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Chimpanzees in the Comoé National Park, Côte d'Ivoire.

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Introduction

The Comoé National Park (CNP) in Côte d'Ivoire is the largest reserve in West Africa, covering 11,500 km². It is located in the north of the country between 9° 6' N - 8° 5' N and 3° 1' W - 4° 4' W. Due to its diverse habitats the park is home to at least 150 species of mammals among which are 14 species of primates (Fischer unpubl. data). Due to an almost complete lack of management for more than a decade the large mammal community of the park, including the majority of primates, is heavily threatened (1, 2).

Chimpanzee in West Africa and the Côte d'Ivoire

The western chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes verus*) suffered heavily from hunting and habitat loss leading to extinction in Gambia, Burkina Faso, Togo and Benin (3). The total chimpanzee population in Côte d'Ivoire is believed to be less than 750 individuals (4). However, the CNP is not listed on the IUCN map showing the distribution of chimps in West Africa (3).

Western chimpanzees have been comprehensively studied in the Taï National Park of Côte d'Ivoire, where they are elaborate tool users (5) and frequent hunters of red colobus (6). To date no chimpanzee study has been performed in the CNP.

Chimpanzees in the CNP

Chimpanzees are frequently heard on the west bank of the Comoé River in the southern part of the park. Here their nests can easily be found leading us to believe that they are fairly

undisturbed. Neither have chimpanzees nor any signs of them been encountered on the east bank of the river, which might be due to the less extent of gallery forest here.

We have been told by villagers that chimpanzees are not hunted due to their resemblance to man. In addition we never found any chimpanzee remains in poacher camps nor were any products offered to us on the markets. We are not able to give an estimate of chimpanzee density in the CNP, but believe that they only occur in the gallery forest and the larger island forests close to the river. Their range is probably restricted to the south of the park since forest structures in the north are rare. Chimpanzees might still occur in sufficient numbers to build a healthy population.

Since observations of chimpanzees are very rare in the CNP we describe such incident in some detail.

Chimpanzee Observation

On the 30th and 31st of October 1998 (late rainy season) we heard several chimpanzees calling at the west bank of the Comoé river close to the research camp of the University of Würzburg. On both mornings we heard some drumming around dawn between 5:00 and 7:00, but did not see any apes on either of these days.

On the 1st of November between 9:30 and 11:15 a.m. we were able to observe two adult males as well as an anestrus female accompanied by a juvenile (about 4 - 5 years old) feeding in a large fruiting tree about 25 m above ground. While the males were feeding close to each other the female and the juvenile were sitting 2 - 3 m below them. We were not able to determine the tree species but fruits had to be small since several hornbills swallowed them whole. According to Hovestadt (7) *Ficus thoningii*, *Celtis zenkeri* and *Diospyros abyssinica* fruit around that time of the year and are preferred by birds and mammals.

The following day we observed an oestrus female, an infant of about 2 - 3 years and an older juvenile feeding in the same tree from 9:15 - 10:30. On both days at least three other chimpanzees were heard screaming from the

ground close to the fruiting tree which was ignored from their conspecifics above. On 3rd November we observed an older juvenile feeding, but mostly playing in the tree from 9:00 - 11:45 a. m.. By that time whole branches had been broken by the chimps, and the tree was not visited any longer by birds.

Chimpanzees have not been observed ever since, but were regularly (every 2 - 4 weeks) heard calling and drumming at the west bank of the river in 1999. While one group was heard close to the research camp in January 1999 a second group was heard that same day 15 km further south.

Conclusion

The CNP contains a rich variety of large mammals some of which can be found nowhere else in Côte d'Ivoire. The cessation of almost all management activities in the late 1980s has already led to tremendous decreases in the large ungulate population (1, 2). Some of the formerly abundant primate species like black and white colobus (*Colobus polykomos vellerosus*) are close to extinction today. Immediate action against poaching and other support for the park is urgently needed to ensure the future existence of the biosphere reserve and world heritage site. We hope that a WWF project founded by EU that started in 1998 will help to establish effective park management.

References

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