

31 August 2017

Dear Duke University Center for International and Global Studies,

First, I would like to thank you for your continued support of my project (Mitigating the Effects of Poaching on Forest Elephants: Using Behavior to Inform Management Strategies)! This summer has included many positive advancements as well as some frustrations. In June, I moved to Libreville, Gabon where I will be based for the next year, managing the forest elephant project and analyzing the genetics samples for my thesis. Since last year we have tripled the size of the project! We have expanded from tracking 12 GPS-collared elephants in one protected area to 56 GPS-collared elephants in four protected areas (via satellites and on foot). As a result, my position has grown from primarily focusing on field work- living in the protected areas and following the elephants, to training teams and managing the research across all sites. This includes interacting with higher level government officials within the Gabonese National Park Agency (Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux; ANPN).

To take advantage of our unique opportunity to follow the GPS- collared elephants we created three field teams to track the forest elephants in three of the protected areas (Ivindo and Loango National Parks and the Wonga Wongué Presidential Reserve). In July, with the support of DUCIGS, I travelled to Loango National Park and trained the last of three field teams that will spend a year in one of the protected areas collecting genetic samples, and data on demography, resource selection and environmental variables. Similar to last summer, my efforts have resulted in the collection of large amounts of elephant dung; this is great news, because it will allow me to reconstruct forest elephant social groups and determine the drivers of large group aggregations.

As productive as this summer has been, it was not without frustrations or issues. One frustration is the slowness of creating a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with ANPN to use a local laboratory to analyze the genetic samples. Last summer I began unofficially working with the Institute for Research in Tropical Ecology through ANPN. Since May, we have been working towards an official agreement which despite both groups wanting to collaborate has not yet been realized. I'm hoping and expecting that in the next week the MoU for my project will be finally agreed upon and can be sent to our respective bosses for signatures. A second, more alarming, issue is that one of our collars has stopped emitting points as of August 26th. This could be as simple as the battery malfunctioned and the collar stopped emitting GPS points or it could mean that one of our elephants has been poached. We have sent an emergency team to check on the situation but as of now have no news. Up to now we have had three collars stop emitting points: two were caused by poachers destroying the collars and one by the collar battery dying. We remain optimistic that this is just a battery malfunction. However, moments like these serve as a stark reminder of the immediate need of our research in the search for solutions to stop elephant poaching.

I look forward to spending the next year in Gabon. Once the MoU has been agreed upon and is awaiting signatures, I will travel to the Wonga Wongué Presidential Reserve to check-in on the field team and follow a few of the elephants. Hopefully by the end of that trip the MoU will be signed and upon my return to Libreville I will be able to begin analyzing the genetic samples and untangling forest elephant social group dynamics and movement patterns which will then be used to inform anti-poaching strategies.

Thank you again for your support,

Amelia Meier