Global plan aims to save elusive okapi from extinction

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The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), supported by partners including the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) and global conservation charity the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), has published the first-ever coordinated global strategy to protect the unique and elusive okapi (*Okapia johnstoni*) from extinction in the wild.

The 10-year strategy, guided by a detailed review of the species' status through a range-wide, multi-partner conservation effort, calls for urgent government and international commitment to support the integrity of key Congolese protected areas from armed militia and illegal extractives activities. In 2012, a brutal attack on the Okapi Wildlife Reserve headquarters in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) resulted in the deaths of seven people, including an ICCN ranger, as well as all 14 okapi housed at the facility.

Key to the plan, overseen by ZSL on behalf of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Giraffe & Okapi Specialist Group and ICCN, will be safeguarding the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. This protected area at the core of the species' range has recently come under severe pressure despite World Heritage site status. The influx of thousands of illegal gold miners into the reserve has heightened instability further and, despite investment in infrastructure and wildlife patrols enabling ICCN to regain control of around half of the reserve, recent renewed attacks mean much remains to be done to fully restore long-term security.

Found in the inaccessible forests of north-east DRC, okapi represent the only other living members of the Giraffidae family alongside giraffes (*Giraffa camelopardalis*) and are currently classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. These rarely-seen 'forest giraffes' face numerous threats in the wild including habitat loss, poaching, armed conflict and – increasingly – the destruction of their fragile native forests by extractive (mining and oil) industries.

The strategy's lead author, ZSL's Dr Noëlle Kümpel – Co-chair of the IUCN SSC Giraffe & Okapi Specialist Group – explains: “The okapi is an iconic species for DRC and the wider world. There are still enormous gaps in our knowledge of these creatures, in large part because security concerns across their range have prevented survey teams getting on the ground. But what is clear is the unprecedented pressure and range of threats now facing these rare and amazing animals. This global strategy provides a clear roadmap for joint action to bring them back from the brink of extinction, tackling these wider threats so we can focus on specific actions to better manage and monitor okapi, such as implementing SMART (Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool) technology.”

Alongside the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, the species is also found in the northern sector of DRC's Virunga National Park – another World Heritage site and the most biodiverse protected area on the continent. This area is currently threatened by industrial-scale oil exploration, despite strong opposition and a European Parliament resolution signed in December 2015.

The strategy supports repeated calls from the World Heritage Committee, NGOs and investors to uphold commitments to safeguard natural World Heritage sites from the extractives industry, particularly in the wake of the Virunga case. Most recently, ZSL was one of over 60 organisations to sign a joint statement, released on 21 January 2016, calling for UNESCO and the governments of Uganda and the DRC to agree to stop new oil drilling licenses being awarded in and around the Virunga World Heritage site region.

Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) Director General Pasteur Dr Cosma Wilungula comments: “This first conservation strategy for the okapi emphasises the need for us all to intensify our collective and collaborative efforts to protect the unique 'forest giraffe', as well as its habitat, the globally important Congolese forests. In particular, ICCN needs major international support to restore the integrity of our protected areas; around 350 rangers have died for the cause of conserving the okapi and Congo's other wildlife in the past 10 years alone.”

-ENDS-

Notes to Editors

The full Okapi Conservation Strategy and Status Review can be downloaded from: www.giraffidsg.org.

For more information on the joint statement calling for UNESCO and the governments of Uganda and the DRC to agree to stop new oil drilling licenses being awarded in and around the Virunga World Heritage site region, visit:

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Nine of the world's leading conservation NGOs including ZSL issued a joint statement calling for 'no-go' and 'no-impact' commitments from governments and the private sector at the IUCN World Parks Congress in 2014; for more information, visit: http://www.zsl.org/conservation/news/nine-global-ngos-call-for-ban-on-mining-in-world-heritage-sites.

See below for additional quotes from project partners

IUCN

IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature, helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges. IUCN's work focuses on valuing and conserving nature, ensuring effective and equitable governance of its use, and deploying nature-based solutions to global challenges in climate, food and development. IUCN supports scientific research, manages field projects all over the world, and brings governments, NGOs, the UN and companies together to develop policy, laws and best practice. IUCN is the world's oldest and largest global environmental organization, with almost 1,300 government and NGO Members and more than 15,000 volunteer experts in 185 countries. IUCN's work is supported by almost 1,000 staff in 45 offices and hundreds of partners in public, NGO and private sectors around the world. www.iucn.org

The IUCN SSC Giraffe and Okapi Specialist Group (GOSG)

The GOSG is one of over 120 IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Specialist Groups, Red List Authorities and Task Forces working towards achieving the SSC's vision of “a world that values and conserves present levels of biodiversity”. Made up of experts from around the world, the GOSG leads efforts to study giraffe, okapi and the threats they face, as well as leading and supporting conservation actions designed to ensure the survival of the two species into the future. The Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) are institutional co-hosts of the GOSG for giraffe and okapi respectively. www.giraffidsg.org

ICCN

The *Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature* (ICCN) – the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation – was created in 1925 and manages the protected area system of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Its rangers risk their lives on a daily basis patrolling protected areas, removing snares, arresting poachers and clearing out hunting and mining camps. The ongoing presence of armed militia in large areas of the DRC continues to complicate efforts to protect vulnerable species including the okapi, contributing to the deaths of over 350 rangers over the past 10 years. ICCN and ZSL together launched a range-wide okapi conservation project in 2010, which led to the production of this status review and conservation strategy.

ZSL

Founded in 1826, the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) is an international scientific, conservation and educational charity whose mission is to promote and achieve the worldwide conservation of animals and their habitats. Our mission is realised through our groundbreaking science, our active conservation projects in more than 50 countries and our two zoos, ZSL London Zoo and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo. www.zsl.org

ZSL and okapi

ZSL's connection with the okapi dates from its discovery in 1901 when a Fellow of the Society collected the first specimen from what is now Virunga National Park and the species was described at a meeting of the Society. ICCN-ZSL surveys then captured the first full camera trap images of okapi from the same site in 2008. In addition to chairing the IUCN SSC Giraffe and Okapi Specialist Group, ZSL and the Wildlife Conservation Society currently have a joint grant from SOS – Save Our Species and Fondation Segré which supports SMART (Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool: www.smartconservationtools.org) and other activities to conserve okapi and elephant in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. www.zsl.org/okapi

Other range-wide okapi conservation project partners

This conservation strategy and status review was made possible by the strong collaboration, support and data freely provided by a large number of organisations and individuals working across the okapi range and internationally. Key partners include the Okapi Conservation Project, Wildlife Conservation Society, the Lukuru Foundation/TL2 Project and Cardiff University. Key donors include the UK's Darwin Initiative, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, SOS – Save Our Species and Fondation Segré.

Okapi

Okapi are largely solitary, chocolate brown, horse-sized giraffids restricted to the lowland rainforests of north-eastern DRC. They have prehensile purplish-blue tongues up to 30 cm in length for grasping leaves, the basis of their diet, and distinctive white-striped markings on their legs and hindquarters. The ZSL-led okapi status review and joint IUCN/ICCN/ZSL-led conservation strategy workshop led to their reassessment as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species in 2013. **Media visits to see okapi up-close at ZSL London Zoo can be arranged on request.**

Additional quotes from range-wide okapi conservation project partners:

Dr John Hart, Scientific Director of the TL2 (Tshuapa-Lomami-Lualaba) Project and member of the IUCN SSC Giraffe & Okapi Specialist Group, who has been working on the ground in Congo for over thirty years, warns: “From what we are seeing around the range, I think okapi could soon be the next big flagship species to crash in Congo, unless we act now to implement this plan.”

Norbert Mushenzi, ICCN's Deputy Director of Virunga National Park and chief warden for the northern sector where okapi are found, comments: “Due to the presence of militia groups, ICCN has been unable to patrol or carry out monitoring of the okapi in Virunga's northern forests since 2009, when the last camera trap surveys were conducted in conjunction with ZSL. The additional pressure of oil exploitation in the region could spell disaster for the park's already small and vulnerable okapi population.”

Rosmarie Ruf, manager of the Okapi Conservation Project in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, adds**:** **“**Generous donations from the international community following the attacks on the Okapi Wildlife Reserve headquarters in 2012 helped ICCN to restore destroyed buildings and equipment and recruit and train 50 new rangers, and, with the support of the Provincial Governor and President Kabila himself, joint ICCN and army missions removed around 10,000 illegal miners that had invaded the reserve. Unfortunately these gains may have been short-lived as we have recent reports of new militia attacks and miners encroaching on the reserve, so we are calling on national and international bodies to help restore security.”

Robert Mwinyihali, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Okapi Wildlife Reserve programme, comments: “We are working with ICCN to introduce an improved system of supporting and managing patrols in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve and other protected areas in DRC to maximise protection for okapi, forest elephant and other endangered large mammal species. One of the tools we are using to monitor and thus better optimise and orient anti-poaching efforts is the SMART system, Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool, which enables managers to put rangers where they are most needed and to monitor the impacts of their patrols so they can adapt patrol effort accordingly.”

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