



*Situation
positionnement économique*

The Gabonese Republic is a peaceful, stable haven of great beauty, immense natural resources and diverse ethnicity. A French colony until its independence in 1960, the Gabonese government under President Al Hadj Omar Bongo Ondima has been working hard to diversify the economy, develop indigenous industries and find new and innovative ways to attract foreign investment.



President bongo

President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba is the longest-serving African head of state, having first been elected in 1967. Gabon is one of the most stable democracies in Africa, with multi party elections being held since 1991 when a new constitution was adopted. Among the many modern provisions introduced under President Bongo are a Western-style bill of rights, the creation of the National Council of Democracy to oversee the guarantee of those rights and a governmental advisory board to deal with economic and social issues.

The president retains strong powers in Gabon, contributing to this long period of political and economic stability. Public education has been a particularly important agenda of President Bongo throughout his administrations with the result that Gabon enjoys a literacy rate of over 63% - one of the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In his January 19th re-election inaugural address President Bongo re-emphasized his determination to promote economic growth, and modernize the country, by instituting programs to improve the road and communications infrastructure and support development in the private sector through new and innovative ways to attract foreign investment while fighting poverty and unemployment. Describing foreign investment

as: "The foundation of our economic activity and its means of diversification..." President Bongo called for "Support from our partners abroad" to help Gabon lead the way for Central Africa into the 21st century.

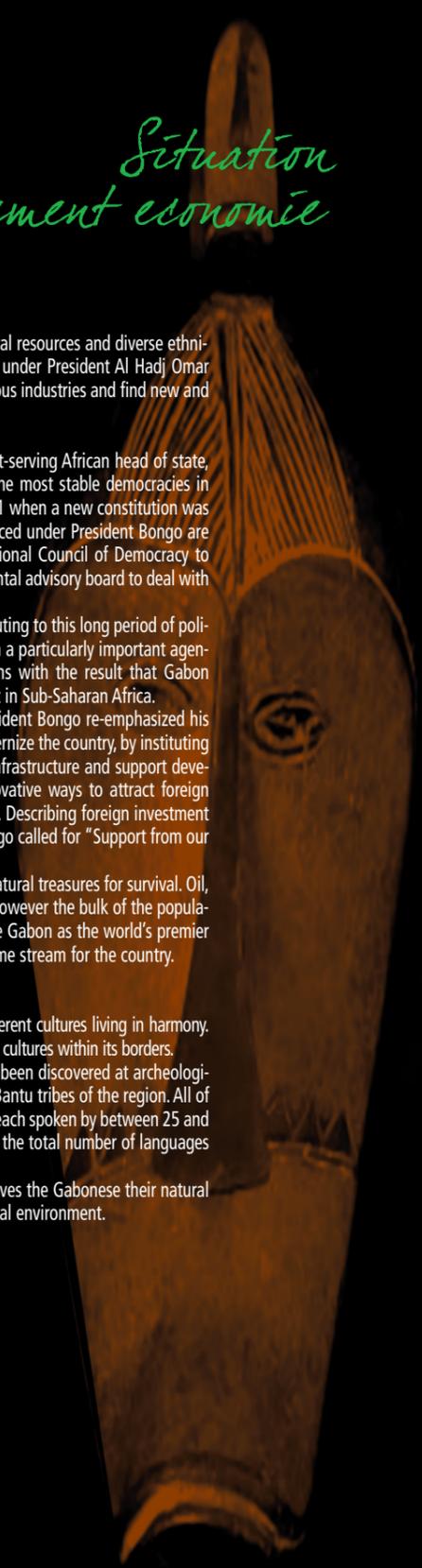
Rich in natural resources this lush, green, country has traditionally depended on exporting its natural treasures for survival. Oil, timber, diamonds, iron ore, and manganese earn Gabon one of the highest incomes in Africa, however the bulk of the population live by subsistence farming. Now, under President Bongo's ecological initiative to promote Gabon as the world's premier eco-tourism destination, the preservation of these same resources could become a major income stream for the country.

An ethnically diverse ecologically minded people

The Congo River Basin is one of the most ethnically diverse areas of the world, with over 250 different cultures living in harmony. Gabon, with its 1.2 million inhabitants in an area roughly the size of California, counts 38 different cultures within its borders.

The earliest inhabitants of the region were the Bayaka or Pygmy people, traces of whom have been discovered at archeological sites dating back 400,000 years. Today they have largely been assimilated into the various Bantu tribes of the region. All of the local languages of Gabon are Bantu. The most prominent are Fang, Mbere and Sira (Eshira) each spoken by between 25 and 30% of the population. However dialects exist in practically every village and region bringing the total number of languages in Gabon to 40.

It is perhaps this very diversity, and the necessity for living in balance with one another, that gives the Gabonese their natural sense of preservation - for their culture, their traditions, art, music and, most of all, their natural environment.



*We can't let places like
this disappear*

The republic of Gabon is an ecological treasure trove. This sparsely populated country located south of the Gulf of Guinea on the western coast of Africa is 75% covered by a virgin forest canopy which is home to 700 species of birds, 70 species of reptiles, 190 different kinds of mammals, and 100 species of amphibians. Almost 20% of the vegetation is the result of endogenous growth: the forest itself generates new species without outside stimulus. In a study of endangered species conducted in 1999 the largest concentration of forest elephants, over 60,000, were discovered in the rich tropical woodlands, along with over 20,000 lowland Gorillas and 30,000 chimpanzees. The interior of the country is a latticework of clear rivers tripping over spectacular waterfalls emptying onto a seacoast abundant with humpback whales, dolphins and leatherback turtles. The coast is lined with endless, unspoiled, and undeveloped, beaches. Indeed, Gabon is the only place on earth where Hippopotami can be seen "surfing" in the Atlantic.



Awakening to the dream

In 2001, Mike Fay, an American ecologist and photographer undertook an expedition to explore 3200 kilometers of virgin forest along the Congo River Basin to the Atlantic coast of Gabon. His 15 month journey was recorded in a documentary film and several books; among them "The last Place on Earth" sponsored by the National Geographic Society. The real impact of his trip, however, was not to be felt until he showed his pictures to President Bongo who took the immediate decision to organize the creation of 13 national parks covering 10% of the country's area, and to cancel forestry concessions that threatened to ravish over 800,000 hectares.

In 2002, President Bongo announced an ambitious plan to preserve the biodiversity in the Congo River Basin at the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, coinciding with the 10th anniversary of the United National Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

The reality is that today, four years after the creation of the parks and the implementation of their administration, the experiment has been greeted with approval by the international community. It has been hailed as an example of a creative solution for many interlocked socio-economic issues, studied by other countries and world-wide environmental institutions, and become the focal point of new thinking concerning sustainable development for poor countries and the central African region.

The plan in action

Loango, Lopé, Ogooué and Pongara are the first parks to be developed for Ecotourism in Gabon out of the 13 areas set aside (See inset box).

In 2005, after barely a few months of being opened to the public, Loanga attracted 10,000 visitors alone. In the words of Dr. White, one of the original surveyors for the WCS "...it is the most beautiful natural park in Africa at present." Indeed, it is the only place in the world where tourists can see elephants and buffalo graze in fields that border beaches where Hippos bath in the Atlantic surf. More lodgings and better roads are being built to allow tourists even easier access to this area, and



a new internal road system is being laid out that will allow vehicles to circulate in the park without seeing one another. The Omboué airport nearby is also undergoing renovation, and will have a new runway to receive even more visitors.

The Lopé forest is the easiest equatorial African park to get to and is also a large research center for a new type of eco-tourism. Here visitors will be able to approach the fauna more closely through the use of new technology. The park is rich in Mandrills, Gorillas and Chimpanzees, as well as home to the largest elephant herd in Africa. In the near future, a suspended walkway will be completed, as well as a lodge right in the center of the virgin forest.

The Ogooué delta park will allow tourists to visit Lambaréné, a village located on the river's edge, as well as gain access to the Wonga Wongué nature preserve, formerly the private presidential hunting grounds. A network of canals will enable easy transit to Loanga by boat.

Pongara is a wild region located not far from the capital of Libreville, and easily accessible by boat. The park is being developed as a recreational area to appeal mainly to groups of students and schoolchildren. A reception center, several hotels, and cafés are currently under construction, as well as footpaths to the nearby bathing center of Pointe Denis. The other areas designated as national parks are located in each of the nine provinces of Gabon:



Ethnicité populations locales

Government commitment

The success of the newly created parks and, indeed, of the plan as a whole, will depend on the financial commitment of the Gabonese State, its ability to appoint competent personnel - in the field and within its administration - and sustained political commitment at the highest level.

The Gabonese government has learned from past failures in other countries where conservation programs have been started up with much fanfare, only to fail soon afterward for lack of coordinated support between government and the private sector, that a policy of "the state as the only administrator" is not a viable alternative.

President Bongo believes the state should assume a leadership role by overseeing negotiations of mutual commitments with a wide spectrum of natural resource industries, eco-tourism operators, private companies, NGOs, local associations, etc. ... to ensure balanced utilization of reserved lands through the proper execution of contracts over specific areas of responsibility and eventual exploitation - whether for natural resources or tourism.

The Gabonese people recognize that only through careful planning, execution, and continued commitment to supervision can an environmental conservation plan of the magnitude implemented by President Bongo and his administration become a sustainable national resource that will attract investment, on all economic levels, from the international community.

By uniting the countries bordering the Congo River Basin under universal ecological values, Gabon is leading the way to a new era of biodiversity conservation that will meet the most stringent global demands

The Gabonese Experiment

In 1999 the Ministry of Water and Forests asked the Wildlife Conservation Society to undertake a nationwide survey of sites for biodiversity conservation, co-financed by World Wildlife Foundation. These surveys, they insisted, should provide a comprehensive understanding of the ecological and socio-political contexts for conservation in Gabon.

Based on the evaluations provided by the American NGO, President Bongo, in 2002, set aside just over 10% of the national patrimony for conservation to be organized into 13 national parks and conservation areas. Since 2003, with funding from the Moore Foundation and USAID (The United States Association for International Development) WCS has been assisting the Gabon National Parks Office managing the protected areas.

At the end of 2003, in partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society, Gabon totally rebuilt its network of protected zones, which contain the bulk of its biodiversity. The WCS lent its support to the efforts of President Bongo for the definition of these areas as well as mobilized administrative and organizational resources to assure the successful implementation of his plan. Further, the WCS has been instrumental in helping to attract eco-tourism industry developers to the region to help make the parks self sufficient in the future.

However, besides international aid from the United States and the European Union in the form of outright grants and foreign debt reduction agreements similar to the one signed in 2005 between Cameroon and France the Gabonese government recognizes that the success of the operation will largely depend on the mobilizing the interest of private companies to encourage them to enter into joint ventures for natural resource development and exploitation with the government, on localized economic enrichment coupled to continued education about the benefits of environmentalism to a population who see conservation as an encroachment on their hunting and fishing rights and on the development of eco-tourism as a national industry by making the Congo River Basin an eco-tourist destination.

Also important is the involvement of NGOs and associated bodies in the administrative and decision making process, as well as the respect for mutual commitments to guarantee effective national mechanisms of control over the Congo River Basin.

Akanda Isand : Located in the northeast part of the country, near Libreville, the park contains Mondah and Corisco bays.

Mont Birougou : Situated around 975 meter Mont Birougou, at the southern end of the Chaillu Massif.

Ivindo : Nestled between the Ogooué and Ivindo rivers, downstream from Makokou.

Mayumba : An elegant tongue of sand in the extreme southern end of the country, sandwiched Mayumba and the Congolese border.

Minkébé : Minkébé is a huge expanse of virtually uninhabited forest in the extreme northeast of the country.

Crystal Mountains : This majestic mountain range is situated between Equatorial Guinea and the Ogooué river.

Moukalaba-Doudou : Located in southwestern Gabon, the park covers the Doudou Mountains forest and part of the Nyanga savannas.

Mwagné : Situated to the east of Makokou between the Lodié and Louayé rivers this area crosses the border into the Congo.

Bateke Plateaux : Located in the uninhabited southern section of the Bateke Plateaux.

Waka : The most varied terrain of the Chaillu Massif, between Fougamou and the Lopé. At the heart of Mitsogho country, it is the cradle of a unique Gabonese culture.

Private Investors and the ecology

The success of the parks will also depend on private investors like Rambout Swanborn. This son of a former Royal Dutch Shell employee, raised in the unspoiled beauty of Gabon, has invested 6 million (\$ 7.5 million US) to fund the Loango park project with the WCS, and is ready to invest a further 11.5 million (\$ 14,4 million US) in Lopé and Ivindo.

He is not alone

Investors around the world are looking at Gabon as the next great venue for eco-tourism with parks to rival those of Namibia and Costa Rica. Costa Rica has developed 20 national parks and 8 biological reserves over the past 20 years that today offer hiking, riding, and ornithological expeditions to tourists from around the world. The industry has become a major money spinner for the country employing 17% of the population and provided a new basis for investments in hotels and luxury accommodations. Gabon foresees eco-tourism as a growth industry that in 10 years will reach 1.000.000 tourists annually generating over 230.000,000 (\$ 287 million US) and gradually replace the subsistence farming economic baseline in its most rural areas with agricultural and craft industries more closely tied to the parks and their development.

In a recent speech in South Africa, President Bongo underlined the strong trade relations between African nations and encouraged foreign investment: "In Gabon, we have launched a policy of opening up and of diversification of economic partners. We are convinced that international investors with aptitude, experience and skills, will be active partners in this policy. In short... investors and businessmen are welcome in Gabon in order to increase already existing trade and to strengthen cooperation."

Gabon and the 21st Century

Gabon has over 38,400 fixed telephone lines and over 495,000 cellular phones. 6 AM and 7 FM radio stations with 11 repeater stations, plus 4 shortwave stations. The country has 4 television broadcast centers, plus 6 repeaters, 310 Internet hosts and 40,000 Internet subscribers. Communications are more than adequate by African standards and improving with the help of the growing mobile cell system.

Recently in Paris, Novacom created a "Virtual Museum" unique in the world and on the Internet. It is a 3D tour of native Gabonese art, culture, music and dance set in a computer generated environment, but with a twist: Like Wikipedia (not sure the comparison is adequate), the on-line encyclopedia, the museum invites collectors of Gabonese treasures around the world to submit pictures and text about their pieces so the whole world can participate and appreciate them.

Many organizations, like Novacom, whose website <http://www.gabonart.org> & www.legabon.org offers a creative look at Gabonese culture through its roots, religion, artists and music through DVD's so potential tourists can have an in depth look at what awaits them. Created under the auspices of the Gabonese government, and endorsed by President Bongo, their "Carnet de voyage" (literally "Travel brochure") is a rich tapestry of the sights sounds and rhythms that are Gabon.

"One of my functions as the head of State..." said President Bongo, "...is and always will be to ensure that our different cultures, artistic expressions and symbols can be freely expressed and shared among all people." Maybe take on more statement and make it as a conclusion...



www.legabon.org
www.gabonart.com
www.gabonnationalparks.com



Languages of Gabon

| | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Baka (SIL code BKC) | Ngom (NRA) |
| Barama (BBG) | Njebi (NZB) |
| Bekwel (BKW) | Pinji (PIC) |
| Benga (BEN) | Punu (PUU) |
| Bubi (BUW) | Saka (SAG) |
| Bwisi (BWZ) | Sangu (SNQ) |
| Duma (DMA) | Seki (SYI) |
| Fang (FNG) | Sighu (SXE) |
| Kande (KBS) | Simba (SBW) |
| Kaningi (KZO) | Sira (SWJ), aka Eshira |
| Kili (KEB) | Northern Teke (TEG) |
| Kota (KOQ) | Western Teke (TEZ) |
| Lumbu (LUP) | Tsaangi (TSA) |
| Mahongwe (MHB) | Tsogo (TSV) |
| Mbama (MBM) | Vili (VIF) |
| Mbangwe (ZMN) | Vumbu (VUM) |
| Mbere (MDT) | Wandji (WDD) |
| Myene (MYE), has several dialects | Wumbvu (WUM) |
| Ndasa (NDA) | Yangho (YNH) |
| Ndumu (NMD) | Yasa (YKO) |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Capital | Libreville | Population July 2005 est. | 1,384,000 (150th) | Summer (DST) | not observed (UTC+1) |
| Largest city | Libreville | Density | 5.2/km ² (216th) | Internet TLD | .ga |
| Official language(s) | French | | (13.5/sq mi) | Calling code | +241 |
| Government | Republic | GDP (PPP) | 2005 estimate | | |
| President | El Hadj Omar Bongo | Total | \$9.621 billion (136th) | | |
| Independence from France | August 17, 1960 | Per capita | \$7,055 (89th) | | |
| Area Total | 267,668 km ² (103,347 sq mi) | HDI (2003) | 0.635 (123rd) | | |
| Water (%) | Negligible | Currency | CFA franc (XAF) | | |
| | | Time zone | WAT (UTC+1) | | |