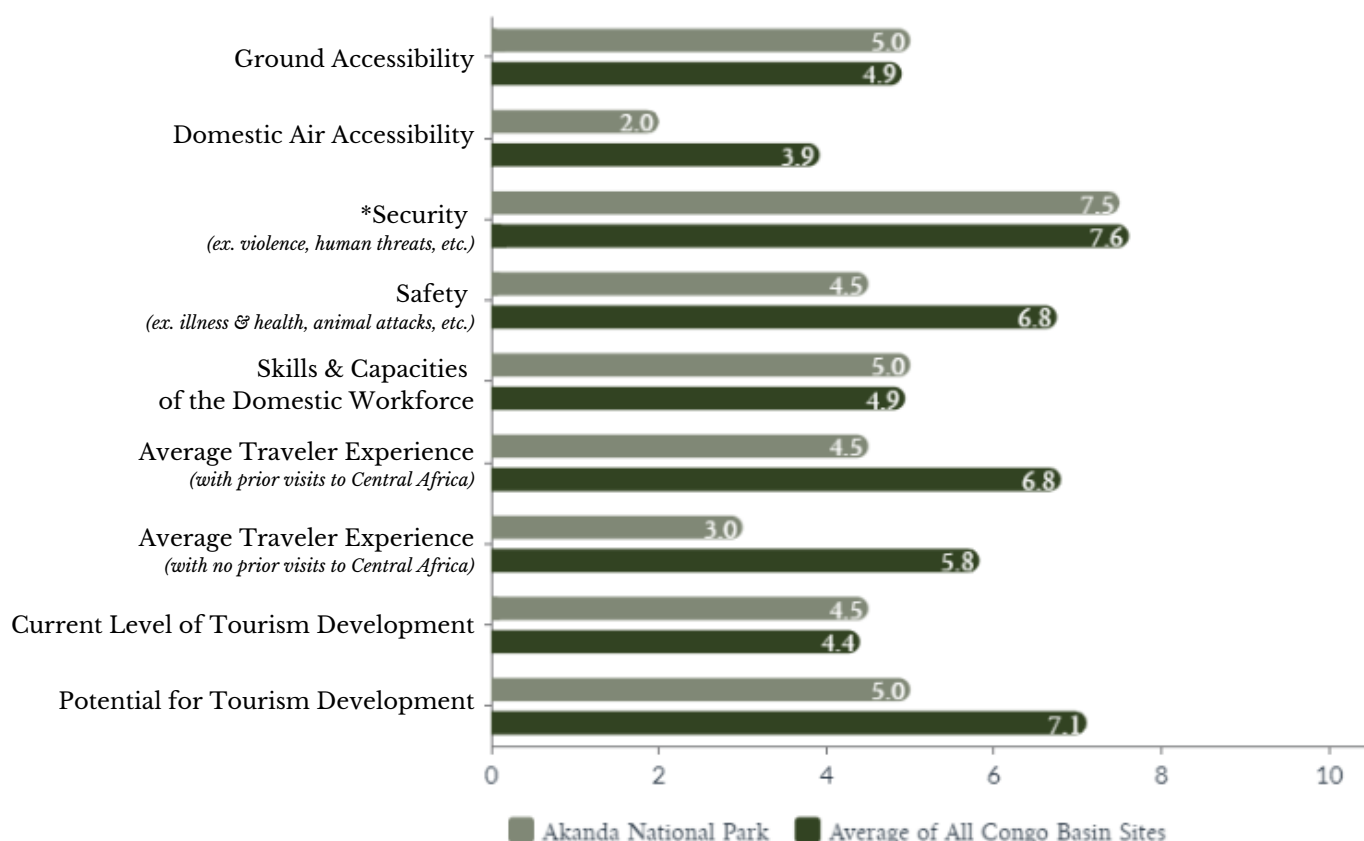
Akanda National Park, Gabon

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

‘1’ represents relative weakness in the field and ‘10’ represents strength in the field.

Akanda National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Key Takeaways:

- Though domestic air accessibility ranks lower than the regional average, the park's proximity to Libreville signals that this would not be a development constraint.
- The average traveler experience to this site ranks significantly lower than the regional averages, signaling a need for both tourism product and service development in order to compete with other sites.

Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is some formal interest from tourism investors and opportunities for expanded tourism in Akanda National Park.
- Mangroves and birds were both highlighted as important natural assets by all respondents.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Pongara National Park
 - Monts de Cristal National Park

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

**For additional information on security, see site analysis below.*

Site Analysis:

Akanda National Park, Gabon

Overview

Akanda National Park (ANP) stands as one of Gabon's two peri-urban parks. It is located in between the capital city Libreville, a few kilometers to the south, and Corisco Bay to the north, of which it has a direct coastline. The park covers 54,000 Hectares [1], including large portions of protected ocean areas [2], and is surrounded by a 5 km-wide buffer zone, of which the southwestern portions separate the park from Libreville's urban landscape [3]. The park's coastal habitats and marine life are recognized by Ramsar as a Wetland of International Importance [4].

The parks' ecosystem is largely maritime, composed mostly of tidal beaches, mudflats, wetlands, and mangrove habitats, of which the latter are the most dominant [5]. Together, ANP and nearby Pongara National Park account for 25% of Africa's protected mangrove area [6]. Further inland, flooded forests, lowland evergreen forests, and patches of savanna can be found [7]. Akanda is most known for its avifauna wildlife, especially migratory birds, but its coastline is also an important nesting ground for green turtles [8]. In the waters of ANP, dolphins, manatees and whales are also common.

While ANP is not subject to any specific travel advisories, the U.S. Department of State has issued a '*Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution*' travel advisory for Gabon as a whole (the same level as France and the UK) [9]. When surveyed, stakeholders working in the park did not express any serious concerns about safety & security within the park. Furthermore, in 2017, a researcher investigating the tourism potential of Akanda National Park identified "safety and security within the park" as a favorable aspect, particularly highlighting that it would not be of concern for tourism development [10].

[1]<https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/1652>

[2]<https://zslpublications.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/rse2.161>

[3] https://hal.univ-brest.fr/hal-04399286v1/file/sardenne_2024_MPB.pdf

[4]https://rsis.ramsar.org/RISapp/files/RISrep/GA1652RIS_1611_fr.pdf

[5]<https://www.travelogabon.com/places-to-visit/akanda-national-park/>

[6]<https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/90251/gabons-towering-mangroves>

[7] <https://gabonadventure.pro/akanda-national-park-in-gabon-comprehensive-guide/>

[8]https://pfbc-cbfp.org/meetings-news/Excursion-RDP19-Gabon07.html?file=files/docs/RDP%2019/-%20220613_EN_Descriptions%20d%C3%A9tail%C3%A9s%20sur%20les%20Excursions.pdf

[9] <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/gabon-travel-advisory.html>

[10]<https://hdl.handle.net/10210/293115>

Site Analysis: --- --- Akanda National Park, Gabon

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of all the protected areas in Gabon. As the ultimate manager of the park, ANPN is responsible for all tourism activities, unless otherwise ceded to a tourism concessionaire, which is not currently the case in Akanda National Park. However, ANPN does recognize the potential for tourism development in ANP in the National Tourism Strategy (2020-2025).

The National Tourism Strategy includes a plan to create 'Zones of Tourist Interest' (ZITs) which is "an area of [Gabon] presenting strong potential for tourism development due to its endowment with exceptional natural or cultural sites." The 'Libreville ZIT' is one of the 6 proposed ZITS and includes Akanda National Park. Per the Tourism Strategy, some of the plans for the park include building an accommodation offer and beachside restaurant, developing a formal entrance site for the park, identification of innovative activities to offer, and investments in accessibility infrastructure

A standout opportunity for nature-based tourism development in Akanda National Park is birding. Known for hosting high concentrations of migratory birds from Europe, the park features natural "bird islands" where many species congregate. Stakeholders consistently emphasize that birds are the park's top tourism asset, suggesting that tourism development should revolve around them. In the short term, prioritizing the development of tourist services, activities, and infrastructure for birding tourism is crucial. Due to the sensitive nature of the ecosystem, careful planning to minimize ecological impact will be needed.

Additionally, forging partnerships with international birding tour operators to develop itineraries that include the park should be prioritized. If tourism facilities are developed in the park, there is also the opportunity to connect ANP to tourism circuits to other parks in the country, especially given its proximity to Libreville.

Leveraging the park's proximity to Libreville, day and weekend facilities and activities could target domestic and resident tourism markets for both leisure and meetings/events. As mentioned in the National Tourism Strategy a formal entrance to the park is needed. This could act as a visitor information center, a launching point for day activities and a focal point for accessing the park. A restaurant could also be established at the site.

Site Analysis:

Akanda National Park, Gabon

Enabling Environment Constraints

Accessibility

User-generated content and reviews highlight that accessibility to Akanda National Park is often confusing and unreliable, despite its proximity to Libreville. This is a crucial consideration, particularly for accommodating day guests or quick trips. Given that boating is the primary transport option into the park, short and medium-term goals should prioritize facilitating better and easier boating access through park managed access sites. Additionally, further analysis is needed regarding ground access options to the park, especially relating to access for potential accommodation facilities.

Accommodations

ANP faces a clear gap in accommodation offerings, lacking facilities within the park other than basic campsites. Although Libreville has an abundance of accommodation options, including some next to the park, lodging in the park would provide a unique experience for visitors as well as generate revenues for ANPN. If land-based accommodations should ideally be located with easy access to Libreville as this would increase use and make them a more appealing site for meetings and events. Floating accommodation could also be explored (through concessions) either through live-aboard boats that would move through the park with visitors staying on the boat, or through a small scale moored floating hotel. Both of these options could be appealing to the birding market, due to their easy access to birding areas. For floating facilities, extra care should be taken on how they manage and dispose of waste to ensure waste is not being dumped in the park.

Tourist Services & Activities

Current tourist services and activities in ANP are limited with one-off birding tours, beach walks, or boating trips. Some local businesses, such as Cap Caravane (a nearby hotel and restaurant) offer these excursions to the park. Building on these activities is crucial as well as improving their quality, especially as it relates to high quality bird guides (a requirement to attract the international bird market). Moreover, it's essential to identify new offerings to cater to the evolving needs and interests of the market. Expanding the range of activities could include wildlife watching excursions, mangrove kayaking, cultural experiences with local fishing communities and educational programs about the park's avifauna biodiversity and conservation efforts. These additions would enrich the visitor experience and encourage longer stays in and around the park.

Political Environment

To leverage the opportunity for tourism within the park, investment is needed in tourism facilities and services. The recent political changes at the national level may give pause to potential investors (especially international high-value ecotourism brands) due to uncertainty about the future. This is discussed in more details in the country level analysis of Gabon.

Site Analysis:

Akanda National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

****Tourism planning for the park as well as a feasibility analysis to create a roadmap for where and how tourism infrastructure, facilities (accommodation, restaurant, visitor center) and services will be developed, along with skill development and the structures, systems and standard operating procedures to effectively manage tourism in the park. This will include the possible type and size of facilities (including possible meeting and event facilities and floating accommodations), the market mix and any foundational infrastructure/services required to lay the groundwork for private investment. The plan would also include standard operating procedure for managing tourism in the park. Site specific zoning should also be included in the planning activity, to define where tourism can occur, what type of activity/facility and carrying capacities.**

****Establish investment promotion and tender materials for potential tourism facilities and activities in the park for both private investment as well as public and donor investors. On the public/donor investment side, this would include base infrastructure such as a visitor center, boat launch areas (along with park management and entrance facilities), campsite improvements, boats and other needs that would provide the foundation for other investments by the private sector. The private sector concessionaires would be engaged through direct promotion to potential investors as well as an open tender process. Private investment would include lodging, restaurant and activities such as boat excursions, adventure/team-building activities such as low ropes, courses, and more.**

Develop a marketing and branding strategy for the park, including content and promotional materials creation to tell the story of the parks and influencer trips to build the image of the park locally as a travel destination.

Work with a local tour operator or boat company to facilitate small scale, regularly scheduled trips to the park based on capacities of current infrastructure. This will help to generate awareness and interest in the park locally and provide a partnership through which activities and itineraries can be tested. Information from these small scale trips can help to guide future planning and investment.

Working with a local events management company and other relevant partners, establish an annual anchor event that would build the profile of the park and raise funds for conservation efforts. This may include a kayak race, beach race, annual fishing tournament or other innovative event that can draw people to the park and build awareness. This could be done in conjunction with Pongara National Park (i.e. one annual event in each park). An example of such an event is the Lewa Safaricom Marathon that has raised \$8.5 million since 2000.

*****Critical Enabler***

Site Analysis:

Akanda National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Conduct a detailed bird inventory & checklist for the park, along with promotional materials that highlight the park's bird species and travel possibilities for visitors. This should also include guide training for bird guides that will work in the park to enhance their specific bird guiding skills.**

****Attract investments into the park that would provide the foundation for tourism in the landscape. Building on the short-term activities described previously, investment would include public investment in infrastructure and public facilities alongside private investment in accommodations and activities.**

As private investment funds are scarce and hard to attract from outside of the country, the focus may center on long-term expats and higher-net-worth Gabonese residents interested in investing in a site just outside of the capital city. With this segment, one large investor could be sought for each concession site, or a model for fractional ownership could be explored. With fractional ownership, investors can buy into a portion of the company in exchange for an allocated number of nights per year at the facility, as well as potential investment returns from their investment.

This way each investment is more manageable for investors, there are benefits beyond investment returns (a holiday retreat), risk is more diversified and the investors themselves can act as ambassadors to promote the facility with their networks. Corporate investment (such as oil and gas companies) at this scale may also be possible, where they can provide 'incentives' trips for their employees through fractional ownership in an accommodation facility.

Co-op marketing & storytelling campaign with investors and tour operators promoting the park (also in conjunction with other parks that can make tourism circuits). This would include a specific focus on the international bird watching travel market as well as domestic/resident travelers to inform, engage and excite them about the park. Actions may initially include:

- a. Direct outreach and sales visits to target birdwatching tour operators in key international markets to increase awareness and help these operators package and sell the destination.
- b. Collaboration with Gabonese and regional (e.g. Cameroon, ROC, Nigeria) tour operators to package trips for domestic, resident and possibly regional visitors, as well as a social media campaign to inform potential visitors and promote packages.
- c. Familiarization trips for target tour operators so that they can understand and sell the tourism experience.
- d. Circuit development with local tour operators, with itineraries that connect multiple parks.
- e. Engage with an intrepid A-list celebrity or influencer to explore the region and highlight the travel experience to their network. This may be combined with recommendations for parks in ROC as a combined effort for the whole region. This should be tied to current conservation activities that the celebrity can get involved in for a more meaningful story (for example, the 'Friend-a-Gorilla' campaign with Hollywood celebrities that ran in Uganda in 2010, generating over \$4 million in free media coverage or Katmai National Parks in Alaska where they have a funny 'Fat Bear Week' social media tournament, where instagram users can 'vote' for the fattest bear.

****Critical Enabler**

Destination Snapshot:

Monts de Cristal National Park, Gabon

Quick Facts:

- 119,200 Hectares
- “Twin Park”
 - Mbe NP (Southern section)
 - Mt. Seni NP (Northern section)
- Coastal forests, rainforest blocks, and mountains
- IUCN Category - Not Reported
- Park Entry Fee: Unknown

Seasonality:

-  July-September
During this time, low clouds & humidity still blanket the park
-  October-June (notably high levels of rainfall)

- There is not a TripAdvisor page for this park

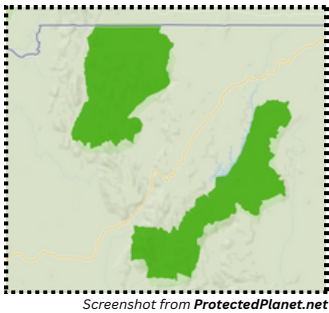
Accommodations & Facilities

Accommodations within the park historically have been limited and not ‘touristic.’

However, Mbolo Tours has recently gained access to some buildings & facilities owned by the ANPN, which they are converting for tourism usage. This includes a lodge with a restaurant, a bar, and some bungalows for travelers.

It is important to note that this park is said to have a surprisingly high amount of electrical cables, ‘industrial’-looking facilities, and hydro-electric workers. Something that might ‘turn off’ potential travelers.

Mbolo Tours new plans will likely address these issues, as they pertain to tourism potential.



Screenshot from ProtectedPlanet.net

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Flora:

Extraordinarily high plant biosiversity, considered by many botanists as having **the most diverse flora in all of Africa.**
Exceptional tourism asset.

Geographic Features:

The **Crystal Mountains** range & cloud forests are picturesque.

Shares northern border with Equatorial Guinea
Cross-border tourism circuit potential.

Human Capital

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of the protected areas. Though they have not ceded full management responsibilities to outside organizations, they do curate tourism concessions and other partnerships within the parks.

Mbolo Tours

Has recently signed concessions agreements to operate tourism in the park.

WCS Gabon works in this park on ‘Payment for Ecosystem Services’ initiatives. This project relates to the hydro-electric dams found in the southern section of the park (Mbe).

Accessibility:

Int’l Air	Léon-Mba International Airport (Libreville)	
Domestic Air	Médouneu Domestic Airport Serves the city of Médouneu in northern Gabon, ~50km from the park. One runway, ~4km long. The quality of the facilities & runway is unknown.	
Road & Water	To Mbe (southern section) by car from Libreville: ~ 3-4 hour drive (120km) along a mixture of paved and unpaved roads.	To Mt. Seni (northern section): Only accessible by boat from Cocobeach.
	As there are quarries and facilities related to the hydro-electric dams, there are a few gravel roads throughout the park. These are still operational in the rainy season, though more difficult. <i>Though these roads were not designed with tourism in mind, they could be expanded and upgraded to support tourism development.</i>	
Within Park		

Transportation Infrastructure	Poor
Park Headquarters	Unknown
Availability of Accommodations	None
Accommodation Product Variation	Low
Visitor Activities	None
Activity Product Variation	Low

None Basic Limited Diverse

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Destination Scorecard:

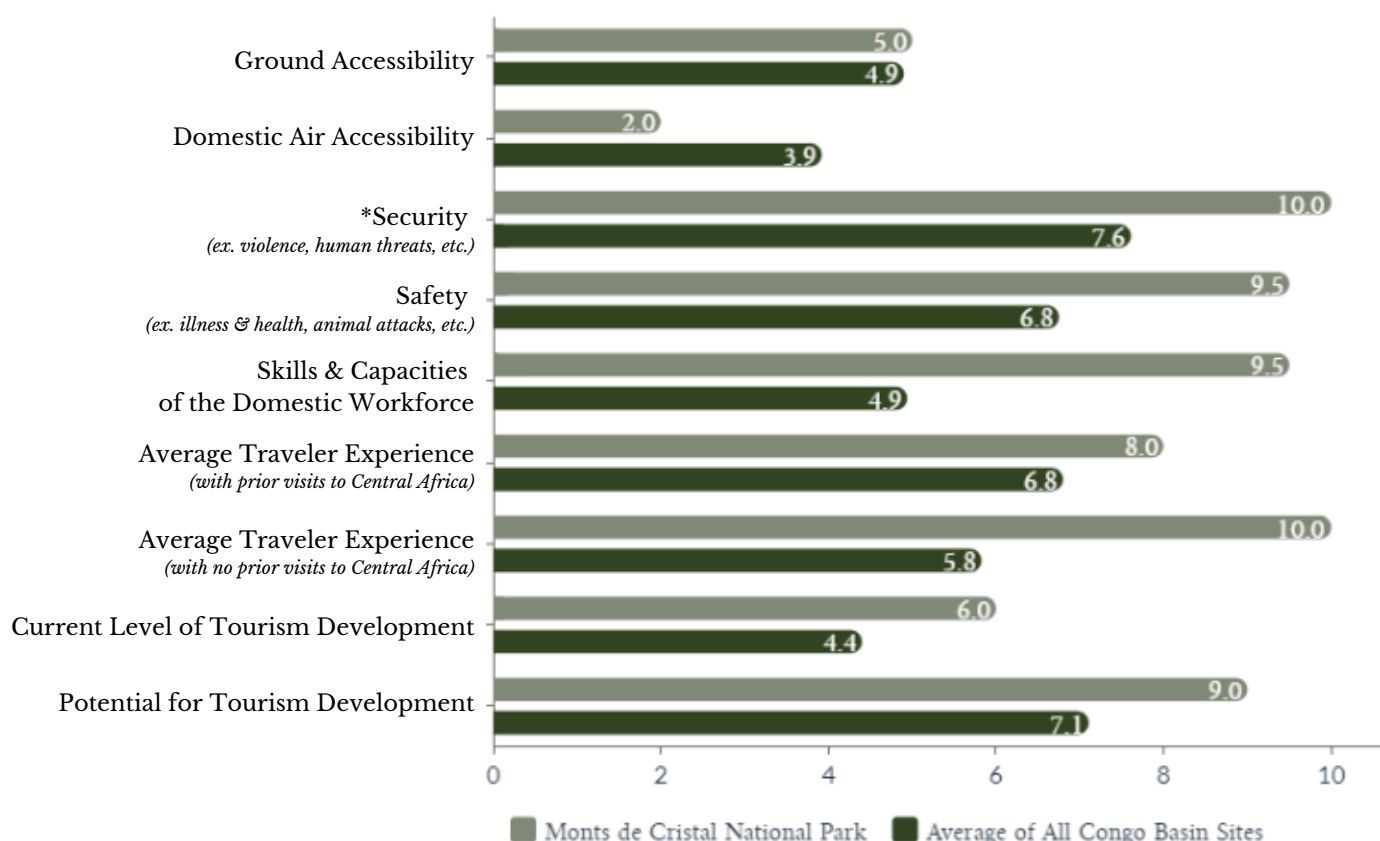
Monts de Cristal National Park, Gabon

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

'1' represents relative weakness in the field and '10' represents strength in the field.

Monts de Cristal National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Key Takeaways:

- Considering the high ratings for average traveler experience, security, safety, skills and potential for tourism development, this park should be considered an opportune site for further development and investments in the short-term.
- Domestic air and ground accessibility should be improved in order to compete with other sites, as well as to enable more visitation from domestic and international travelers.

Additional Insights from Survey:

- There has been recent formal interest from tourism investors and opportunities for expanded tourism in MDC National Park
- The presence of quarries in and around the park support road quality in the rainy season (they can use the gravel to enhance the roadways), but are also a threat to the park.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Loango National Park
 - Korup & Takamanda

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

**For additional information on security, see site analysis below.*

Site Analysis: --- --- Monts de Cristal National Park, Gabon

Overview

Monts de Cristal National Park (MCNP) is located in northwest Gabon and shares its northern border with Equatorial Guinea. This 'twin park' comprises two separate sections and covers approximately 119,200 Hectares between them both [1]. The northern sector and the southern sector, named Mont Seni & Mbe respectively, are roughly the same size. There is a 5-km wide buffer zone surrounding the parks' boundaries, as well as a roughly 117,000 Hectare patch of land separating the two blocks. MCNP is also part of a larger recognized landscape, the Monte Alén-Monts de Cristal Landscape, which spans 2.5 million hectares across Gabon and Equatorial Guinea [2].

The landscape is a mosaic of dense, rich equatorial forests and low mountains, traversed by various rivers, waterways, and waterfalls. Portions of the Crystal Mountain range fall within the park, from where the park gets its name. Mont Mbilan is the highest peak in the park, rising to 925 meters. The botanical biodiversity in the park is the most impressive natural asset, with botanists believing that the park has the most diverse flora in Africa [3]. There is an incredible number of orchids, begonias, and fern species [4]. Further, its various altitudes create an environment of mist and clouds [5], a stunning and differentiated visual experience in Central Africa. The northern block's landscape is considered to be much more 'wild' than the southern, of which there are various industrial plants and overhead power cables.

The wildlife inventories of the park report that there are good densities of great apes [6], as well as forest elephants, buffalo, leopards, monkeys, chimpanzees, and mandrills [7]. However, the wildlife in MCNP are not as heavily populated nor as commonly congregated for viewing opportunities, compared with the Bais and clearings in other parks. Around 340 different bird species have been recorded in the park [8]. Uniquely, the park is home to a diverse group of rare and colorful butterflies and the number of butterfly species is one of the highest in Africa [9].

While MCNP is not subject to any specific travel advisories, the U.S. Department of State has issued a 'Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution' travel advisory for Gabon as a whole (the same level as France and the UK) [10]. When asked about the safety & security of the park, stakeholders working in the park expressed that the site is extremely safe.

[1] <https://www.protectedplanet.net/306237>

[2] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep01922>

[3] <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/gabon/attractions/monts-de-cristal-national-park/a/poi-sig/1558176/355302>

[4] <https://www.petitfute.co.uk/v56184-parc-national-des-monts-de-cristal/>

[5] <https://www.africatouroperators.org/gabon/crystal-mountains-national-park/>

[6] https://carpe.umd.edu/sites/default/files/documentsarchive/WCS_Gabon_MontCristal_FinalNarr.pdf

[7] <https://gabonadventure.pro/national-parks-in-gabon/#crystals-mountains-national-park-parc-national-des-monts-de-cristal>

[8] https://carpe.umd.edu/sites/default/files/documentsarchive/MonteAlen_SOF2006.pdf

[9] <https://www.travelogabon.com/places-to-visit/cristal-mountain/>

[10] <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/gabon-travel-advisory.html>

Site Analysis: Monts de Cristal National Park, Gabon

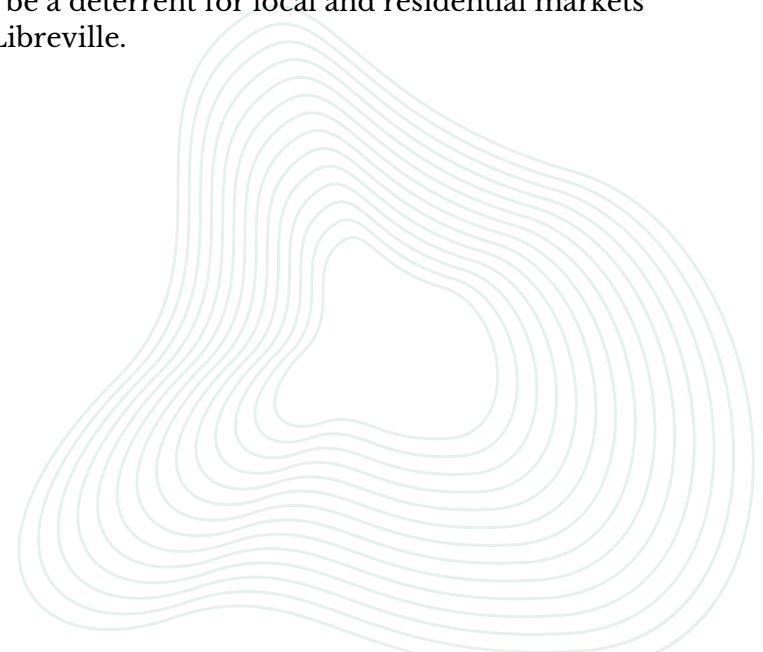
Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

The Gabonese National Agency for National Parks (ANPN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of all the protected areas in Gabon. As the ultimate manager of the park, ANPN is responsible for all tourism activities, unless otherwise ceded to a tourism concessionaire. Recently, Mbolo Tours have reportedly signed concession agreements to operate tourism in the park. Although MCNP is not mentioned as one of the parks of focus in the short-term in the National Tourism Strategy (2020-2025), its potential for tourism development is recognized in the medium-term.

A significant opportunity for the park lies in its botanical biodiversity, coupled with high diversity in butterfly species. Recognized as one of the richest botanical landscapes in Africa, boasting rare species of flowers, plants, and trees, it holds immense appeal for flora-based and photographic tourism markets. By leveraging these strengths, there is potential to develop a destination brand for MCNP, positioning it as a botany (and possibly butterfly) bucket-list destination could attract specialty audiences with botanical and butterfly interests. Although hyper targeted, making it easier to access travelers within this market, these audiences are small, so a diversified market strategy would be needed for the park.

This park is already a popular destination among locals and expats in Gabon, thanks to its affordability and proximity to Libreville. Just a 3-4 hour drive on mostly paved roads, it offers an accessible weekend getaway. To further tap into the domestic market, there are opportunities to develop higher-quality yet still affordable tourism services and activities. This includes lodging, tourism experiences in the park as well as linked to local communities and marketing/promotion would help to boost local visitation to the park. As a unique cloud-forest landscape, distinct from other protected areas in Central Africa, the park's tranquil ambiance is also ideal for relaxation amidst natural beauty, with potential for wellness and relaxation retreats targeting local markets.

The southern section of the park is easier to access from Libreville, but also hosts hydroelectric dams and power lines in the landscape. This erodes the feel of remote natural beauty expected when traveling to a national park, but may not be a deterrent for local and residential markets looking for an easily accessible location from Libreville.



Site Analysis: Monts de Cristal National Park, Gabon

Enabling Environment Constraints

Accommodations

In the past, accommodation within the park has been limited and lacked touristic appeal, often industrial in design and location. Considering that the primary market for this park has been domestic and residential tourists, developing new accommodation options that provide quality service but are still affordable will be a top enabling factor. This should be a mix of budget and mid-level facilities. The secondary target market for the park of international botanical and butterfly travelers would also fit well with the development of mid-level accommodations.

Lack of Investment Interest

With the exception of the recent concession to Mbolo Tours who plan to develop tourism facilities in the park, there is limited interest from other investors at present in developing this park in the short-term. This is largely due to its industrial use and the presence of hydroelectric dams supplying electricity to Libreville. While these industrial facilities are crucial for the city's economy, they pose a challenge for nature-based tourism development. However, creatively leveraging existing infrastructure, such as expanding existing roadways and renovating abandoned buildings, could offer opportunities for tourism development. With creative planning, areas of the park that are less impacted by industrial development could also be explored for further tourism development. The fact that Mbolo Tours have started developing tourism in the park is also very positive as it may provide a catalyst for others to also gain interest in investing in the park. Additionally, the northern block of the park is largely untouched by industry, opening opportunities for developing the northern block in the long term, although access to this region is much harder at present.

Political Environment

To leverage the opportunity for tourism within the park, investment is needed in tourism facilities and services. The recent political changes at the national level may give pause to potential investors (especially international high-value ecotourism brands) due to uncertainty about the future. This is discussed in more details in the country level analysis of Gabon.



Site Analysis: Monts de Cristal National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

****Support Mbolo Tours** tourism development activities in the park to improve visitation and demonstrate success for future investors. This may include support with market profiling, research, marketing, and site development activities.

****Tourism planning** for the park (both sections) to identify tourism zones and areas of optimal tourism development within these zones. Priority sites will be ones that can leverage any existing infrastructure for tourism, but can also leverage natural areas where visitors can feel they are in nature, can explore the landscape, and can relax (targeting domestic and resident markets). The plan will also further define tourism markets, how to reach these markets, and will include a feasibility analysis of investments in tourism so as to attract further private concessionaires to the park. Public investment (government or donor) in park infrastructure and facilities will also be identified through this process.

Conduct biological inventories of the park, especially bird, butterfly and plant species, but also other wildlife to document what exists in the park. *If resources are limited, the southern sector should be targeted initially for these inventories.* This information should then be packaged into informational materials that can both attract visitors to the park as well as inform them when they are actually in the park. This information can also be used for branding and marketing of the park.

Site Analysis:

Monts de Cristal National Park, Gabon

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Strategic investment promotion to attract anchor tourism facilities targeting domestic and resident markets.** To incentivise private investment, donor grants may be needed to help 'buy down the risk.' If these are utilized, these should be structured in a way that the grant investment forms the equity in the lodging facility for the local community so that they see direct financial benefits from tourism in the park.

As private investment funds are scarce and hard to attract from outside of the country, the focus may center on long-term expats and higher-net-worth Gabonese residents interested in investing in a site just outside of the capital city. With this segment, one large investor could be sought for each concession site, or a model for fractional ownership could be explored. With fractional ownership, investors can buy into a portion of the company in exchange for an allocated number of nights per year at the facility, as well as potential investment returns from their investment. This way each investment is more manageable for investors, there are benefits beyond investment returns (a holiday retreat), risk is more diversified and the investors themselves can act as ambassadors to promote the facility with their networks.

Domestic marketing campaign, in partnership with investors/concessionaires in the park to package and promote the park to visitors. This would include domestic/resident markets as well as targeted outreach to international tour operators specializing in butterfly and botanical tours (possibly in collaboration with efforts recommended for other parks in the country). The campaign may also include collaborations with local tour operators to package regularly scheduled trips to the park.

Building on the tourism plan, provide training and tourism product development locally to diversify the tourism activities offered in and around the park. This may include guided tours, community tourism experiences such as crafts, dances, and more.