

Conservation comeback in Central African Republic's Manovo-Gounda St Floris National Park (commentary)

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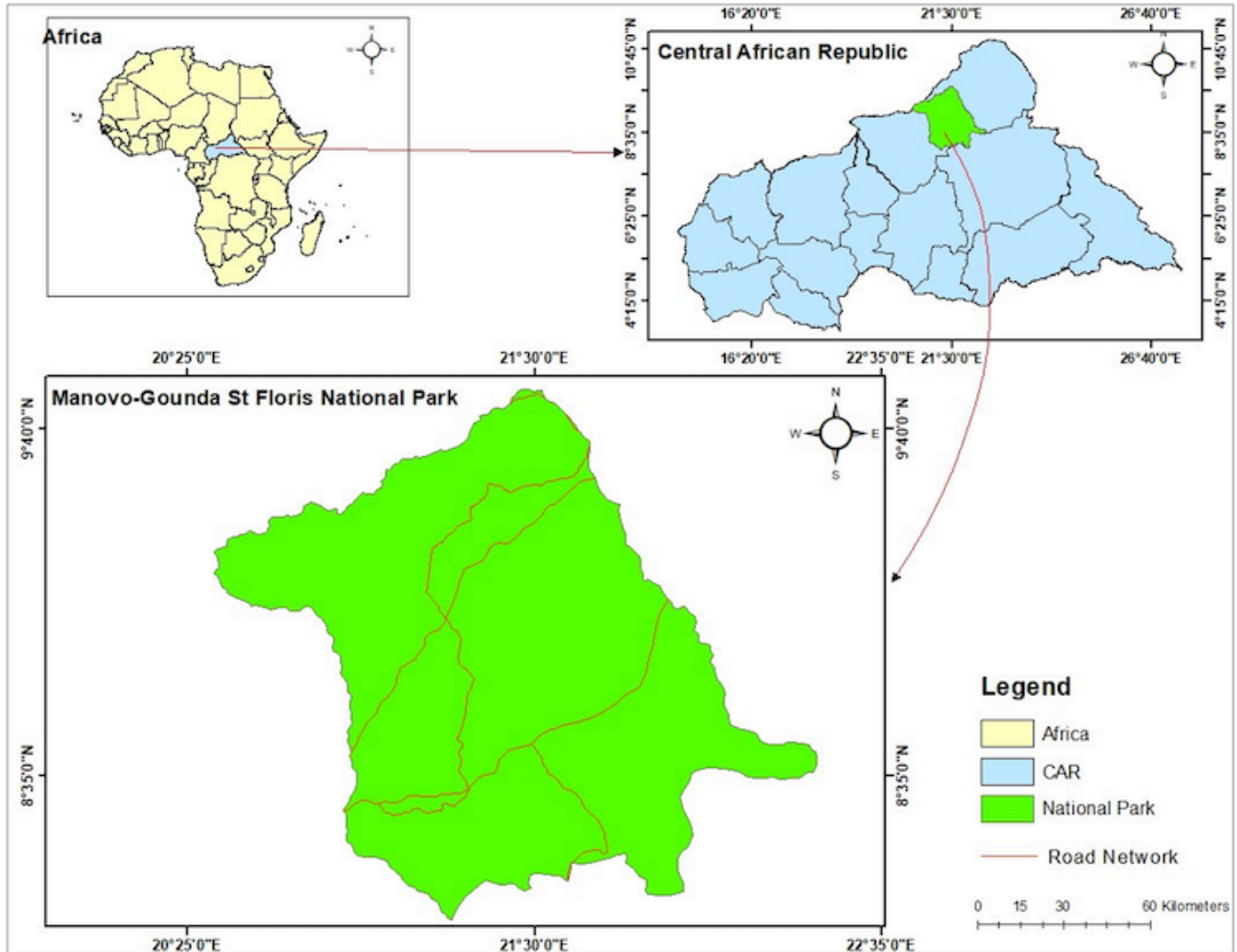
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- *Manovo-Gounda St. Floris National Park is the largest park in the Central African savannas, covering 17,400 square kilometers, and was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988 due to its Outstanding Universal Value.*
- *However, the combined effects of poaching, livestock intrusions, artisanal mining, and other threats saw it added to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 1997.*
- *Recent cooperative efforts between the Central African Republic, NGOs and UNESCO to enact a new management plan have greatly improved the situation, and were recognized by the International Coordinating Council of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme last year.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the authors, not necessarily Mongabay.*

Located in northeastern Central African Republic (CAR) close to the Chad and Sudan borders, Manovo-Gounda St. Floris National Park is the [largest park](#) in the Central African savannas, covering 17,400 square kilometers. The park was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1988 due to its [Outstanding Universal Value](#) (OUV), and financially supported by the European Union for a decade. Its diverse ecosystem hosts rich fauna and flora including [many endangered species](#) such as elephants, lions, hippos, and some of the last remaining giraffes in Central Africa.

However, even at the time of UNESCO recognition, Manovo-Gounda St. Floris National Park was threatened by [poaching](#) of these charismatic species and by illegal transhumance (the practice of moving livestock from one grazing ground to another in a seasonal cycle). As these threats grew over time, affecting its OUV, the park was added to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 1997 due to combined effects of poaching, livestock intrusions, artisanal mining, security issues, and other threats. Sites are included on this list when they face serious threats to their OUV and serves as a call to action for the international community to take measures to protect and preserve these important natural landmarks.

In 2009, a Joint Reactive Monitoring Mission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) requested by the World Heritage Committee concluded that Manovo-Gounda St. Floris National Park's OUV had significantly degraded and suggested recommendations and corrective measures, including improving wildlife law enforcement and conducting a wildlife inventory.



Manovo-Gounda St Floris National Park map courtesy of Suh Celestin Neba / Megwah.

Unfortunately, these recommendations could not be effectively implemented due to political instability that began in 2012. From then until 2018, the park was abandoned and not effectively managed due to insecurity arising from the political crisis, resulting in a significant drop in populations of iconic species. By 2017 elephants, lions, hippos, and giraffes were no longer spotted. In 2018, the CAR government and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), signed an agreement which entrusted the management of several protected areas in CAR to WCS, including Manovo-Gounda St. Floris National Park.

One year later, in 2019, the CAR government signed a peace agreement with armed groups, ushering in new hope for peace and the return of effective conservation at the park. Another joint

[UNESCO/IUCN Mission](#) in 2019 concluded that the three pillars of OUV were all threatened, and it could not be ruled out that its OUV had already been irreversibly lost.

However, the mission considered that, at that stage, it was impossible to confirm the irreversible loss of the property or to comment on the possibility of its regeneration. Therefore, the mission accorded a five-year period from 2019–2024 to evaluate if an effective management system could be established, and if this would help to secure and restore the site's OUV.

With the above mentioned management agreement in place, an operational park management plan has been developed to address major threats to the site, including transhumance, illegal mining, and poaching. In addition, the government has upgraded its security presence around the site reducing levels of security threats. To address poaching and all illegal activities at the site, 44 rangers have been recruited, trained, equipped, and deployed. The rangers have contributed significantly to the fight against poaching and supported overall conservation efforts at the site. Their commitment and achievements serve as an inspiration and a beacon of hope for the future of the site.

These efforts were recognized during the 35th Session of the International Coordinating Council of the UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme, which included the Northeastern Central African Republic Protected Areas Complex (including Manovo-Gounda St. Floris National Park as a core zone) among the 11 [new Biosphere Reserves](#) in 2023.



Rangers stationed at the Koumbala Sector of the Manovo-Gounda National Park. Photo courtesy of Namzoka Steve for WCS.

Illegal transhumance and illegal grazing are major causes of conflict in the park, since they damage vegetation and compete with wildlife for food and water. This often leads to conflict between park rangers and pastoralists, who may also resent restrictions on their traditional grazing practices.

To reduce conflicts between the park management and livestock grazers, as well as to reduce the negative impacts of illegal transhumance, 44 “tango guards” have been recruited, trained, and deployed in the field. Tango guards are local members of the herding communities who serve as a vital connection between the park management and the herders, as they use their cultural and regional knowledge to peacefully negotiate the needs of the herders while at the same time directing them to respect the boundaries of the park. [The choice of the term ‘tango’ is rooted in the phonetic alphabet: as transhumance begins with the letter “T,” the corresponding phonetic alphabet, “[tango](#)” was adopted as a fitting moniker for these guardians of the park.]

The tango system serves to guide herders along designated corridors around the park to avoid incursions that harm [biodiversity](#) at the site. As a result, transhumance activities have successfully been rerouted outside of protected areas, decreasing illegal transhumance in the park to less than 3% of its initial value, as reported by WCS. Herders now seek the advice of tango guards on where to graze their livestock to ensure they are following the law.

WCS reports that when the crisis broke out in neighboring Sudan in April 2023, some Sudanese herders who were unable to return to Sudan sought advice from these guards on where to settle with their livestock. Guards indicated an area outside the park, where they have since settled. These developments highlight the trust and credibility that the guards have gained within the community.

By demonstrating that traditional transhumance practices can be effectively reconciled with nature conservation goals, the tango guard system provides a blueprint for other protected areas across Africa to adopt similar approaches. This approach not only mitigates the negative impacts of transhumance on biodiversity but also fosters a sense of stewardship among local communities, ensuring the long-term sustainability of conservation efforts.

See related: [How climate change could push African rhinos to extinction](#)



Newly recruited tango guards undergoing training in Bamingui, Central Africa Republic. Photo by Namzoka Steve for WCS.

In addition, a strong biomonitoring program has also been developed by recruiting, training, and deploying 32 ecological monitors ('eco-monitors') who survey wildlife populations at the site. Direct observation and indirect signs collected during biomonitoring patrols indicate the enduring presence of elephants and other charismatic [species](#). By involving community members as ecological monitors, a sense of ownership and responsibility is fostered, creating a deeper connection between the people and the park. Large camera trap surveys were also recently planned.

At the onset of conservation activities in 2019, local communities displayed a sense of resistance towards conservation-related initiatives taking place in the area. However, through persistent and ongoing awareness raising efforts, communities have now embraced the importance of conservation and actively collaborate with various stakeholders to safeguard the property. The process of sensitization involved engaging with the local communities and raising awareness on the significance of preserving the park's unique biodiversity and the vital role it plays in maintaining ecological balance. By fostering a sense of ownership and instilling a deeper understanding of the long-term benefits that conservation efforts bring, the park management is bridging the initial gap between the communities and the conservation initiatives.

Recently there were plans for construction of a road through the park, raising concerns about the potential negative impact on the park's delicate ecosystem. However, in a commendable display of environmental consciousness, the CAR government made a pivotal decision to redirect construction of the road around the southern periphery of the park instead. This will ensure the economic and social development of villages there, as well as the protection of the park and adjacent wildlife reserves.

While conservation efforts have changed the narrative and an operational management system has been established, it is recommended that:

- The government of CAR take bold steps to address the threat to the park posed by mining, like the bold decision it took to redirect the construction of the road outside of the park boundaries.
- The international community continue to support safeguarding this important World Heritage Site by providing financial resources for its effective management.
- Key stakeholders work to enhance alternative income generating activities for local communities through conservation-compatible activities that reinforce their resilience.
- The park should recognize the customary rights holders who ceded land when the park was created, and involve them with decision-making powers in the new governance structure.



African savanna elephant (*Loxodonta africana*). Image by Charles J. Sharp via Wikimedia Commons.

The dedication and hard work of multiple conservation actors have led to the comeback of Manovo-Gounda St Floris National Park. However, there is still much work to be done in order to secure its future. The provision of financial support and expertise by the international community can play a vital role in achieving this.

By collaborating and working together, we can ensure that this unique and precious ecosystem is protected for future generations. Support should continue to be provided to the park management and regular monitoring missions should be carried out by UNESCO and IUCN to assess the progress of conservation efforts, in line with the desired state of conservation, toward the removal of this site from the List of World Heritage in Danger.

The authors would like to pay tribute to Florent Zwoya, who passed away prematurely in 2022. He dedicated most of his life to working for the preservation of this ecosystem. We express our deepest condolences to his family and the conservation community.

Commentary submitted by Dodé H.M. Houehounha ^(1,2), Ichu G. Ichu ⁽³⁾, Paul Telfer ⁽⁴⁾, Felin Twagirashyaka ⁽⁴⁾, Jennica Betsch ⁽⁴⁾, Jean Hugé^(5,6,7,8), Baudouin Michel ^(1,2), and Cédric Vermeulen. ^(1,2)

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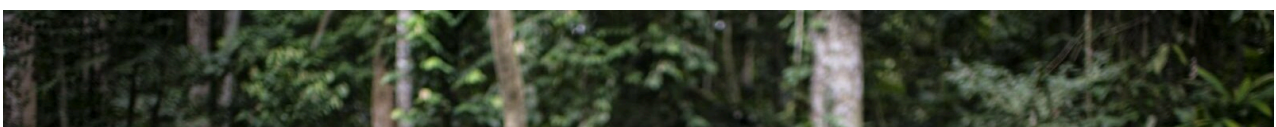
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