

## Omari Ilambu (1959-2018)

*For almost 30 years, Omari Ilambu worked for the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN), the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF). He is remembered here by his former colleagues at WCS.*



Omari Ilambu 2015. Photo © Jonas Abana Eriksson

### A Tribute to a Hugely Respected Congolese Conservationist

It is with deep sadness that we look back on the life of Omer Omari Ilambu, who died at his home after a brief illness in November 2018. Born in Kindu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1959, then still a wildlife-rich area, Omari attended the University of Zaire and graduated with a degree in Biology. In 1991, he started working for the Congolese Institute for Conservation (ICCN – the protected area authority in DRC) in Kundelungu National Park, where his fieldwork included research on cheetahs and ungulates.

In 1994, Omari was seconded to WCS's Grauer's Gorilla Project and worked with a large international field team. For the six years that followed, Omari was based in eastern DRC as coordinator of field studies and surveys in Kahuzi-Biega National Park and Itombwe.

From these years in the field, Omari went to the USA on a Beinecke scholarship and gained a Masters' in Environmental Science at Yale University. His thesis was on the impact of human conflict on the conservation of Grauer's gorilla in Kahuzi-Biega, and he went on to co-author six peer-reviewed papers from his fieldwork in eastern DRC.

On his return home in 2001, Omari was appointed as the WCS-DRC Focal Point in Kinshasa, to liaise with government and civil society partners, and he began to take a close interest in Salonga National Park. Using his experience in the field and in organizing multiple teams in this highly complex country, Omari became the DRC coordinator of the CITES-MIKE (Monitoring of the Illegal Killing of Elephants) program and surveys of Salonga. It should be remembered that Salonga National Park is the size of Belgium, without roads and, at least then, no communications network.

After the successful completion of those surveys, Omari was recruited by WWF-DRC. He managed the Salonga project between 2005 and 2011, before becoming their Senior Technical Advisor for Protected Areas. That role allowed him to visit many of the protected areas in DRC and to gain experience in organizing a wide-ranging, multi-site program. This served him well, because in 2013 Omari returned to WCS—this time as Inventory and Monitoring coordinator, then as Conservation Director, and finally, in 2016, WCS Chief of Party for the USAID CARPE program, one of the largest regional biodiversity conservation programs operating in Central Africa.

Omari spent significant periods of time in other countries, learning and practicing conservation (three years in the USA, a year in Uganda, three months in Zambia), but always returned to his beloved DRC to better help the astonishing wildlife of his homeland. Throughout this long trajectory of increasing responsibility for conservation projects in the region, Omari was always incredibly humble and dignified, possessing a great humanity. His smile lit up his surroundings and everyone he came into contact with became a better person. Omari was respected by the entire conservation community in DRC, and he always pushed for young Africans to become conservationists, whether academically or as practitioners, and to take the same road he did to save the wildlife on his continent. He was known as “the baobab” by many of his African colleagues, because of his physical stature, his maturity, and his wisdom.

Omari is survived by his wife and four children, and by hundreds of friends and colleagues who will never forget him. May the earth rest lightly upon you, Omari.

*Fiona Maisels<sup>1,2</sup>, Liz Williamson<sup>2</sup>, Robert Mwinyihali<sup>1</sup>, Emma Stokes<sup>1</sup>, and Richard Tshombe<sup>1</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup>Global Conservation Program, Wildlife Conservation Society, Bronx, New York, USA*

*<sup>2</sup>University of Stirling, Stirling, UK*



Omari Ilambu in Kahuzi-Biega National Park (KBNP), DRC, with Jean-Paul Kibambe (left) and Richard Tshombe (right) and a Grauer's gorilla, 2014 © WCS.

## **Omari Ilambu: A Conservation Legacy**

I worked with Omari Ilambu on different projects from 1995 through 2005. It was a key decade of his professional development that included major surveys of the Itombwe massif and Salonga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Omari understood that conservation in DRC had to be rooted in the field: seeded by discovery and nourished by the engagement of the local people living there. But he also knew that political figures, security agents and traditional and administrative authorities, who held sway over the land at a distance, also had to be brought on board for any major project to be undertaken, and before any conservation action could be put in place. Omari's great contribution came from his capacity to shrewdly and effectively span this range of players and produce results. His genius was in knowing what he needed and what he could get from each, and to bring these together to achieve a significant scientific program. And he did it all with creative aplomb and great humour.

Omari's field leadership was brilliantly deployed during fieldwork in Itombwe in 1996—the first major expedition that he led. Itombwe was a mysterious place that biologists had not traversed since the late 1950s when George Schaller crossed the massif on the meagre network of existing mining roads to inquire about the region's gorillas. Alexander Prigogine, a colonial mining agent and ardent ornithologist, had produced a stunning collection of birds that revealed the phenomenal diversity of the region's avifauna. But trained Congolese hunters and collectors provided most of his specimens, and Prigogine spent little time in the field. No field biologists had reached some of the more remote areas or spent much time in the massif in the decades since independence.

The region's mystique was enhanced by rumours that it remained a refuge for a little-known association of rebels, led by a certain Laurent Kabila, former comrade of no less than Che Guevara. The rebel stronghold was in a region named Hewa Bora "Good Air" but in 1996, no one could give us their precise location. Hanging over our preparations for the field were the lingering memories of the daring kidnapping in 1975 of several American researchers and graduate students from Jane Goodall's camp in Gombe, Tanzania, on the opposite bank of Lake Tanganyika and bringing the hostages at gunpoint back across the lake to Hewa Bora.

Omari recognized the challenge of working in the region but was not to be put off. He already knew, or sensed, enough to suspect that the rebels were unlikely to be a significant threat. But he left nothing to chance. Our first meetings were with military and information service authorities, and after listening to Omari's explanation of the importance of the massif for the conservation of great apes, the Colonel agreed to our request for authorization to travel there.

Omari and I planned an ambitious follow-up expedition with field teams that included international experts on birds, nocturnal primates and plants, as well as the customary large mammal transect teams, focused on apes. Omari had the insight to include a dedicated outreach leader who moved ahead of the mobile field teams to prepare villages, some of which had never been visited by foreigners, for our arrival.

Over three months we explored and surveyed much of the 5,000-km<sup>2</sup> core of the massif's ruggedly varied and stunningly beautiful montane landscapes. Expert field leaders, good preparations, and good luck led to some major discoveries. These included Tom Butynski's rediscovery of Prigogine's owl. Near the same site, Tom photographed an unknown galago, which has just recently been seen again in the Nyungwe National Park, Rwanda, and is now thought to be a new species. The field teams found gorillas in about half of the areas where Schaller had seen them nearly 40 years earlier and identified two new areas where gorillas had not previously been documented.

Following the expedition, Omari and I set up shop in Bukavu to begin the crucial step of turning field discoveries into conservation outcomes. If the fieldwork was challenging, the conservation follow-up proved to be even more so. Thinly veiled competing interests questioned the expedition's recommendations and even results. Omari stepped into the leadership for this phase as effectively as he had led the fieldwork. By the time we stepped away from the Itombwe, we had mobilized a Kivu-based working group to lead the next steps of reserve gazettement.

In October of 1996, rebels based in Itombwe and under the leadership of Laurent Kabila, initiated an armed movement that led to the collapse and replacement of the Mobutu regime in the following year. Omari and I later wondered how it was that we had crossed the very region where the rebellion was initiated, and we had not recognized what was afoot. We had in fact noted that we saw few young men in the settlements and cattle camps we visited, and had even asked local people about that, but were told that all the boys were off in Rwanda "training to be school teachers." Omari and I shared the laugh. How easily we had been duped.

Omari moved on from Itombwe to work on surveys in the Salonga, and others picked up on what he had initiated. Omari was too good at conservation politics to remain based in the field, and he moved to ever larger and more complex projects that took him into higher, more strategic roles in conservation.

During our last conversation, Omari said that he was making progress in his new posting, despite political and administrative constraints. He regretted that he was no longer in the field, but he had moved on. In the long run, Omari's legacy will be that he showed what could be accomplished for conservation in DRC by the approach that he so brilliantly deployed in Itombwe. Omari was a leader in showing that conservation objectives could be pursued in zones of political strain and dubious security by putting high level capacity in the field to make and publish the discoveries, and associate this with political, administrative and cultural support from local to national scale.

In 2016, DRC's eighth national park, was established in the Lomami Basin, a gazettement process from the bottom up, punctuated by major discoveries of unanticipated fauna and flora, that continue to the present. The process that led to the creation of Lomami National Park was built on Omari's legacy. And I am certain there are other sites that can follow.

*John A. Hart, Lukuru Wildlife Foundation, Kinshasa, DRC*