

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PJW-13  
In pursuit of elusive wildlife

Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina-Faso  
(formerly Upper Volta)  
1 December 1984

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

African wildlife attracts a great number of tourists. Most people who come to Africa specifically to see wildlife travel to the plains of eastern Africa in Tanzania and Kenya. Wildlife can be found elsewhere in Africa, but often requires a bit more effort or luck to find.

In the past year, I have not seen much wildlife in Burkina-Faso (formerly Upper Volta). Occasionally I catch a brief glimpse of monkeys scampering across the road, from one patch of bushes to another. Frequently I see vultures, egrets, black kites (Milvus nigrans), or small red-and-black bishops (Euplectes sp.). Other birds, such as martial eagles (Polemaetus bellicosus), are relatively rare. Otherwise, animals commonly seen are domesticated ones -- cows, goats, sheep, pigs, donkeys, and dogs. Lizards and insects are everywhere. Although many species of poisonous snakes exist here, the Burkinabè generally beat snakes to death: snakes, thus, are infrequently found in areas of human habitation.

Wildlife was probably much more numerous in the past. During the 1950's and 1960's lions in the northern part of Upper Volta were exterminated under a bounty program. Currently wild animals can be found in a few national parks or national forests in various parts of the country, and also in a few "sacred" locations.

When I first arrived in Ouagadougou last November, I was introduced to the diversity of wildlife that may have once existed in Upper Volta when I visited the Safari Zoo. The Safari Zoo was unlike any other zoo I have ever visited. It was a small, private zoo adjacent to a restaurant named the "Safari". The zoo was open to visitors for an entrance fee of 200 francs (50¢) per person, or free to those dining at the restaurant. The zoo had one large lion and two cubs, a leopard, a civet, some monkeys, an owl, another large bird, and a couple of pythons.

Last fall I had talked to the proprietor of the restaurant-zoo. She said that, with the curfew (which was 11 PM at that time), few

---

Paula J. Williams is a Forest and Society Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, studying human uses of forest resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

people were willing to drive to the outskirts of town to have dinner at the restaurant. Since the zoo was primarily supported by the restaurant proceeds -- rather than the entrance fees -- this drop in business caused concern. She didn't know how she was going to be able to continue to feed the animals. It was costing 600,000 francs CFA (\$1,500) a month to feed them, as the "cats" were eating two or three donkeys a week. The proprietor had been putting out appeals for contributions to save the animals.<sup>1</sup>

There also was, once upon a time, a small zoo in Bobo-Dioulasso. Now, however, the front gate is locked and all of the cages are empty. The only current resident is a large land turtle who wanders around inside the fence, eating the grasses growing over the zoo grounds.

In a few locations around the country, efforts have been made to set aside areas for wildlife. In the southeastern part of the country are two national parks, Arly Park and the Park of W, the latter being a park that straddles the national boundaries between Burkina-Faso, Benin, and Niger. Supposedly one can find wild boar, antelopes, water buffalo, monkeys, and elephants in these parks. South of Ouagadougou is the National Park of Pô, stretched out along a length of the Red Volta River. Here it is sometimes possible to see elephants.

Last spring my husband LeRoy and I decided to drive down to Pô to look at the park. We chose to go on May Day, a national holiday in honor of "International Workers' Day". An hour and a half's drive south of Ouaga, we arrived at the park boundary. A sign was posted there, stating all the park regulations. Among other restrictions, a permit was required to drive around on the dirt tracks in the park, off the main paved road, and no grazing or hunting was allowed in the park.

We drove through the park and continued on to the town of Pô, in search of the park office and a permit. Driving into town, we were suddenly startled to see the most imposing road check we've ever encountered here -- an armored car with its long-barrelled cannon pointing straight up the road in our direction. Pô is considered to be a particularly important strategic point in Burkina-Faso, as it is where the military commandos are based. The country's current leader, Captain Thomas Sankara, had previously headed the military unit in Pô, and his supporters had driven up from Pô last summer -- in commandeered garbage trucks and other vehicles (as their military vehicles had been withdrawn from them, for fear of insurgency) -- to Ouagadougou to stage the coup d'état of 4 August 1983 that launched the Revolution.

When we got to the checkpoint, the armored car looked a bit less imposing, as one tire was flat. (Not that that would make any difference, however, in firing it down the road.) The

soldiers checked our documents and told us where to find the park office in town. In the village center was a gas station, a small open-air market, and two police stations. The town's facilities probably reflect the fact that Pô is the last significant town on this route before the Ghanian border. After checking with both the local and national police, we discovered where the park office was, and that it was closed. We were told where the other park office was located, back out of town, on the edge of the park. We drove back out there only to discover that it, too, was closed. Someone gave us instructions to the park ranger's house, where his wife said that he had just left and gone into town. At that point we gave up. As we drove through the park again, on our way home, the only animals we noticed were cattle grazing in the park. (A lot more vegetation for the cattle to eat remains inside the park than outside.)

\*

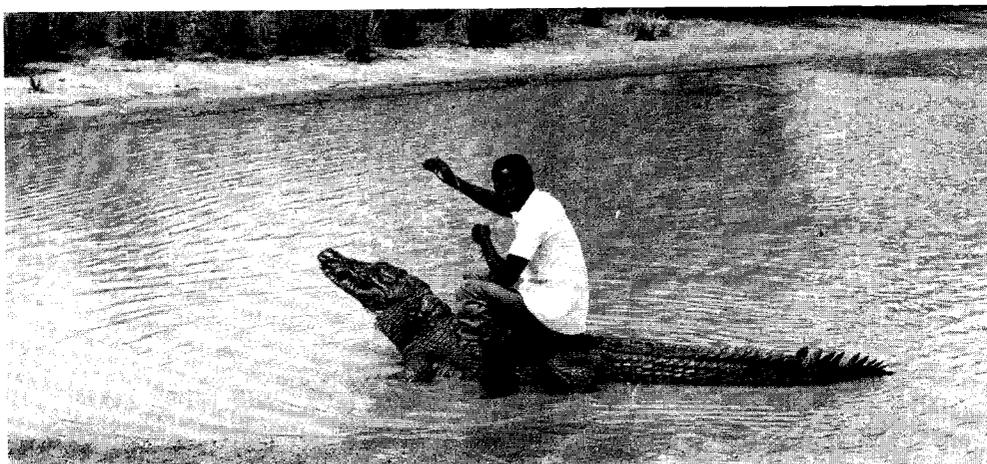
\*

\*

It is much easier, however, to see crocodiles. About 100 km (60 mi.) southwest of Ouagadougou, just off the road that goes to Bobo-Dioulasso, are located the "Sacred Crocodiles of Sabou". These crocodiles historically have been sacred to the local Mossi villagers. Now the crocodiles are being promoted by the Ministry of the Environment and Tourism (MET) as a tourist attraction, and a MET sign on the highway points the way.

On a recent trip from Bobo to Ouaga, LeRoy stopped to see the crocodiles. When he arrived, a local villager told him that there were more than a hundred crocodiles in the extensive series of ponds. The villager was in charge of the tourist attraction, and collected the fees from the visitors -- 500 francs CFA (\$1.11) per person, plus 500 francs per chicken fed to the crocodiles.

Initially one crocodile was fairly close to shore, to whom the villager fed a couple of dead chickens. This creature hardly seemed to be "wild", but rather a docile, well-fed pet: it tolerated its tail being pulled about and even being sat upon by its feeder.



A mild-mannered crocodile

Then a small crocodile swam up, and some of the village kids fed it a chicken. The guide assured LeRoy that the crocodiles did not attack the children. Then he took LeRoy to see a big crocodile -- perhaps nine feet long -- who didn't have many teeth left. The villager said that this crocodile was mean -- he didn't play around with it. When this crocodile was given a chicken, it opened its powerful jaws and slammed them shut -- bam!



A mean crocodile

\*

\*

\*

The Classified (National) Forest of the Hippopotamus Ponds is also known for its wildlife. This forest contains some large shallow ponds, stretching for over 4 km (2.5 mi.) from north to south. The ponds provide habitat not only for hippos, but also for numerous birds and fish: during the dry season, elephants can also be seen at dusk, coming to drink out of the ponds. The wildlife is currently "protected" under law, but poaching -- primarily of elephants, but also of hippos -- still occurs. (Tourist artifacts of ivory and hippo teeth are sold all over West Africa.) Recently the Burkina government proposed that the Hippo Ponds be established as a biological reserve in UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere system. The National Center of Scientific and Technological Research is hoping to undertake ecological and hydrological studies of the area.

The Hippo Ponds are approximately 65 km (40 mi.) northeast of Bobo-Dioulasso. The first two-thirds of the trip is on a major dirt road that runs from Bobo-Dioulasso to Dédougou, and the last third on a minor dirt road. An extremely faded road

sign in the village of Satiri indicates the turn-off. Last spring, when we had first tried to visit the Hippo Ponds, the minor dirt road was in very bad shape -- a track of thick dust, perhaps 8-10 inches deep. Halfway in, we learned why the road was in this state. Big, double-trailer trucks were hauling out loads of cotton from the village of Bala, and destroying the road. The dust was so deep that it was difficult to drive through -- very reminiscent of driving through deep, powdery snow. As dust was permeating the car, it was also difficult to breathe. So we had turned back.

The end of October we decided to try the trip again. This time, to insure that we would be able to get there, we rented a Land Rover with four other people for the day's excursion. The road was in much better shape than it had been the previous spring, as some road repairs have been done.

The road from Satiri goes past Bala and ends up at the southern end of the Hippo Ponds. Fishermen who live in Bala have a small camp on the edge of the lake. The camp is a base from which they fish in small, flat-bottomed, wooden boats. In addition, the fishermen will also take tourists out in a bigger boat to see the hippopotamuses.



Huts at the fishermen's camp

When we drove past Bala, the road entered the Classified Forest, passing through a twenty-six-year-old teak plantation. After the teak was a fairly dense forest of native species. At the end of the road, we saw a large, bright orange, Mercedes diesel bus. The bus had sand ladders mounted on its side, so it had probably come across the Sahara Desert. Since the bus



The German tour bus

had a German sticker on it, we surmised that it was transporting a tour group from Germany. At the edge of the fisherman's camp was also parked a 4 x 4 van camper.

After our Land Rover was parked and we climbed out, we noticed that the boat was just setting out for the ponds, packed to the gills with the tourists who had just come on the bus. The boat contained twenty or so of them, plus half a dozen boatmen. The second party, of six Europeans, were sitting on some logs, near a fire, awaiting their turn. A forestry agent was sitting under a tree, watching the proceedings.

While waiting to go out in the boat, I talked to the forestry agent. He is the only agent for the entire Classified Forest. Normally a villager from Bala collects fees from the tourists for their boat ride to see the hippos. As the villager had had to go to Bobo for the day, the forestry agent was collecting the fees himself. The Ministry of the Environment and Tourism (MET) charges a fee of 500 francs CFA per person for the boat ride: for each boatload of tourists, the boatmen are collectively paid 500 francs (plus whatever tips their passengers may choose to give them), and the rest of the fees are sent to MET.

I asked the agent if the large tour bus was typical. He said that -- in previous years -- commonly one such bus a week would come during the busy tourist periods of April to May, July to August, and November to January (the peak months being August and December). During the tourist season, people visit the Hippo Ponds virtually every day of the week. At other times of the year, when the visitors are mostly bureaucrats who work in Bobo-Dioulasso, they primarily come on the weekends.



I wandered over to the fire, I discovered what they had been photographing -- two turtles, lying upside down on the rocks next to the fire, having been roasted for someone's lunch.



Roasted turtles

After the first group had disembarked, the second had headed out. Half an hour later they returned: finally, it was our turn.

The tourist boat is a big, shallow, metal, U-shaped craft, allegedly once a lifeboat for an ocean-going vessel. A couple



The tourist boat

of inches of water were in the bilge, but the boat seemed eminently seaworthy. The six of us climbed in and went to stand in the bow, leaning against the sides. The six boatmen filled up the stern. Using long poles, five of them propelled us off the shore and out through a path in the marsh grass. The oldest boatman, however, just sat in the middle of the boat. I wasn't quite sure what his role was -- perhaps he was there to make sure that everything went okay, and that the hippos weren't antagonized.



Poling through the marsh

The marsh seems to be turning into a bog. Although the boat had just made two trips out and back through the channel, the water was already covered with mosses and lily pads again. On the edges of the marsh, a couple of birds with brown bodies, white-and-black heads, and sandpiper-like legs were looking for bugs to eat. Appropriately enough, these birds are called "lily-trotters" (Actophilornia africana).

The boat emerged onto open water and we stopped. Roughly forty yards away were at least five hippos, possibly more. We could just barely see their eyes, ears, and snouts above the surface of the water. As we snapped pictures, the hippos would dive underwater and then pop up again.

After we'd shot a lot of pictures and my roll of black and white film was finished, the boatmen asked if we were ready to return to shore. Figuring that we had seen all that we were going to, we replied that we were. So they poled the boat in a big semi-circular turn, to head back to shore, bringing us



A camera-shy hippo

slightly closer to where the hippos were. One hippo then got up, with its whole head out of the water, and opened its mouth, as if to warn us not to come any closer. Everyone was pleased with the hippos' closing performance, and some of the others got photos. When we got back ashore, we assured the forestry agent that the hippos "had done well".

Based on the number of other tourists there, and my experiences in trying to see wildlife elsewhere in Burkina-Faso, the Hippo Ponds constitute one of the true tourist attractions of the country -- where one can actually be assured of seeing the wildlife that one came to see.

Perhaps reclassifying the Hippo Ponds as a Man and the Biosphere reserve will enable the government to better control use of the area and to better protect the hippos. Recognition of the importance of wildlife as a national resource is growing. During my most recent visit to Ouagadougou, the country's capital, across some major roads were stretched banners proclaiming that wild fauna is part of the "national capital" and urging people to protect wildlife and to stop the traffic in bush meat.

\*

\*

\*

Nonetheless, Burkina-Faso cannot yet put the amount of resources into managing its wildlife reserves that some neighboring countries can. In Togo and the Ivory Coast, for example, the per capita income is higher, so there is more money to promote tourism and to manage wildlife reserves.

Last May we drove from Ouagadougou to Lomé. On our way south through Togo, we went through the National Park of the Keran. Like the National Park of Pô in Burkina-Faso, the Keran Park stretches along a river -- an important wildlife habitat. But there the resemblance between the two parks ends. The Keran is better financed and staffed, and use restrictions are severely enforced. The population density around the park also seems to be lower than that in Burkina-Faso. These factors enhance the abundance of wildlife (as visible from the road).

The main north-south highway in Togo runs along one side of the Keran Park. As a great deal of traffic uses this road, particularly trailer trucks hauling goods from the port of Lomé north into Burkina-Faso and Niger, the government enforces speed limits within the park boundaries to protect the wildlife. For automobiles, the speed limit is 50 km (30 mi.) per hour, and for trucks, less. Game wardens monitor speed through the park with three checkpoints -- one at either end of the park and one in the middle. When we entered the park, we stopped at the first checkpoint and were given a form noting the time we passed. We were told that it should take us 65 minutes to arrive at the next checkpoint -- if we arrived too early, we would have to pay a fine of 25,000 francs CFA (\$60).

Consequently, we took our time going through the park. First we passed through an area with a big swampy marsh to the west, with egrets, herons, and other birds. Nearby was a wart-hog. To the east were grasslands dotted with baboons, near a cluster of trees, and several kinds of antelopes. We then entered a wooded stretch, where a big grey elephant was meandering along the side of the road. We parked the car and I walked down the road a bit, to look at the elephant -- who was now standing under the trees, flapping its ears back and forth, and occasionally spraying water on its back.



Togolese elephant

A man rode up on his bicycle, saw the elephant and turned around, and rode back in the direction in which he had just come. When I returned to the car, he was trying to talk to LeRoy. He was clearly agitated about the elephant. Since he and LeRoy

spoke no common language, it was unclear if he was trying to ask for a ride past the elephant or if he was trying to warn LeRoy that I was being foolish to stand in front of the elephant. He finally took off again, headed back the way he'd originally come, and we drove on past the elephant. When we arrived at the mid-way checkpoint, LeRoy had to explain to the game warden why we were "half an hour late" -- because we'd seen an elephant. In the second stretch, we saw some more birds and antelope, as well as some monkeys. Although it had taken a couple of hours to drive approximately 75 km (45 mi.), we felt well-rewarded.

An accessible park like the Keran, where wildlife are easy to see, is more of a tourist draw than the parks in Burkina-Faso. The Keran is clearly a national priority, and is highlighted as such in tourist promotional materials. Togo does have considerably more tourists visit each year than does Burkina-Faso.<sup>2</sup> Many of these tourists fly into Lomé, where they can stay at beach-front hotels, and then take excursions inland to see mountains, native villages, and wildlife. This diversity of attractions is promoted by the Togo Tourism Board with slogans such as "Africa in Minature".

\*

\*

\*

The number of tourists who visit Burkina-Faso is, nonetheless, significant. A low-cost, non-profit, charter airline, Le Point, offers roundtrip flights from Lyon, France to Ouagadougou. This flight attracts a lot of low-budget travelers to West Africa: some just visit Burkina-Faso, whereas others use Ouaga as a starting or ending point for travels into neighboring countries.

The Burkina government seems to have decided that promotion of tourism is compatible with its development goals. This past spring, for example, Burkina signed an accord with Togo to promote joint tourist tours. The government is trying to encourage the establishment of moderately-priced accommodations throughout the country. Such accommodations would not only enable low-budget tourists, but also Burkinabè themselves, to see the sights of the country.

Although the extent to which tourism actually contributes to developing economies is a hotly debated topic, the experience with Le Point tourists seems to have benefited Burkina-Faso. Rather than taking profits out of the country, Le Point insures that they are reinvested in the local economy. Since Le Point started flying to Ouagadougou in 1980, it has been donating its profits on the Lyon-Ouaga flight to Upper Volta/Burkina-Faso.<sup>3</sup> This past year, for example, Le Point donated 100 million francs CFA (\$250,000) to Sahel 84, a consortium of private voluntary development organizations working in the northern part of the country.

Thus, while development has threatened Burkina's wildlife, the best hope for protecting its wildlife also lies with development. As the standard of living increases for its citizens, Burkina-Faso will better be able to afford to safeguard its faunal resources. In the future, wildlife in Burkina may be less elusive, and "wildlife safaris" may be more rewarding experiences.

Sincerely,

*Paula J. Williams*

Paula J. Williams  
Forest and Society Fellow

NOTES:

1. A few months ago the Safari Restaurant was reopened in a new location, more centrally located between the center of town and the airport. The curfew is now 1 AM, so more people now are dining out. Presumably these two changes have improved the financing supporting the zoo. The Safari Zoo still exists in the same location.
2. According to Africa South of the Sahara 1983-84 (13th Ed., Europa Publications, London), Togo had 117,000 tourist arrivals in 1981, as compared with Upper Volta's 43,724 in 1979. The per capita income for Togo in 1980 was \$410, whereas that for Upper Volta for the same year was \$190.
3. This information on Le Point is discussed in Alan Rake's (ed.) Traveller's Guide to West Africa (IC Magazines Ltd., London, 1983), pp. 26-27.

For more information on birds and snakes found in Burkina-Faso, the following are recommended:

Roman, Benigno, Serpents de Haute-Volta. Ouagadougou: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique, 1980.  
Serle, William, Morel, Gerard J., and Hartwig, Wolfgang, A Field Guide to the Birds of West Africa. London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1977.