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## **GABON'S FLAGSHIP LOANGO NATIONAL PARK INACCESSIBLE**

*Africa's Eden SA, the main tourism operator at Loango National Park – the park described as Gabon's "jewel in the crown" – has announced today that it has been forced to abandon its ecotourism operations at the park as of September 1<sup>st</sup> 2010.*

The decision has been taken despite Africa's Eden's shareholder having invested more than 15 million euros over the past nine years in aviation access and tourism infrastructure and nature conservation: building accommodation, eco-camps, training Gabonese staff and eco guides and supporting research and monitoring studies for the conservation of Loango's exceptional wildlife and biodiversity wealth.

It means that Loango Lodge, which since 2001 has welcomed thousands of international tourists to discover Gabon's wildlife rich forests and unspoiled coastline, is closing its doors indefinitely.

## **AFRICA'S EDEN SA PULLS OUT OF GABON**

The move is a result of the failure of negotiations following a dispute between the Gabonese civil aviation authorities (ANAC) and Africa's Eden's sister company SCD Aviation which ran a regional airline charter company to transport tourists from the capital Libreville to the park.

Even active support of key members of Gabonese government could not prevent the severe consequence of a malfunctioning civil aviation authority (ANAC) that failed to create the conditions necessary for regular and safe aviation transportation: SCD Aviation was consistently refused the renewal of its Air Operator's Certificate (AOC) even though all requirements were met.

Another consequence of this problematic situation is the fact that the European Union blacklisted all Gabonese airlines in 2008 when a large number of deficiencies were reported with regards to the capability of ANAC "to perform their air safety oversight responsibilities", as states the Commission of the European Commission. "More than 93% of the ICAO standards were not implemented". This was the lowest percentage of all audited countries. and makes ANAC in Gabon one of the poorest performing civil aviation authorities in the world.

"We have made numerous attempts to resolve this dispute amicably for over a year now," said Rombout Swanborn, founder of Africa's Eden and SCD Aviation. "The ongoing events and consequences of not being able to operate our aircraft have financially crippled our organisation, leaving us with no choice but to take this drastic measure." He added: "We are highly disappointed as a solution would have benefited all parties involved. In the end, the Gabonese people. "

Legal action against the aviation authorities in Gabon has been initiated to seek compensation for the financial losses SCD Aviation and Africa's Eden have undergone.



## **SEVERE CONSEQUENCES FOR GABON'S TOURISM & CONSERVATION SECTOR**

Gabon's late President Omar Bongo was celebrated for his leadership in conservation. In 2002, he ring fenced more than one tenth of his country as 13 national parks, lighting the touch paper of ecotourism, and inviting plaudits from the international conservation community.

Lee White, head of Gabon's National Parks Agency (ANPN), described Loango National Park in 2007 as "the jewel in the crown" of Gabon's 13 national parks. "It is a really good example of conservation taking place on the back of a well-organised tourism infrastructure," he said.

"The close down of Loango National Park is a major setback in the development of sustainable tourism in Gabon," said Jacqueline van den Broek, sales & marketing manager of Africa's Eden. She added that Africa's Eden was the main tourism operator in Gabon and that it had won the country huge global exposure through its promotional activities at international trade shows and in renowned media such as National Geographic and the BBC. In 2008 Africa's Eden won the British Guild of Travel Writers' Best New Overseas Destination for its activities in Loango National Park in Gabon. The British Guild of Travel Writers is the leading organization for travel writers professionals.

"As of today, we will stop promoting and selling Gabon as tourism destination. The damage is considerable: over 125 employees will be laid off and millions of euros of tourism investments will be lost, quite aside from the €3 million that Africa's Eden has contributed towards research, conservation and education at the park."

The park is host to an assortment of scientific projects, many part-funded by the money earned from tourism as Africa's Eden has operated under an ethos of "tourism pays for conservation". These projects include research and monitoring studies of whales, manatees, crocodiles and turtles by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). In the north of the park, primatologists from the Max Planck Institute have been pioneering the habituation of western lowland gorillas and chimpanzees, and it was hoped that tourists would eventually be able to view them. A further pioneering gorilla sanctuary and reintroduction project has also been funded by Africa's Eden at the park and made international headlines when six infant and juvenile western lowland gorillas legally confiscated and rescued from the bushmeat trade were transferred onto a safe island in the Fernan-Vaz Lagoon outside Loango National Park in July 2009 in what was the first successful transfer here.

However, Loango's nature conservation projects now have an uncertain future.



## **AFRICA'S EDEN SHIFTS FOCUS**

The focus of the international investment group behind Africa's Eden will now shift towards its investments in sustainable development on the island of Príncipe, a tropical island off the west African coast, and in the Dzanga-Sangha Reserve in the Central African Republic.

A separate press release can be expected on August 15<sup>th</sup> 2010 on the 35 Million Euro sized project that aims to create sustainable economic development for the full island of Principe based on ecotourism. Investments are foreseen in the island logistical, tourism and national park infrastructure.

## **BACKGROUND**

Since its creation in 2001, Africa's Eden SA aimed to develop low-impact eco-tourism and conservation in Loango National Park, Gabon based around the concept of 'tourism pays for conservation'. Simultaneously put in place was SCD Aviation SA, operating as a regional carrier from Libreville to the major capitals in west central Africa and to the national parks.

Loango National Park has 100 kilometres of unspoiled coastline where elephants and buffalo roam. There is a main lodge with luxury bungalow accommodation overlooking a lagoon and five comfortable satellite camps on a mosaic of open savannah, deserted beach, rainforest and rivers. Safari activities include game drives, kayaking, forest treks, gorilla and bird-watching and the park is also renowned as a sport fishing site for tarpon and barracuda.

Revenues generated by Africa's Eden are reinvested in research, conservation, park management and education activities in Loango National Park. Over 3 million Euro was contributed towards conservation partners such as the Max Planck Institute, Wildlife Conservation Society, researchers from renowned and local universities, and a local primary school.

Based on the concept of "Tourism pays for Conservation", Africa's Eden's international sales and marketing office in the Netherlands ([www.africas-eden.com](http://www.africas-eden.com)) will continue to organize exclusive trips to the islands of São Tomé & Príncipe and the Dzanga-Sangha Reserve in the Central African Republic.

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Also see:

[www.africas-eden.com](http://www.africas-eden.com)

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