

## **Okapi Wildlife Reserve**

The **Okapi Wildlife Reserve** is a World Heritage Site in the Ituri Forest in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, near the borders with Sudan and Uganda. At a size of approximately 14,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it covers approximately one fifth of the area of the forest.

As implied by the name, the reserve is home to many okapis. As of 1996, the number was estimated at about 3900–6350, out of a global population of around 10,000–20,000. It is also the location of the Epulu Conservation and Research Center, on the Epulu River. This facility dates back to 1928 when the camp was founded by American anthropologist Patrick Putnam as a capture station, where wild okapis were captured and sent to American and European zoos. It still serves that function today, albeit with very different methodology. Okapis are captured, and then bred in captivity, and then only these offspring are sent to zoos, as it has been found that they have a much higher chance of survival. Even so, very few are now exported — only the minimum number necessary to ensure genetic viability of the captive population. The center also carries out much important research and conservation work.

In addition to the okapis, the wildlife reserve is also home to many other interesting or endangered animals, such as the forest elephant, and at least 13 species of anthropoid primates. Nomadic Mbuti pygmies and indigenous Bantu farmers also live within the reserve.

The Okapi Wildlife Reserve was added to the list of world heritage sites in danger in 1997. The main threats to the reserve are deforestation, primarily caused by slash and burn agriculture, and commercial hunting for the sale of bush meat. Gold mining has also been problematic. As of 2005 the fighting in the eastern part of the country has moved within the boundaries of the reserve, causing its staff to flee or be evacuated. While the native Mbuti and Bantu peoples traditionally respect the forest and its wildlife, immigrants into the area do not feel the same connection. Lack of funding due to the political and economic conditions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has also been problematic. It is hoped that eco-tourism to the area can be developed, leading to both increased funding and improved public awareness.

Source:- Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]