

Bushmeat Trade in Ouesso, Republic of Congo

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In biologically rich, but economically impoverished areas of the world, people frequently turn to bushmeat as a food source. Bushmeat is any meat caught in the wild for human consumption. The hunting and capturing of bushmeat often fails to discriminate between common and abundant, and rare and threatened species. As a result, the collection of bushmeat can be a force driving some bird and mammal species closer to extinction.

In the tropical rainforests of Central Africa's Congo Basin, fish and bushmeat are the primary sources of protein for the human population. Meat from domesticated animals is both rare and expensive. In the tropical forest habitat of the Republic of Congo, hunters target medium to large mammals, including chimpanzees, gorillas, other primates, elephants, bongo, and several species of antelope. Several of these species are globally endangered, although locally abundant. As the human population grows, the forests around villages and towns have been cleared for agriculture. In addition, hunting has decreased the supply of local wild animals. As a result, villagers increasingly depend on meat from outside the area immediately surrounding the villages.

The largest town in northern Republic of Congo, Ouesso, has a meat trade that consumed 5700 kg (12,566 lbs) of bushmeat a week in 1994. Duikers (small forest antelopes) were the most abundant animal hunted,

with a remarkable 400 individuals sold per week, likely due to the ease of hunting and transporting them. Unfortunately, the meat of endangered species, such as chimpanzees, gorillas and even elephants, was also sold in the market.

By following hunters and interviewing them, we learned about the three main hunting systems used in the area: snares, night hunting with flashlights and guns, and day hunting, the only legal form of hunting. Snares were the most common form of hunting due to the inexpensive nature of the materials necessary. Snare hunting is indiscriminate, often capturing endangered species such as gorillas. We found that two-thirds of the meat for the market came from a road to a village called Liouesso, southwest of Ouesso. As the roads between these areas improve or degrade it is likely the routes of meat entering the market will change.

Finally, we concluded that law enforcement and wildlife management were ineffective in the study area, either because local people were

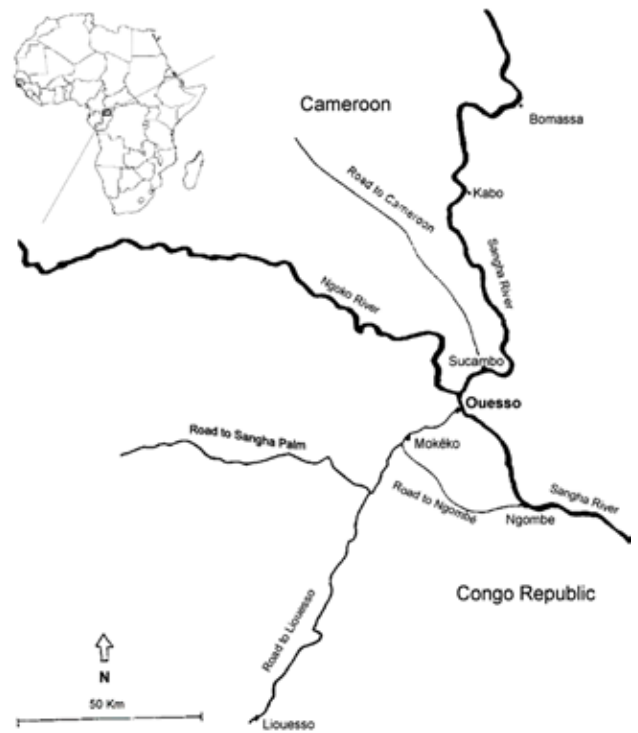
unaware of the laws or because the area concerned was too large for local law enforcement to effectively patrol. The addition of roads to this area might aid law enforcement's ability to patrol, but would also result in easier transport of bushmeat and increased access to hunting grounds. We recommend that Ouesso should continue to be monitored to determine the sustainability of its bushmeat trade. The simplicity of this study means that it can easily be repeated to understand how sustainable this market has become, and what impacts the bushmeat trade may incur on local biodiversity.

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Routes by which meat is brought into Ouesso