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REPORT OF THE CONFERENCE HELD ON JUNE 02, 2023 ON THE THEME: TOGETHER FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CONGO BASIN BIODIVERSITY

0. Introduction

Biodiversity has a value in itself, beyond anthropocentric considerations, independently of the needs and existence of the human species or its judgment. It is essential for maintaining the services it renders to the human species and for the resources it holds. The human species is therefore dependent on these resources and eco-systemic services for its survival. Most of our medicines and materials (fabrics, wood, etc.), as well as the basis of our economic system and survival, come from the non-human organisms that inhabit our planet. Hence the preservation and conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable management of natural biological resources are fundamental to sustainable development.

All the activities of the Biodiversity Preservation and Conservation Research Program at VPGL asbl are based on our desire, insofar as we are able, to carry out a number of actions that can contribute to bringing the human species closer to nature in order to ensure a Biodiversity conservation and better quality of life. In fact, it's imperative that we start by assessing the impact of human activities on biodiversity, then set up a series of educational activities on biodiversity, organize thematic meetings and support local initiatives to implement projects and activities aimed at preserving and conserving the biodiversity of the Congo Basin as part of the region's sustainable development dynamic. Moreover, it is in this same perspective, see above, that we were able to organize, on June 02, 2023 in the conference room of the Uvira Hydrobiology Research Center (CRH), a great conference-debate under the global them: **"Together for the conservation of Congo Basin Biodiversity"**.

Two VPGL researchers exploring wetlands in the village of KAboke 2 in Fizi Territory



Family photo with some of the participants at the Congo Basin Biodiversity Conservation Conference in Uvira



The conference was marked by five main stages:

- Official and solemn opening of the event by the Uvira City Mayor, represented by his Vice Mayor, followed by a welcome to participants and a presentation of the organization (VPGL asbl) by the Chairman of the Board of Directors;
- The presentation of the three keynote speakers focused on specific topics of the day's agenda;
- Debate around the presentations ;
- Coctail and closing of the event.

I. Opening of the event, welcome of participants and presentation of VPGL

Moderated by Mr. Filbert MAURIDI OFISI, Teaching and Research Assistant and Head of the Biodiversity Preservation and Conservation Research Program at VPGL asbl, the conference began with a solemn opening speech by Mr. KIFARA KAPENDA Kiky, Vice-Mayor of Uvira, who was present in the room. Mr. Claude HABAMUNGU MIHIGO, Chairman of the Board of Directors, then welcomed the participants and introduced the Association des Volontaires des Pays des Grands Lacs. Taking the floor, Mr Claude took the opportunity to welcome the various delegations from the 8 territories of Sud-Kivu province and from elsewhere. Among those present were many political, administrative and customary authorities, religious authorities, civil society structures, associative groups(local NGOs), institutions of higher and university education, members of the local press, local community organizations, different tribe mutualities, the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the National Police, as well as economic operators. The Chairman of the Board of Directors also gave an overview of the organization, emphasizing the conference's mission to bring together scientists, civil society organizations, local communities and political decision-makers around a single table, local communities and political decision-makers to assess the impact of human activities on the Congo Basin's biodiversity, to raise awareness and to unanimously define appropriate measures to mitigate the risk of this threat throughout the Congo Basin, in general, and the Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga Territories, in particular.



From left to right, in the first image, Mr Filbert MAURIDI OFISI, Teaching and Research Assistant and Head of the Biodiversity Preservation and Conservation Research Program at VPG; Mr. Claude H.MIHIGO, Chairman of the Board of Directors at VPGL; the Urban Commander of the National Police in the town of Uvira and Mr. KIFARA KAPENDA Kiky, Vice-Mayor of Uvira city. In the second image, top right, from left to right, Mr. Claude, Mr. the Vice-Mayor and the Territory administrator of Uvira. The next picture shows Mr. Jules MABAMBA, accountant at VPGL; Mr. Filbert and Mr. Josias TOMBO, Honorary Coordinator of VPGL. Then comes group photo with some of the participants, and finally the last image is of the Vice-Mayor of Uvira solemnly opening the event.

II. Presentations

From the outset, it should be noted that the organization of this conference followed a methodological approach based primarily on inviting people from different strata of the population on the basis of their initiative, their commitment to environmental issues, in general, and their motivation, as well as their role in regulating and implementing strategies and measures favorable to the preservation and conservation of Biodiversity, in particular. In practical terms, the conference featured interactive sessions on three main topics, namely:

- Loss of forest cover and its consequences in the Uvira and Fizi territories;
- Socio-economic challenges of natural resource conservation in rural, urban and peri-urban environments ;
- Biodiversity crisis and protected area management: The case of Itombwe Nature Reserve and Ngandja Wildlife Reserve.

Indeed, the best part of the conference was the presentation, one after the other, of these three themes, in the presence of 73 people, although only 50 people were invited; this was done respectively by assistants Didier MUGISHO YALIRE and Filbert MAURIDI OFISI, as well

as Doctor Daniel BATACHOKA MASTATKI, who spoke last before the debate was opened to everyone.

Taking the floor for his presentation on the loss of forest cover and its consequences in the territories of Uvira and Fizi, the first speaker focused his presentation on four main elements, namely:

- State of forest cover in D. R. Congo: an overview of the territories of Uvira and Fizi ;
- Main causes of loss of forest cover in the Uvira and Fizi territories ;
- Consequences of the loss of forest cover in the territories of Uvira and Fizi ;
- Conclusion and recommandations.

Participants were alerted to the fact that, in both territories, the loss of forest cover is growing exponentially and is out of all proportion to reforestation efforts. The speaker was able to demonstrate how a fast-growing population, coupled with high food and energy needs, is putting great pressure on natural resources. Practices such as slash-and-burn agriculture, commercial forest exploitation, mining activities and urbanization were highlighted as among the main causes of the loss of forest cover in these areas. In addition, many unfortunate consequences of the loss of forest cover in this region were also presented to the participants, including: the aggravation of natural disasters, the amazing rising waters of Lake Tanganyika leading in turn to much damage to populations, the emergence of new diseases, the disruption of agricultural activities, etc. It has been shown, for example, that between April 17 and 20, 2020, more than 1,626,998 individuals were directly affected by the rains, out of a total of 9,310,90 people informed, i.e. almost 18%. This is such an enormous figure for a population composed of a majority living in extreme poverty, and therefore so unable to cope with even the slightest threat from natural disasters of this kind. Finally, the speaker drew participants' attention to the fact that protected areas offer a prime opportunity to preserve and sustainably manage the values essential to the development of local communities. For this reason, inter-sectoral coordination must be strengthened in order to implement effective integrated management of the forest estate and ensure biodiversity conservation in the two territories of Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga; the recognition and involvement of the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities in the design and management of protected areas, the implementation of a land reclamation plan and the raising of local awareness were presented to the audience as measures likely to contribute effectively to the fight against the loss of forest cover in the territories of Uvira and Fizi.

**Mr. Didier MUGISHO YALIRE
talks about the loss of forest
cover in the Uvira and Fizi
territories.**



**Woman illegally exploiting the
natural forest in Fizi highlands**

**Heavy flooding in Uvira leads to loss
of line**

**The effects of the rising waters of Lake
Tanganyika on the Luhanga
escarpments in Uvira, causing the
disappearance of the national road N°**

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For his part, Mr. Assistant Filbert, who is also the Head of the Research program for the preservation and conservation of Biodiversity at VPGL spoke secondly under the Topic:

“The socio-economic challenges of natural resource conservation in rural, urban and peri-urban environments. After a brief introduction, the second speaker gave an overview of animal species in South Kivu. This was the ideal moment to demonstrate to the audience what the various formally protected sites and those in need of formal protection in Sud Kivu province. These include the Itombwe Nature Reserve, the Kahuzi-Biega National Park, the Luama-Lwiko Hunting Zone, the Ngandja Wildlife Reserve, the Ubwari Peninsula and the mouth of the Ruzizi River at Kavinvira. It is important to mention that the communication

products recently prepared, designed and shared to us by our partners: **E.O.Wilson Biodiversity Foundation, Half-Earth Project and the Yale Center for Biodiversity and Global Change** through our dears PhD Alex and Tamara were very helpful here. The speaker used these communication products to explain to participants the different sites and hotspots in the Sud-Kivu province rich in Biodiversity. The participants were so amazed and above all pleased to learn more about the statics relating to the different species and above all the endemic species that abound in the different sites already mentioned. The various delegations present in the room, and in particular the political and administrative authorities, local community associations and scientists, reacted positively to the quantity and above all the quality of the information provided on this subject. Many of them even acknowledged that this conference was the first of its kind to be held in Uvira.

Filbert using the communication tools received to show participants what the various protected sites in South Kivu contain.



Filbert drew the audience's attention to the need to preserve and advises species at risk of extinction in the coming days

Participants well prepared to follow the conference



Secondly, after explaining why it is imperative to preserve and conserve biodiversity, and presenting the intrinsic arguments, the instrumental arguments and the relational arguments ; this speaker highlighted the main socio-economic challenges to be met in order to limit the risks posed by human activities on biodiversity in South Kivu, which can be summed up in a single fact: developing the means of subsistence of local communities, and above all of the indigenous peoples surrounding the various protected sites to be protected, through mutually

supportive economic development based on the adoption of practices that simultaneously integrate the essential needs of the populations and those of the various non-human species, as well as all the other priorities in terms of sustainable development. In addition, the question of awakening collective awareness, and above all that of local communities and political, administrative and customary authorities, to invest in the preservation and conservation of biodiversity and habitats in the Congo Basin in general, and in Sud Kivu in particular, was raised.

Finally, Dr. Daniel spoke about the “Biodiversity crisis and protected area management: the case of the Itombwe Nature Reserve (RNI) and the Ngandja Wildlife Reserve (RFN)”. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this presentation was based on three main parts: DR Congo's protected areas and key landscapes, conservation threats to the RNI and RFN, and sustainable management. The last speaker explained how in our country, traditionally, *in situ* biodiversity conservation efforts were concentrated solely in classic protected areas. Today, however, there are at least 78 protected areas in Democratic Republic of Congo. Following this, the various threats to the conservation of these two protected areas were once again highlighted for the benefit of the participants. These include hunting, logging, deforestation for agriculture, pastoralism, unregulated fishing, poaching (accentuated by the massive presence of armed gangs), mining, bush fires, etc. Finally, the Doctor dropped in on that all-important question on which he was able to reason with the participants: What do we know about the links between conservation and poverty?



Doctor Daniel on the Biodiversity crisis and protected area management in DR Congo and South Kivu



Bushfire remains a major challenge in the Uvira and Fizi highlands



Artisanal and unregulated Fishing is a threat in its own right to the reproduction of fish resources on the Lake Tanganyika.



The consequences of poaching somewhere in Fizi

III. Debate

This stage was characterized by the opening of a series of interactions both on the various words of the authorities and much on the various themes addressed during the presentations. The debate was therefore open to the whole audience. Participants' contributions can be grouped into two broad categories: questions and suggestions. There were many questions, but the most pertinent were as follows:

- 1) Why have all the efforts made so far by various actors involved in conservation fallen into disuse?
- 2) Beyond the theoretical aspects, what can we actually do to preserve and conserve biodiversity?
- 3) Insofar as certain animal species constitute a danger to human life in certain places, as in the case of the hippopotamuses at the mouth of the Ruzizi River at Kavinvira, who should be protected in this case between humans and animals?

- 4) Should forests be protected instead of agriculture for communities that depend mainly on these forests?
- 5) How does population growth in urban and peri-urban areas in particular threaten biodiversity in rural areas?
- 6) Between promoting peace and creating wealth, what is needed in terms of biodiversity conservation?
- 7) Is poverty reduction a path to better biodiversity management?
- 8) Where did you get all this information about the various sites to be protected?

Answers to these questions were first provided by the speakers, who took it in turns to hand over the microphone, doing their utmost to further edify the participants. It should also be noted that additional answers were provided by some of the participants in the room.

In terms of the suggestions made by participants, we would highlight the following:

- Multiply contacts with state and customary authorities, as well as various civil society structures, for more joint action to preserve and conserve Biodiversity in South Kivu province;
- Sustain the population, together with local authorities, in their efforts to set up a management structure for plastic waste ending up on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, with a view to promoting the reproduction of fishery resources in the Uvira-Fizi area and thus combating the increasing scarcity of these resources in these areas, as well as combating food insecurity;
- Initiate a program to build the capacity of indigenous peoples and local populations not only on measures to preserve and conserve Biodiversity in rural areas of South Kivu province through a vast awareness campaign using available communication products; but also on the potential for implementing income-generating activities to mitigate and prevent the impact of human activities on Biodiversity;
- Organize regular conferences of this kind, and in the very near future, on the same theme in Bukavu, in the 7 others Territories of Sud Kivu province and even in other provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo;
- Increase the number of participants at future events like this one, etc.

At the end of the debate, two major resolutions were unanimously adopted, which can still be considered success stories for this conference. These were :

- Firstly, after presenting the full range of animal species, especially endemic ones, found in the various formally protected sites and those not yet protected, the

participants were amazed at the quantity and quality of this information, and above all its relevance at local, national and international level. In all this, we benefited from the unfailing support of governmental and customary authorities, non-governmental structures and organizations, and the actors present, who greatly applauded our efforts and promised to support us in this fight whenever we need their help, and especially in the context of major mass awareness-raising events such as this one. Moreover, the participants agreed to support the initiative of collecting plastic waste on the shores of Lake Tanganyika the day after the conference, as part of the commemoration of World Environment Day activities, with a view to contributing to the reproduction of fishery resources, which are one of the key products in the diet of the local population and of the local economy;

- Secondly, by answering the question of whether poverty reduction is a path to better biodiversity management? The idea of promoting the identity of indigenous peoples with a view to contributing to the sustainable management of protected areas in South Kivu, through the creation of museum villages, attracted the attention not only of political and administrative authorities ; but also and above all that of the customary authorities and the heads of community associations, who discussed at length the feasibility of such a Project in favour of Biodiversity and the Indigenous Peoples (generally marginalized and forgotten, yet revealed to be responsible custodians of their lands and resources for millennia) as well as the local communes in extreme poverty and living mainly in the vicinity of these area. In fact, the Museum Villages project, which is part of an ecological tourism approach, has distinguished itself as an action likely to contribute to bringing the human species closer to nature in order to ensure a better quality of life and species, thanks to the cultural, social and economic integration of Indigenous Peoples and certain local communities.

IV. Cocktail and closing ceremony

Before the Vice-Mayor of Uvira closed the event, the Head of the Biodiversity Preservation and Conservation Research Program at VPGL, Assistant Filbert MAURIDI OFISI, took the floor to thank all those present, in general, and more particularly to the various political and administrative authorities, the various heads of delegation, as well as the leaders of the NGO Volontaires des Pays des Grands Lacs (VPGL asbl), including the Chairman of the Board of Directors and the Activities Coordinator, all of whom were present in the room. It was a question of recognizing the efforts of all those who had spared no effort to make this event a success. He took the opportunity to reawaken collective awareness of the role to be played by

every player involved, including the local population, in the overall preservation and conservation efforts to be carried out. The Vice-Mayor of Uvira then solemnly closed the event, before a member of his protocol ask participants to sing the national anthem. A few group photos were also taken with the participants, and finally it was time to share a glass of water and a meal.

Uvira, June 29, 2023

For the Biodiversity Preservation and
Conservation Research Program,

Assistant Filbert MAURIDI OFISI

Note : Appendices bellow please

APPENDICES

















