

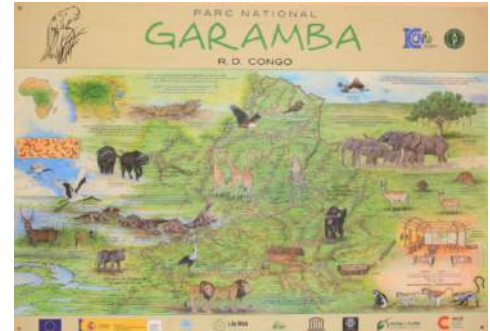
Garamba National Park, DRC – Field Report

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Garamba National Park (NP) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) historically conjured up images of early explorers crossing large open plains, on the edge of the forest, teeming with elephant, buffalo, rhino, giraffe and predators. Nestled into the north east of the country bordering (South) Sudan, Garamba NP is a World Heritage Site which was once home to the last remaining population of Northern White Rhino and the previously assumed Congo giraffe.



However, these were not exactly the images that first came to my mind when GCF was approached by African Parks Network (APN) together with the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN) to support an initiative to save the last giraffe in the DRC. I conjured images of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Joseph Kony and child soldiers plundering communities and parks – images that have been splashed across the media for more than a decade. These images, understandably, had me thinking twice.

But, we are all about giraffe conservation and if any giraffe population needs help, this definitely was one to look out for. With valuable financial support from the Mohammed bin Zayed Foundation Species Conservation Fund, it was only a matter of convincing (Dr to be) Francois Deacon from the University of Free State, South Africa to join me and help assess the situation for DRC's last giraffe population. Once we had met up in Entebbe, Uganda in mid-February we chatted late into the night about the days ahead focussing on all things giraffe – and trying to have some perspective that this was not going to be Southern Africa, our home turf.

Early the next morning we flew to the northwest border town of Arua in Uganda together with Jean Labuschagne, APN's Manager: Special Projects in Garamba NP. After crossing the border with the help of local staff and a fixer, we weaved our way through the livestock, potholes and UN manned vehicles to the local airport in Aru, DRC, before being whisked off in the APN plane by Guy, APN's cool and calm Canadian pilot, to our final destination: Garamba NP. The most noticeable take-away message from the hour-long flight was the density of people, the sheer amount of cleared land and the lack of organised agriculture.

On arrival in Garamba NP the reality of where we were hit rather quickly. A UN envoy was camped close to the airstrip awaiting the potential of a voluntary declaration by the LRA as their impact was dwindling, yet the



shock waves of an attack only a few kilometres up the road clearly resonated with everybody – the fight is clearly not over yet. Coupled with the reports of fresh poaching of elephant for their tail hair, Francois and I could only but feel how different the day-to-day life of a conservationist here was compared to the south of the continent.

But down to business. Our job was to assess the feasibility of a proposed fenced Sanctuary to conserve the last giraffe. We spent a full day out in the field with a team of rangers



and monitoring staff, including Redebul (gives your wings) and Matokaloma ('Mato' to his mates) who had recently returned after two years of training in Rwanda. Full of enthusiasm they identified different trees, giraffe forage preferences, seasonal habitats and the odd animal across the plains – and there were certainly not many of them. The Garamba landscape is large and includes the neighbouring 'domaine de chase' areas, encompassing more than 7,500km² in total. Whilst Acacia dot the landscape it is definitely not ideal habitat for giraffe and

we got the feeling that after little evidence of giraffe (and no sightings) in the area propose for the Sanctuary that they required a larger area to sustain themselves. In this landscape giraffe would likely walk many kilometres a day in search of adequate forage and mates.

Back at the APN lodge (originally built to host the hopefully large numbers of tourists wanting to visit this iconic outpost) after an intense field day, lots of discussions continued on the bank of the Nagero River with APN's Manager Jean-Marc Froment, Jean and their team. It felt a little surreal in such a tranquil setting with hippos snorting and an array of lifers for any bird enthusiast! Many ideas were thrown around the proverbial table and we finally started to narrow down how best we could help save the last 30-40 giraffe in all of the DRC. This was now a mission!

On the last morning we were fortunate to take to the skies in search of giraffe, well more specifically to scope the lie of the land from above. Frank, the helicopter pilot, took us on an amazing tour of the core area of the Park where giraffe naturally inhabit and we got to fully appreciate the enormity of it all. We banked along the riparian forests in search of the elusive Garamba giraffe, passed over a wandering hyena and the sad sight of an elephant that had recently lost its mate – but so far no sighting of the illusive giraffe. We saw large herds of buffalo, which was comforting, and suddenly, like a mirage, Francois spotted four giraffe loping across the plains – this was the first sighting of Kordofan giraffe for both of us! The three bulls and one cow were literally in the middle of nowhere and made us wonder how and why they had survived here, while so many others had not. A truly amazing sighting and before we knew it, we were back on level ground – with an increased dedication to save those four giraffe and their remaining mates. After a meeting with the Park managers to discuss the way forward, next steps and our final recommendations, we used the remaining time to help Redebul and Mato set up a new giraffe ID database and explained how to use their camera with a scope, before Francois proudly showed them the sights and sounds of South Africa on his computer.



As we departed Garamba after what feels like a whirlwind, and slightly sleepless, few days we were full of enthusiasm, excited about the opportunities ahead and feel encouraged that we might be able to make a real difference. With new technologies for monitoring and tagging giraffe and teams, we feel our job is far from over in Garamba NP, and together we are keen to keep partnering and collaborating to help save the last giraffe in DRC. However, we are quickly brought back to the realities of operating in this unpredictable and potentially dangerous landscape as we receive reports of another security incident close by ... till next time!

