

Participatory, science-based and community rights-based development of sustainable village hunting models: experiences and prospects in the Congo Basin

Side event organized by the Sustainable Wildlife Management Programme on the 07/07 from 1pm to 3pm

In Central Africa, traditional village hunting and fishing today combine with growing demand from urban wild meat/fish consumers and wildlife habitat degradation/destruction. These cumulative pressures increasingly threaten forest wildlife, though at varying levels across the sub-region. But where high, they have already depleted populations of hunted species, depriving indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) of an essential source of food, income and cultural identity.

As evidenced by the adoption in 2016 of a sub-regional strategy for the use of wildlife by IPLCs in Central Africa within the framework of the COMIFAC, involved states are aware of the need to reconsider their wildlife policies and management systems to manage to reconcile biodiversity conservation with human well-being, including for the most vulnerable communities. More recently, the COVID-19 crisis has raised the concerns about global zoonotic risks originating from wildlife and recalled the need to prevent and mitigate disease spill over risks associated to uncontrolled wild meat value chains from the “forest to the fork”. But it has also highlighted the difficulty to ensure dedicated measures do not negatively impact IPLC’ rights.

The Sustainable Wildlife Management (SWM) Programme, a global initiative funded by the European Union, has brought together in this side event its pilot projects (Congo, DRC, Gabon) and other initiatives in the sub-region (Darwin initiative in South Dja reserve, Cameroon; project led by the Association Nsombou Abalghe-Dzal (NADA) in the Ogooué Ivindo province, Gabon; and the USFWS/USAID-funded Wildmeat project) to present a starting collaborative dynamic aiming at supporting Central African states in promoting evidence-based, effective and equitable wildlife management models to address those interconnected challenges.

First a series of presentations have showcased bottom-up approaches to co-develop and field test different models of participatory wildlife management with communities in a variety of contexts. This was also the opportunity to launch [the report presenting the first findings from the SWM project in Gabon](#). Then, the [wildmeat project website](#) and the [SWM Programme legal hub](#), that include thematic databases and toolkits providing multi-disciplinary evidences for wild meat research, practice, policy and legal reforms in Central Africa, have been presented. Finally, illustrations of the way these sources of information are going to be used to effectively support countries willing to engage in wildmeat policy reforms have been presented (so far Gabon, DRC, Cameroon), including through a subregional working group that will allow exchanges of experience and expertise with support from a Science for Nature and People Partnership (SNAPP) project.

Key messages from the side event include:

- The diversity of socio-ecological, cultural, demographic, epidemiologic and economic contexts in the sub-region, requires different wildlife management models to best fit local realities, and, doing so, be better accepted by users and more effective. To develop those models, multi-disciplinary approaches that consider all three – ecological, economic and social – dimensions of sustainability are needed.
- However, there is a growing interest to promote participatory management models that empower and directly involve IPLC in wildlife governance and management, including through the recognition of customary laws and practices. Especially those models could prove effective at meeting sustainability objectives where capacities for ‘business-as-usual’ statutory law enforcement strategies are limited.
- Developing and scaling up those models require a real shift of paradigm that can only be possible with significant and long enough initial investment, given the complex and long-term processes involved, including behaviour changes and law reforms. But most of all, it requires effective political will from all stakeholders to address key challenges that are common across the subregion, such as, *inter alia*, inadequate land and natural resource tenure regimes, weak and disconnected statutory and customary governance systems, lack of capacities of communities and duty bearers supporting them to manage wildlife and its uses.