

Gators in Gabon

FRANCIS E. PUTZ



The government of Gabon, a mostly forested country in Central Africa, sees forest in its future. The large areas set aside as protected areas are the cornerstone of efforts to maintain the country's phenomenal biodiversity, from great apes to massive trees. Efforts are underway to see that these attractions will draw eco-tourists to a region that formerly was off the beaten track. The even larger areas of forest allocated by the government for multiple-use forestry are also expected to contribute to Gabon's conservation and development goals through producing high-quality timber while providing habitat for wildlife, storing carbon, and delivering the many other goods and ecosystem services on which society depends. Building the human capacity to manage these forests is the goal of a new graduate program at the Ecole Nationale des Eaux et Forêts (ENEF).

The on-the-ground team of research faculty on the ENEF campus on Cap de Estérias outside of Libreville includes three recent UF Biology PhDs -- Connie Clark, John Poulsen, and Vincent Medjibe. In June 2012, Jack Putz, joined the team to teach a field course in tropical forestry. The 12 students in the course, 9 from Gabon and 3 from the Republic of Congo, were all working towards their MSc in environmental management. This was

Jack's first visit to Central Africa, but team-teaching with Vincent, who hails from the Central African Republic and did his dissertation research in Gabon, more than compensated for any deficiencies in his understanding. In addition, the students were all mid-career professionals and all very willing to share their extensive experiences.

The course began in and around the ENEF campus but then went further into the forests. The group travelled to Makokou near the Cameroonian border and then worked their way back to Libreville, stopping at logging concessions and sawmills along the way. The focus of the course was on logging methods and impacts, but plenty of brain-power was expended on issues related to the many tradeoffs that need to be considered when making management decisions. For example, while logging went on around them, the group considered ways to optimize timber production, biodiversity protection,

carbon sequestration, and water provision. Although they arrived at no clear solution, these sorts of decisions are exactly like those that each of the students will face when they return to their jobs as park directors, logging supervisors, and climate change mitigation treaty negotiators. One outcome of the course is that most of the students have decided to conduct their master's project on environmental impact assessment in logging concessions, industrial zones, petroleum concession, and buffer zones around national parks.

In addition to making first-hand observations of the impacts of conventional and reduced-impact logging, course participants each carried out individual field research projects. Topics addressed ranged from logging road impacts on adjacent vegetation to post-logging regeneration on log landings. The results of these one-day projects and summaries of other activities were compiled in a course book that is available upon request from Jack (fep@ufl.edu) or Vincent (medjibe@gmail.com). Although most of the course participants do not intend to pursue careers in scientific research, they appreciated the opportunity to carry out a project from hypothesis formulation and experimental design to manuscript preparation and oral presentation. Recognizing that they will all soon be back in jobs for which they will have to commission and evaluate research, they valued the first-hand experience doing science.

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