



# Nigerian Society for Conservation Biology (NSCB)

... advancing the conservation and protection of Nigeria's biodiversity.



## REPORT ON THE ILLEGAL LOGGING ACTIVITIES AT OKOMU NATIONAL PARK (ONP), NIGERIA



Walter's duiker *Philantomba walteri* in Okomu National Park. The distribution range of the species is Nigeria, Benin, and Togo (Photo by Abubakar S. Ringim, 11/01/2023).

BY

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## **Executive Summary**

This report confirmed in the affirmative, the alleged suspicion that massive and illicit logging of mostly matured, climaxed, and often endangered emergent tree species, domiciled within the precinct of Okomu National Park (ONP), is being done. Consequently, there is the ongoing destruction of the only remaining vestige of a lowland tropical rainforest in Nigeria. Evidence of visible forest gaps and felled but abandoned logs were observed at all the impacted compartment sites visited.

In addition to logging, several cases of arson were observed, principally at the main Tree House in Compartment 52 and on several of the newly constructed resting platforms along the trail leading to the Tree House. The reasons behind the arson on the old tree house and the resting platforms were unknown. It is imperative for park management to investigate the likely sources and resolve any grievances that may exist between the park and host communities to prevent future re-occurrence. However, for the park to continue to play its role as critical biodiversity conservation and tourist hotspot, there is a need to re-designate a new tree-house as the integrity of the burnt tree-house is seriously compromised and unstable and therefore, dangerous for its continuous use as a tourist site.

For a more holistic appraisal of the degree of recent illegal logging activities within ONP and its forest reserve, there is a need for the ministry to muster personnel to conduct a comprehensive reconnaissance survey of the compartments originally slated for the onsite visit but, aborted at the last minute due to security concerns expressed by ONP management. Reliable sources alleged that the compartments with security concerns represents the worst cases of despoliation due to massive and widespread logging activities that had occurred at ONP in recent past.

## **Background Information**

Okomu National Park (ONP) is located at Udo town near Benin City in Edo State, southwestern Nigeria. The park is one of the very important protected areas in Nigeria and the only one representing the lowland tropical rainforest in Nigeria and a refugia for a variety of threatened species, some of which are listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) RedList of Threatened Species. A number of these species found in Nigeria occur nowhere else, indicating the global importance of ONP. As it is known, biodiversity conservation ensures the protection and preservation of the variety of species, but more importantly, is the preservation of the critical habitat they depend on to survive. This, in turn, provides us with different ecosystem services in the form of food, materials, medicinal plants, provision of clean air, water, flood control, and mitigation against climate change (carbon sequestration).

Over the years, especially in recent times, there have been a public outcry in Nigeria and across the globe of reported cases of massive logging activities in ONP, which necessitated the submission of a position statement in 2021 by the Nigerian Society for Conservation Biology (NSCB) (see Annexed document). The goal of the statement was to call the attention of the State and Federal Government as well as the Nigeria Park Service (NPS) to the need for an urgent intervention to address and curb the persistent destruction of the last remaining lowland rainforest in Nigeria. In response to the position statement sent to the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Minister of Environment, NSCB was advised to meet the ONP management for a fact-finding mission and recommendations moving forward if the report of deforestation was authenticated. Thus, a 3-day trip to ONP by three members of the society, namely Dr. Adedotun O. Afolayan (President), Abubakar S. Ringim (Secretary/Policy Officer), and Prof. Emmanuel I. Aigbokhan (Member). The interactive meeting and field assessment was conducted from 9th to 12th January 2023.

## Overview of the Wildlife of Okomu National Park

The ONP falls under the Guinea-Congolian biodiversity hotspot supporting a good number of wildlife species. The Park supports the population of forest elephant (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*), which the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has recently uplisted as Critically Endangered, the White-throated monkey (*Cercopithecus erythrogaster*) as Endangered, and Mona monkey (*Cercopithecus mona*) as Near Threatened respectively [1, 2, 3]. There are other wildlife species of global importance occurring in the park such as Chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), the Red-capped mangabey (*Cercocebus torquatus*), African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer nanus*), Dwarf crocodiles (*Osteolemus tetrapis*), Tree pangolin (*Phataginus tricuspis*), and Putty-nosed monkey (*Cercopithecus nictitans ludio*), three species of antelope: Yellow-backed duiker (*Cephalophus silvicultor*) which is considered a Near Threatened species on the IUCN Red-list, Red-flanked duiker (*Cephalophus rufilatus*), and Walter's duiker (*Philantomba walteri*) [2]. The latter was recognised as a species in 2010 and its distribution range is restricted within Nigeria, Togo, and Benin [4]. Over 150 species of birds have been documented in ONP, such as the Endangered African grey parrot (*Psittacus Erithacus*), White-thighed hornbill (*Bycanistes albotibialis*), and Black-casqued hornbill (*Ceratogymna atrata*) [2]. Some threatened and emergent rainforest tree species found in the park are silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), Nettle tree (*Celtis zenkeri*), Obeche or African white wood (*Triplochiton scleroxylon*), False iroko (*Antiaris toxicaria*), and African nutmeg (*Pycnanthus angolensis*).

## **What are the Issues at Stake?**

Nigeria stands a chance to lose the endemic and range-restricted species unique to the lowland tropical forest ecosystem if the logging activities in ONP continue as these species could not survive elsewhere. Massive destruction of tropical rainforest would engender habitat fragmentation resulting in a great setback in the fight against climate change and general ecosystem services. Illegal logging activities due to the frequent movement of large trucks and excessive noise from chain saw impact wildlife behaviour (for example, foraging), and some species, may abandon their nest or young owing to these disturbances. Moreover, the decline in the availability and quality of intact forest cover can influence wildlife species that forage on the specific plant to eat or breed (specialist species), especially butterfly species. Likewise, the opening of the forest cover due to the movement of large trucks has the potential to trigger plant succession and eventually changes in the general structure, composition, and diversity of tree species in the rainforest, triggering a change in the biodiversity community of the rainforest ecosystem amid fighting global biodiversity loss.

## **Findings:**

### **Interactive meeting with ONP management - 9 January, 2023**

The NSCB representatives discussed the position statement with the ONP management, particularly the outcry of illegal logging activities in the park (Plate 1 and 2). In response to the position statement, the CP, Mr. Lawrence Osaze commended the society for taking the issue seriously and for the follow-up to make the fact-finding trip. He commented that there is no doubt that the park is faced with unprecedented challenges as with other protected areas in the country, thus making it difficult to tackle wildlife conservation effectively. The challenges of the park according to the CP include low funding, insufficient staff strength to patrol areas of the park, logistics, and lack of equipment like adequate weapons to confront loggers within and around the park. Further to the CP's response was that the park has a single patrol vehicle making it incredibly hard to undertake adequate surveillance of the park and general conservation activities as well.

The CP, however, shared the good news that the park recently signed an MoU with the African Nature Investors (ANI) to co-manage the park. Under the MoU, about 40 rangers have so far

been recruited as rangers from the surrounding communities, and the second round of recruitment is coming up in February 2023. Furthermore, the CP also shared that the Edo State Governor, His Excellency, Mr. Godwin Obaseki, paid a courtesy visit to the park in 2022 and promised to commission the Forestry Commission as part of the State efforts to tackle the issues affecting the national park. He further stated that in the address of the Governor to the local communities, Mr. Obaseki cautions the local communities to be vigilant of their environment and report any illegal activities in the park to the authorities. The Governor also launched marine police to monitor the water bodies surrounding the park for logging activities, as reports had it that some loggers are having access to the park through the water bodies.

The CP assured NSCB that he had already declared a state of emergency in some parts of the park and in the past few weeks, the park officials had destroyed tents and structures raised by hunters and loggers within the national park. He added that in November 2022, two hunters were arrested and sent to correctional service. He assured us that more changes were underway due to collaboration and networking with local communities, vigilante groups, and non-governmental organizations such as NSCB.

The CP further added that the management has appointed a Nursery Officer to help raise seedlings for reforestation/afforestation and other conservation activities. He said that as part of the ONP efforts to raise biodiversity awareness among the local communities, the park held a nature awareness campaign on world ranger day annually. He concluded that due to increasing challenges and novel approaches to managing protected areas, ONP secured a chance to send one of the staff to Uganda for capacity building on monitoring great apes and their habitats.

Prof. Aigbokhan asked about the current status of ONP and the CP responded that though there were challenges, ONP conservation status is still high because the forest is regenerating fast, despite the human disturbances. He informed the society about the recent sightings of chimpanzees by the locals around the park. The CP then solicits for exchange programs between protected areas managers in Nigeria, and those in other parts of African countries, and the world for better conservation works.



**Plate 1: Cross-section of the interactive meeting between NSCB and ONP management. From L-R, Prof. Emmanuel I. Aigbokhan (NSCB); ONP Conservator of Park, Mr. Lawrence Osaze; and Dr. Adedotun O. Afolayan (NSCB)**



**Plate 2: Group photo of NSCB representatives and ONP management after the interactive meeting**



### Day 1 Field Work - 10 January, 2023

The visit to ONP compartments began in the morning of 10 January, 2023. Initially, the visiting NSCB team intended to visit some pre-identified compartments that were reported to be the most affected by the logging activities. However, the ONP management informed us that those areas could not be accessed due to security concerns as a result of reported militants and kidnappers' activities there. Based on their advice, visits were made to compartments 47, 48, 51, and 52 along River Okomu. The ranger post in Anna camp helped in accessing these compartments. A total of thirteen (13) mature log emergent of six (6) tree species were observed to be logged but were not evacuated from the site. The summary of these logged tree species and their respective quantity found logged within the inspected compartments are in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: List of Mature Logs of Six (6) Species Logged in Compartments 47, 48, 51, and 52.**

Tree species	IUCN Status	Count
<i>Ricinodendron heudelotii</i> (Baill.) Pierre ex Heckel (Euphorbiaceae) - African Wood Oil Nut tree	Least Concern	4
<i>Terminalia superba</i> Engl. & Diels (Combretaceae) - White Afara	Vulnerable	1
<i>Triplochiton scleroxylon</i> K. Schum. (Malvaceae-Sterculioideae) - Obeche	Least Concern	2
<i>Khaya ivorensis</i> – African Mahogany	Vulnerable	4
<i>Annickia chlorantha</i> (Oliv.) Setten & Maas [syn. <i>Enantia chlorantha</i> (Oliv.)] (Annonaceae) – African Yellow Wood	Threatened	1
<i>Lovoa trichilioides</i> Harms, (Meliaceae) - Benin Walnut	Vulnerable	1

**Notes: All the observed felled logs were from mature climax trees, some estimated to be over 250 years old**

## Day 2 Field Work - 11 January, 2023

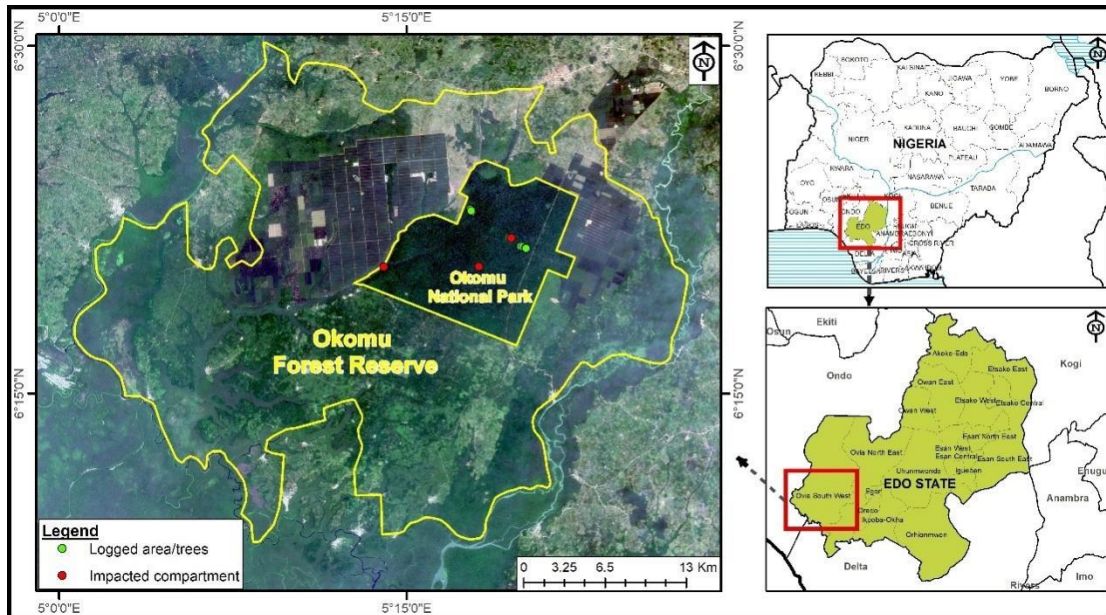
A second field visit was made to assess the state of the compartments along the route to the old ONP tree house in compartment 52 (such as 53). A total of five (5) fully matured log emergent of four (4) tree species at their prime maturity were found to have been targeted and logged. These trees were not evacuated from the site though in some cases, some parts were found missing and apparently must have been taken away by the loggers. The summary of these logged tree species and their respective quantity found logged within the inspected compartments are in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: List of Five (5) Matured Logs of Four (4) Species Logged in Compartment 52 and 53**

Tree species	IUCN status	Count
<i>Entandrophragma angolense</i> (Welw.) Panshin– Gedunohor - Tiama	Near Threatened	1
<i>Entandrophragma cylindricum</i> – Sapele Mahogany	Vulnerable	2
<i>Khaya ivorensis</i> - African Mahogany	Vulnerable	1
<i>Triplochiton scleroxylon</i> – Obeche	Least Concern	1

**Notes: All the observed felled logs were from mature climax trees, some estimated to be over 250 years old**

One of the notable observations in these compartments was that most of the logged trees were exceedingly massive in size. A rough estimate of one of the logged trees was about 80 meters (Plate 3a, b, c). Regrettably, a malicious act of arson was seen at the Tree House along with other three (3) resting platform structures that were situated on the Tree House trail were all burnt (Plate 4). It is important to note that, this arsoned tree house was constructed to serve as a tourist attraction resource for visitors, who wishes to see the treetops of the forest canopy and it had been a source of revenue for ONP.



**Figure 1: Map of Okomu National Park showing the location of the compartment sites visited as well as the other impacted but uninspected compartment sites.**

**Table 3: GPS Coordinates of Un-Inspected Compartments Reported to be Massively Logged.**

Compartments	Coordinates
64	N06° 20.480'/ E005° 18.115'
89	N06° 20.470'/ E005° 14.005'
90	N06° 20.731'/ E005° 15.007'
94	N06° 18.288'/ E005° 18.748'

**Table 4: GPS Coordinates of Logged Trees Recorded During Fieldwork (9-12 January)**

<b>Compartments Visited</b>	<b>Coordinates</b>
<b>Day 1 (47, 48, 51, 52)</b>	N06° 22.885'/ E005° 17.790'
	N06° 22.852'/ E005° 17.825'
	N06° 22.816'/ E005° 17.824'
	N06° 22.782'/ E005° 17.831'
	N06° 22.884'/ E005° 17.790'
	N06° 22.938'/ E005° 17.747'
	N06° 22.957'/ E005° 17.753'
<b>Day 2 [Compartments along route to tree house (52)]</b>	N06° 21.272'/ E005° 20.150'
	N06° 21.290'/ E005° 20.139'
	N06° 21.327'/ E005° 20.027'
	N06° 21.352'/ E005° 19.933'
	N06° 21.704'/ E005° 19.521'



**Plate 3a: Cross-section of one of the logged trees measuring nearly 80 meters long.**





**Plate 3b: Cross-section of the base of one of the logged trees (Human posture for size comprehension).**



**Plate 3c: Cross-section of the base of one of the logged trees (Human posture for size comprehension).**



**Plate 4a: Cross-section of the burnt tree house which is unarguably the largest tree in the park.**



**Plate 4b: Cross section of the burnt tree house which is unarguably the largest tree in the park.**

## **Recommendations**

- i. There is a need for greater information sharing with stakeholders with respect to any illegal activities within the park to be able to source for and access the available countermeasures and external intervention.
- ii. The park is in strong need of more logistics' support, especially vehicles for patrolling adequately and modern weapons to protect the park effectively.
- iii. There is an immediate need to strengthen the manpower of the junior staff to carry out field work to help achieve the park's overall objectives in terms of monitoring and law enforcement.

iv. It was observed that both ONP and Okomu Forest Reserve have the same entry and exit points where logging trucks pass through (see Figure 1 above). This may generate confusion and prevent effective identification of the origins and source of logs being carried by trucks through the exit point, whether they were from ONP or OFR since the two protected areas have different protection statuses and guidelines. Consequently, there is a need to have separate entry and exit points for these two areas as the current one being shared by both of them is undermining the fight against logging activities in ONP.

### **Proactive Actions**

- i. More capacity building is required for ONP staff to advance their careers on current wildlife management practices, community-based conservation, data management and tracking among others.
- ii. It is necessary to identify ways to increase staff motivation in order to have more commitment to work, greater engagement in and enjoyment of their work, and optimal job delivery. Such ways could include recognition of awards and other employee incentive programs.

### **Acknowledgement**

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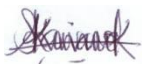
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