

An endangered species goldmine in the Congo Basin

Marine turtles have lived on earth for the past 100 million years. Six of the seven known species of marine turtles have been listed as 'endangered' in the IUCN Red List, of which three are 'critically endangered'. However, in May 2009, the world's largest population of Leatherback turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*), one of the critically endangered species, was discovered in Gabon in the Western Coast of Central Africa by an international team of scientists led by Matthew J. Witt (University of Exeter, UK). The team, during the course of intensive Leatherback counting involving nationwide aerial surveys and extensive ground-based counting along the 600 km Gabon coastline, found 36,185–126,480 clutches and between 15,730 and 41,373 breeding females¹. This number is probably enough to even remove Leatherbacks from the endangered species list.

Recent estimates have reported that the population of the Leatherback, the largest marine turtle, which can grow up to 6.5 ft in length and weigh up to 540 kg, had decreased from 115,000 nesting females in the 1980s to about 26,000–43,000 nesting females worldwide. The Mexico Coast that in the 1980s accounted for about 65% of the world's leatherback population now has only about 1%. In the Pacific, which was one of the Leatherback's main habitats, only 2300 females exist today. This dismal picture has been caused in large part due to overfishing, pollution, destruction of coral reefs and mangrove forests, and other such anthropological reasons, as

well as natural reasons such as predation and diseases. A piece of good news with respect to Gabon is that 79% of the Leatherback nesting sites discovered there was in National Parks and other protected areas². Gabon is part of the Congo Basin, the second largest rainforest in the world, and about 85% of the land area of the country is covered by rainforests. Thirteen National Parks were created in Gabon in 2002 and 11% of the country's total land area is protected.

Significantly, the Congo Basin also has two other discoveries to boast of. On 10 June 2009, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) reported the presence of another endangered species, the eastern lowland gorilla (*Gorilla beringei graueri*) that is endemic to the eastern regions of the Republic of Congo, a country neighbouring Gabon. This is the largest of the four subspecies of gorilla and can weigh more than 500 pounds. The discovery also suggests that the range of this animal is greater than what was known before. The eastern lowland gorilla is considered to be the least studied subspecies of gorilla, and recent estimates show that only 8000 individuals of this animal exist in the world. The survey, which was conducted by a team of four mammal experts, two ornithologists, two botanists and one herpetologist, was a joint effort of Congolese Government, WCS and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)³.

In addition, a year ago, Emma Stokes of WCS and a team led by her found a large population of yet another critically

endangered species, the western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) in the Congo Basin. One hundred and twenty five thousand individuals were found, veritably doubling the estimated population of the species, which till then had been 100,000 individuals worldwide⁴.

The tribes of the Congo Basin depend on forest produce for their food and shelter, and, as in India, wildlife is destroyed by industrial exploitation of natural resources and encroachment of forest land as well as hunting wild animals for their skin, horns, feathers and so on. Apparently, the adverse impact of such activities on the biodiversity of the region seems to be neutralized by conservation efforts, which include cross-border management of protected areas in the countries of the region and a number of projects to protect unique species like gorillas, elephants, manatees and turtles.

1. Witt, M. J. *et al.*, *Biol. Conserv.*, 2009, **142**, 1719–1727.
2. <http://www.cuc.ac.uk/news/2009-news-archive/largest-leatherback-turtle-population.htm>
3. <http://www.wcs.org/press/press-releases/new-habitat-discovered-for-worlds-least-known-gorilla.aspx>
4. <http://www.wcs.org/new-and-noteworthy/motherlode-of-gorillas-discovered-in-central-africa.aspx>

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