SAVING CHIMPANZEES: PROTECTING COMMUNITIES

BOSSOU VILLAGE

SOUTHEAST GUINEA

"Our co-existence with the chimpanzees is historic; chimpanzees are our ancestors, so we should not harm them. We live together," said Bossou village elder Kouna Goumy. "Chimpanzees can convey messages about the future and present. When an official person in the community dies, they feel it first and come around the village with cries to alert the people."

Twenty-three chimpanzees once lived in the Bossou Forest of southwest Guinea. International researchers flocked there to study the primates' use of tools and their changing health. Scientists can no longer study 23 chimpanzees; today's population is seven. A major culprit: deforestation.

The chimpanzee decline is a concern for the 2,000 Bossou villagers who share the forest with the chimpanzees and have come to rely on their presence as a source of revenue. They sell chimpanzee visitors both products and services, from accommodation to food and souvenirs. Chimpanzees are also spiritual guides for the Bossou people. Villagers have historically protected them and listened to their calls for guidance.

The Bossou chimpanzees have been beset by a host of problems from illness to habitat fragmentation. A strong contributor to these problems is deforestation.

To reverse the declining chimpanzee population and save an important revenue stream for the Bossou people, the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Agency for International Development are working closely with the Institut de Recherche Environnementale de Bossou (IREB), Acteurs pour le Dévéloppement Rurale (AUDER) and surrounding communities to collaboratively restore a forested corridor. The corridor will allow chimpanzees to once again migrate and interbreed between the Bossou Hills and the Nimba Mountains, which will improve the numbers and health of the Bossou population.

Forest restoration activities include growing and planting native trees within the corridor, building local capacity to manage and fight wildfires, developing and implementing an inclusive management plan for the corridor, and engaging surrounding stakeholders to sustainably manage common resources.

If today more people from different areas talk about Bossou; and we receive many visitors from other parts of the world the bring us revenue, it is simply because the chimpanzees are still living with us, said Bossou tour guide Pascal Goumy.

University of Montana masters student, Sophie DeMartine, inspects native tree seedlings destined to reforest the Bossou-Nimba corridor, with staff from IREB and AUDER.

The U.S. Forest Service, University of Montana masters students, IREB and AIDER worked with the Bossou-Nimba Corridor communities to map land use and valuable resources that informed a community-owned integrated management plan. Above, the mapping process. Below, community members present the results of an exercise to show the links between natural resources and anthropogenic influences.

The collaboration has already shown tremendous success, particularly in preventing and stopping wildfires from destroying the forest corridor. In early 2019, village fire brigades stopped two major wildfires from ravaging the restored forest corridor. The village brigades implemented fire belts and counter-fire measures that they learned from U.S. Forest Service experts.

The community fire brigades and IREB (below), were able to successfully put out a major fire, right at the boundary of the forest restoration corridor (above).

“I am proud and very glad to have succeeded in managing wildfire this year in our zone. Together we applied the knowledge we got from the trainings by the U.S. Forest Service. When we noticed the presence of fire in our zone because of high-altitude smoke, I was alerted by a community member and quickly used my phone to call the leaders of all the community fire brigades. Within a few minutes, we all met on the site of the corridor and set a fire belt to counter the fire; we also set an opposite fire to restrain the coming fire, and we successfully extinguished it. In comparison to the past when we never had any skills to protect our forests, today the men and the women brigades work together to manage wildfire in our zone,” said Emmanuel Gbato Guemy, Commander of Bossou Fire Brigade. (Translated from French)

Bossou Chimpanzees can use a stone hammer and anvil to crack open palm nuts, but they can’t regrow the forests they depend on for their survival or create fire belts to save their habitats. Thanks to the U.S. Forest Service, USAID and partners, the caring communities that surround the Bossou Forest are now equipped to better manage the forest and to prevent wildfires. The results are a healthier chimpanzee population and a more resilient local community that benefits from a chimpanzee visitor revenue stream and a well-managed forest.

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