



*Successful protocols with loggers and villagers*

→ ‘If the law says hunting is prohibited, we act accordingly’

*Logging company employees are often key links in the bushmeat chain. Many workers set a few traps before they start working; after and even during work they collect the captured animals and shoot a few more. The trucks loaded with timber and the trucks which transport the workers also transport the bushmeat to the city or villages, or*

*traders come to the forest to collect it. The extra income logging company workers earn this way makes it difficult to stop the practice. Reason for WWF’s Minkébé project to contact the logging companies working in the concession areas surrounding the protected area, as well as the local population.*

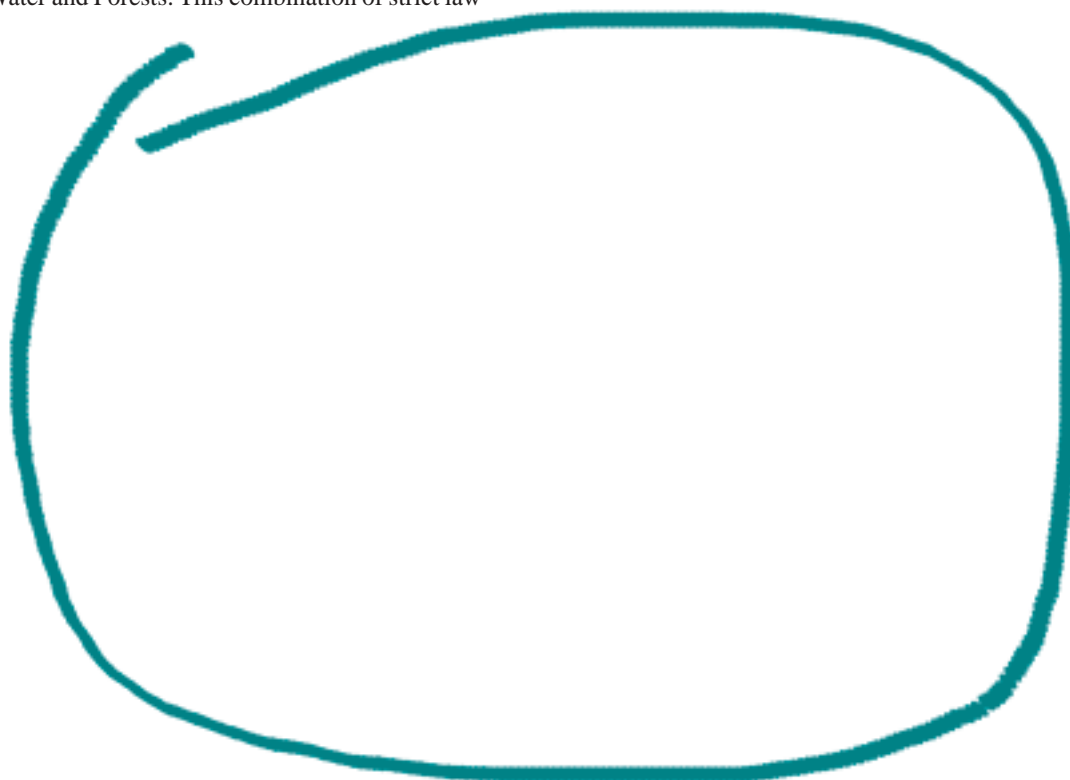
The controls at the entrance road to the Bordamur concession start around noon, when the first big trucks arrive from the forest to bring their load of freshly cut trees to their destination — usually the harbor of Libreville. The checks are thorough. Later in the day, pick-up trucks begin to arrive carrying workers home from work. The Toyota truck is carefully searched and all the men are asked to open their bags. The guards clearly know where to look - they tell stories about bushmeat smuggled under working clothes, etc. Everybody submits to the search with resignation - they are used to it. Only the Malaysian driver of the truck cracks a few jokes with the guards. ‘The Asians love bushmeat too,’ one of the guards whispers. ‘They know exactly how to prepare it, and they eat everything.’

Three years ago, encouraged by the regular surveillance effort of the Minkébé Project, Malaysian logging company, Rimbunan Hijau (Bordamur) started enforcing strong rules and began checking that its employees and trucks were not transporting bushmeat. At that time, their employees were used to bringing bushmeat from the depth of the forest to their village. Company vehicles were being used to transport hunters, bushmeat and arms. Now all this has changed. The company, encouraged by the protocol that has been agreed with the provincial authorities and the local population starting sanctioning and firing workers caught with bushmeat. Since then the entrance to the logging concession has been guarded by a team composed of WWF-ecoguards and agents from the Ministry of Water and Forests. This combination of strict law

enforcement as well as clear rules accepted by all concerned parties has resulted in a spectacular reduction of the illegal poaching and elephant hunting.

‘Teams with strong law-enforcement capacity can stop hunting in concessions,’ says Philbert Owono, chief of the Oyem-based Minkébé Project brigade. ‘People no longer try to enter the area, as they know this is impossible. The teams can help to gradually increase the logging company’s level of control on poaching in its territory. In this process we then gradually shift the balance towards more control by the company itself. That way we can liberate the capacities of the team to focus more time on pressing conservation issues elsewhere.’

After the success with Bordamur, the WWF project has shifted attention to other companies working in the Minkébé Forest, like ENFB, Forex, TTIB, STIBG and SHM. Much time and effort is being invested in applying a similar regime as in Bordamur. Most logging companies welcome this effort, because hunting in a concession area is a cause of trouble. It leads to a bad image for the company, to a lack of workers’ discipline, to theft of fuel and spare parts and to an increased risk of road accidents. Because of the successful approach to poaching in Minkébé Forest, replication of these agreements is supported by the Gabonese government as a national policy and is now ongoing in other logging concessions. It has received the strong support of the donor community, in particular the EU, WWF, and the UN Foundation.





*SHM is a concession of around 1,800 sq. km in the southwest of Minkébé Forest, and the second site where the project emphasized application of the Bordamur model. SHM is a logging company with major financial problems and with traditional weak discipline. Hunting by workers and by unauthorized vehicles tends to be heavy, further complicated because the SHM concession is also a gateway to the Mebaga gold camps, a high-intensity hunting area. The start of semi-regular presence in the area led in 2002 to several incidents with SHM workers.*

In the evening we visit Jerome Lau, chief of operations at Rimbulan Hijau in Minkébé Forest. He sits on the veranda of the wooden house that is the company's office here, resting from a hard day's work with some of his colleagues. All of them are from Malaysia. In total there are some 20 Malaysians working here, together with 75 Gabonese loggers, and 30 more working in the sawmill. The management of the company's activities here - which started some seven years ago - is completely in Malaysian hands. They work long hours, day after day. After a year, they have two months home leave. Contacts between the Malaysians and the local population are few, the Rimbulan employees spend the little free time they have at their homes within the concession area.

Even before being approached by the WWF, Mr. Lau had recognized that the hunting practices of the Gabonese workers were a problem for the company. 'All the time they were busy with the traps, if possible even during working hours. And there were also occasions that they used company vehicles and stole our petrol.' This made it easier for the WWF team to get the Asian company on its side when it

proposed joint action against the poaching practices. Also, the Malaysians are law-abiding people, Mr. Lau says: 'We are guests here in this country, we must follow the law. So if the law says hunting is prohibited, we act accordingly. And we have no problem in being strict in it.'

Thanks to the controls in the concession area the situation has improved greatly, he feels. It's not a popular policy, Lau knows, but he just shrugs his shoulders. 'The workers complain a lot. They say that they are hungry, and can't afford the food we offer them in our store, although these are fair prices. I think it's a very poor attitude. This whole thing also influences our relationship with the villagers, as we are not allowed to transport them into the forest. They are also angry with us. But what can we do?'

The next day we visit another logging company, Forex. A newly built relay station near the company's sawmill is almost ready. The project's mobile team will be housed there, when working in this area. Frequent controls have started since September 2002. 'There are large differences between the concessions,' explains Philbert Owono, chief of the Oyem-based brigade. 'Concession areas where gold



*The newly build station at the Forex concession*

mining is also going on, as here in Forex, are especially difficult to control. The gold diggers want to leave and enter the area as they please. Transport of bushmeat usually takes place in the evening or at night. Even harder are the very small concession areas. The companies which exploit these are mostly gone within a year or two. It's almost impossible to do a deal with them.'

But regular logging companies seem to be pleased with the project's activities. 'We are under a lot of pressure from our workers,' says Hubert Bariller, the French *chef d'operation* of the Forex concession. 'They say: this is our area, we live here, you have to allow us to hunt here. It's nice for us if we can then point the finger to the Ministry, or WWF, and say: we have no choice.'

The agreements which have been reached with the local population explicitly allow for village-based hunting on foot. This is not considered to be a significant threat as the distance covered on foot is limited to a maximum of 20 kilometers. That leaves around two thirds of the Minkébé Forest outside of hunting areas (if no use is made of logging roads by bushmeat hunters). For the villagers, the wildlife resources are essential. They provide a varied, cheap and high-quality source of protein, mitigate the effects of under-employment as hunting is an activity which requires virtually no capital investment, has low risk and income comes in almost immediately. This is confirmed when we visit the small village of Nkougou, near the Bordamur-concession. *Chef de*

*groupement* Mebia Casimine and *chef de village* Assoume Mancer, who give us a hearty welcome, emphasize that the 250 inhabitants of this village are in favor of the new hunting policy. 'We were alarmed by the sight of more and more trucks leaving the area with game. It's very good that this has stopped. Hunting is important for us. We have no fish because there is no river here, just the bushmeat. We need it for ourselves and our children.'

So the village signed the protocol with the rulings on hunting practices; which does not mean everyone is happy. 'The protocol does allow us to hunt for our own needs,' says chief Mancer. 'We want to collect the meat by car, in order to keep it fresh. But we are not allowed to do so. Besides, good roads are also lacking.'

'Indeed, hunting by car is not allowed,' reacts Philbert Owono. 'Because the hunting by car has stopped in this area, animals approach the village again. You know that, and it proves the protocol is for our own good.'

The villagers' relationship with the Malaysian logging company is bad. 'There's nothing good for us in it. Except for the few men of this village who work there. But for the rest, we have no contact whatsoever. They have electricity over there, we don't. They have good drinking water, we don't. They do their shopping somewhere else, not here. We are not even allowed to collect the remaining timber.' One of the other men adds that 'the Asians have occupied our forest and we don't know how and when we will get it back.' ▲