

**Outreach and the development of primate tourism
to protect the Critically Endangered
white-thighed colobus (*Colobus vellerosus*) at Kikélé Sacred Forest, Benin**

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Kikélé Sacred Forest (KSF) (19.8 ha, 9.009° N, 1.729° E) in northwestern Benin is home to a small population of the critically endangered white-thighed colobus (*Colobus vellerosus*) (Matsuda Goodwin et al. 2019) and the mona monkey (*Cercopithecus mona*). KSF is a Sudanian dry semi-deciduous forest. The annual rainfall is about 1,300 mm with a long dry season from October to April and a wet season from April to September. For centuries, Kikélé village has protected their ancestors' totem, the Donko (the white-thighed colobus in Yoruba); however, KSF has been under various forms of anthropogenic pressures.

Although the villagers do not hunt the monkeys in KSF, hunting in adjacent forests and other human activities in the last many decades had reduced the *C. vellerosus* population in KSF to just two groups. Some villagers, especially women, had been disposing of garbage and trash, many of which are hazardous and non-biodegradable, into the forest. Also, some villagers, mainly children, had been using the forest as a toilet and small-scale tree cutting occurred almost daily. A few people were bringing cattle into the forest. Chickens and dogs also enter the forest. These practices threaten primate health and public health. To mitigate these problems and prepare KSF for primate tourism, we embarked on various activities in August - November 2019.



We engaged in an educational program at primary and secondary schools. The program focused on providing the students (total 216 students) with information regarding the ecological functions that primates play and the potential of pathogen transmission that can devastate the monkeys as well as human health as a consequence of open defecation. We visited classroom after classroom in each school. After our program, we saw a dramatic improvement (50-75% increase) in students' knowledge of primates and the negative consequences of human activities that could influence the primate populations and the forest ecosystem.

Secondary school students observe monkey behavior at KSF

Furthermore, 27 secondary school students and 19 primary school students visited KSF twice to observe primate behavior. They learned what the primates feed on, and verified the condition of the forest with their own eyes. Some students now visit the forest during recess and afterschool.

We also conducted outreach in community meetings and met with stakeholders (politicians, forestry personnel and hotel owners) to discuss the deplorable condition of the KSF and the prospect of developing it as a primate tourism site. We also mobilized 18-40 villagers per day for six and a half days to remove three tons of garbage and 300 kg of trash from KSF. The forest is now much cleaner. The women have created the Women's Environment Club that is now responsible for the maintenance of KSF. After these activities, the number of gunshots we heard in nearby forests decreased from 6-8/week in 2017-2018 to 3-4/week. The number of people who use the forest as a toilet, dump waste, or cut trees has decreased considerably (5-10 people/day in 2017-2018 to two cases during the last three months)



Villagers clean the forest

The discussions with stakeholders resulted in the construction of 12 new toilets in the village. The mayor has promised to provide some funds for the protection of KSF this year. Also, the Bassila police have promised that people who commit illegal activities in the forest would be imprisoned and fined. One villager who cut down a tree was imprisoned and fined about £208. This has sent a strong message to the villagers.

We engaged in important activities that are the prerequisite for the development of KSF as a primate tourism site. The commitment that the stakeholders have made will lead to better management of the forest and protection of the monkeys. There are still hurdles that we

must overcome before developing KSF for primate tourism. First, the lack of electricity in many houses is a major hurdle. Second, there still remains some waste that needs to be disposed of. We also hope to fence off the forest against domesticated animals. We also would like to prepare pamphlets that describe the flora and fauna of KSF for students and visitors. We are committed to seeking out funds to continue with our activities by overcoming the difficulties.

References

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