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Spotted Hyena back in Gabon's Batéké Plateau National Park after 20 years of local extinction

Return of Large Carnivores Signals Hope for Recovery in the Park

Gabon, January 19, 2018 – A spotted hyena, considered locally extinct in Gabon, has been sighted for the first time in 20 years in Batéké Plateau National Park, it was announced today by Gabon's Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (National Parks Agency - ANPN), Panthera, the global wild cat conservation organization, and The Aspinall Foundation.

The spotted hyena, which may have dispersed from Odzala-Kokoua National Park in neighboring Congo, was discovered in camera trap images collected as part of an ongoing survey of Batéké's wildlife.



A spotted hyena caught by a camera trap recently in the Batéké Plateau National Park in Gabon. ©Panthera/ANPN/TAF

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In 2015, a lone male lion captured in camera trap images sparked worldwide interest as the first large carnivore to return to Batéké. The spotted hyena was photographed in the same vicinity as the lion, a hopeful development in an area that had been stripped of its wildlife due to poaching.

Records indicate that hyenas went extinct in the area even before lions did. Local ANPN park rangers presented with the hyena photograph did not know the species, while the village elders in their communities north of the park immediately recognized the animal, calling it Otiebié in the local Téké language.

Professor Lee White, Director of ANPN, said, “The return of these large carnivores is a great demonstration that the efforts of our rangers and partners are having a positive effect on Batéké wildlife. Predators are gravitating to this protected zone, where prey numbers are recovering as a result of a long-term commitment by ANPN and The Aspinall Foundation to protect the area.”

In April 2017, Panthera signed an agreement with ANPN to collaborate to further strengthen protection efforts in the park. Dr. Philipp Henschel, Panthera’s West and Central Africa Regional Lion Program Director, said, “During our 2001 Batéké lion survey, besides a single image of one small antelope in this vicinity, we only photographed poachers coming in from Congo. To see these large carnivores in the same landscape now is incredibly exciting and promising.”

The return of large mammal species started twenty years ago with The Aspinall Foundation’s gorilla reintroduction program. With this program ongoing, there is now an international coalition of organizations committed to protecting the park and restoring its wildlife.

“Gorillas, lions, hyenas—the remarkable return of these headline-making species is not only an indicator of the success of two decades of hard work, but also inspires us to keep pushing the restoration forward,” said Tony King, who coordinates reintroduction programmes for The Aspinall Foundation. “The Batéké Plateau has many more surprises hidden away, and together we strive to help it reveal them.”

Images

Additional photos at the end of the document, with high resolution versions available on:
<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/gea14khe3w3qdof/AAAgmNRGLUCVX494V3E6n2a7a?dl=0>



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Background

In 2001, Panthera and WCS conducted an inventory of Batéké's wildlife for the Gabonese Government to look for evidence that lions still roamed the plains, but, to the survey team's despair, lions and other wildlife had vanished due to uncontrolled hunting. Gabon's wildlife authorities recognized the landscape's incredible uniqueness and potential, and created the Batéké Plateau National Park with a vision to restore the area to its former glory.

The Batéké Plateau is a magnificent and unique landscape, consisting of a mosaic of riparian forests and wooded and non-wooded grasslands that spans a vast area of Gabon and the neighboring Republic of Congo. The area is the northern extreme of the Kalahari sand dune system, and represents a transitional zone between the Congolese rainforest and Zambezi savannah. This combination results in an incredible diversity of wildlife; an area where lions and leopards share their habitat with gorillas and chimpanzees, where African golden cats co-exist with servals, and where jackals follow trails forged by forest elephants.

Gabon's only lion was discovered in the park in 2015 by chimpanzee researchers of the Max-Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology. This lion, who may have crossed the Congo River and travelled over 250km to arrive in Batéké, has been continuously photographed during his three-year reign of the park, but remains alone, calling for a mate.



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About ANPN

Under the leadership of Gabon's President Ali Bongo Ondimba, Gabon's National Parks Agency (ANPN) has gone from strength to strength, growing to become one of Africa's most effective national Parks Authorities, deploying over 800 staff across 13 National Parks and over 50 other types of protected areas. As well as protecting and managing Gabon's wildlife, ANPN is working to develop an ecotourism industry in Gabon that will allow both the Gabonese people and international clients to experience the unique natural treasures of this country, 88% covered by lush tropical rainforests.

About Panthera

Panthera, founded in 2006, is devoted exclusively to preserving wild cats and their critical role in the world's ecosystems. Panthera's team of leading biologists, law enforcement experts and wild cat advocates develop innovative strategies based on the best available science to protect cheetahs, jaguars, leopards, lions, pumas, snow leopards and tigers and their vast landscapes. In 36 countries around the world, Panthera works with a wide variety of stakeholders to reduce or eliminate the most pressing threats to wild cats—securing their future, and ours. Visit panthera.org.

About TAF

The Aspinall Foundation was founded in 1984 and manages conservation projects in Congo, Gabon, Indonesia and Madagascar. The charity helps to protect some of the most endangered species on the planet, including western lowland gorillas, eastern black rhinos, greater bamboo lemurs and Javan gibbons, and has pioneered ground-breaking reintroduction projects. The Batéké Plateau region of Congo and Gabon was the first large wilderness area to see gorillas hunted to extinction. Since 1996 The Aspinall Foundation has released 72 gorillas to the Plateau; 32 in Congo and 40 in Gabon. Fifty-three of these are wild-born orphans from TAF's confiscation and rehabilitation programs, and 19 are hand-reared captive-borns, originating from the prolific captive breeding programme at Howletts and Port Lympne Wild Animal Parks. Thirty-four births to released gorillas have been recorded to date; 22 in Congo and 12 in Gabon. These two projects are the only gorilla reintroduction projects in existence. Visit www.aspinallfoundation.org



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A spotted hyena caught by a camera trap recently in the Batéké Plateau National Park in Gabon. ©Panthera/ANPN/TAF



Panthera, The Aspinall Foundation and ANPN team members celebrating as they witness the photo of the hyena for the first time. ©Richard Slater-Jones



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In 2001, camera trap photos of poachers far outweighed those of wildlife in the Batéké, and large carnivores were absent. Now, a lion and hyena have been photographed less than two kilometres from where the poaching activity was documented in 2001. © Philipp Henschel/Panthera



The lone lion of Gabon photographed recently in the Batéké Plateau National Park.
©Panthera/ANPN/TAF



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Western lowland gorillas have been successfully re-established in Batéké through The Aspinall Foundation's long-running reintroduction programme © The Aspinall Foundation



Chimpanzees caught on a camera trap in the savannahs of the Batéké Plateau National Park, Gabon. ©Panthera/ANPN/TAF



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A serval, typically a savanna species, caught on a camera trap in the Batéké Plateau National Park, Gabon. ©Panthera/ANPN/TAF



This yellow-backed duiker was the only wild animal that was photographed by camera traps in the area in 2001. Now, photos of large carnivores and forest elephants are evidence of wildlife returning to the landscape. ©Philipp Henschel/Panthera



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