

Research Article

The Practices of Eco-guards During Patrols in Kundelungu National Park in Haut-Katanga

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Abstract

The protection of natural resources in protected areas is characterized, on the one hand, by the application of legal instruments for environmental protection, and on the other hand, it reveals the hidden side of operations within the various organizations involved. From a criminological perspective, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the practices carried out by eco-guards during patrols in Kundelungu National Park (KNP), based on an immersion in the daily lives of eco-guards at the Katwe station, which houses the park's headquarters. The analysis of the collected data reveals two categories of field practices: so-called formal practices and informal practices. These two categories illustrate how field actors can carry out actions tinged with both formal and informal elements, while remaining within their daily duties, thus forming a complex reality of field operations. These practices call into question the effectiveness of public policy on biodiversity protection in the DRC, as outlined in Law No. 14/003 of February 11, 2014, concerning the protection and conservation of nature, as well as the efficiency of the work performed by eco-guards in protected areas. They also raise deeper questions about the challenges and issues surrounding the management of the nature conservation sector, biodiversity, and personnel administration in parks across the DRC.

Keywords

Practices, Eco Guards, Patrols, Kundelungu

1. Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is often referred to as a geological scandal due to the exceptional wealth and variety of its natural resources. However, alongside this mining heritage, the country also houses remarkable reserves of animal and plant species, some of which are rare on a global scale, found in its national parks and other protected areas. To ensure the conservation and increased protection of this biodiversity, specialized services have been established in the DRC. It is within this framework that the role of the eco-guard, as an actor responsible for monitoring

protected areas, has drawn our attention, particularly in its functioning within the Kundelungu National Park, located in the Haut-Katanga province.

It was during this stay that two fundamental observations emerged: First, during patrols, the eco-guards filled out service reports regarding wildlife observations. However, the information reported no longer corresponded to the reality on the ground. Secondly, some eco-guards consumed the carcasses or fragments of meat from animals that had been killed or abandoned by fleeing poachers.

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These remains should have been handed over to the Katwe station headquarters for incineration or conservation for study, according to the procedures. The observations made in the PNK raise issues, as they affect the work of the eco-guards. Some of these are formalized (institutional procedures), while others fall within informal dynamics. To clarify the observed reality, we set out to answer the following research question: What are the practices surrounding eco-guard patrols at the PNK?

Our analysis starts from the empirical data to identify the practices observed during eco-guard patrols in this park. Furthermore, some of the problematic practices observed seem to represent one of the weaknesses in the management of these protected areas. These practices are particularly at odds with the applicable legal framework, which includes the following texts:

- 1) The ordinance-law n° 69-041 of August 22, 1969, relating to the conservation of nature,
- 2) The ordinance n° 67-514 of December 1, 1967, creating the Institute of National Parks of Congo,
- 3) The note n° 1335/ICCN/DS/DG/2003 concerning the respect for the Kundelungu Park and its adjacent areas.

Titled "Practices Surrounding Eco-Guard Patrols in the Kundelungu National Park in Haut-Katanga," this study aims to provide a detailed description and a deep understanding of the aforementioned practices during eco-guard patrols in the PNK.

Drawing from field data from observations and interviews, this study employs thematic analysis to make sense of the data collected. The choice of this form of analysis is justified by its relevance in faithfully presenting the accounts from semi-structured interviews.

Our approach is both qualitative and inductive: qualitative in that we start from empirical data and aim to let the interviewed social actors express themselves freely, and inductive because we explored the reality without formulating hypotheses beforehand, basing our analysis on the actors' discourses to arrive at a descriptive and comprehensive analysis of the problematic practices surrounding eco-guard patrols in the PNK.

2. Literature Review

Kazaba and Al. [1] show in their survey the existence of human-wildlife conflict around the outskirts of Kundelungu National Park. In this study, most of the species present are subject to subsistence hunting and are considered harmful to crops. According to this research, a strategy involving the communities surrounding the park should be considered in order to achieve better conservation outcomes.

Bruce Kinloch [2] recounts his years spent as a Game Warden in East Africa (notably in Uganda, Tanzania, and Malawi). He describes life in the field, daily patrols, and conflicts with poachers. But also relationships with local communities whose fields ("shamba" in Swahili) are some-

times destroyed by wildlife (elephants, buffaloes, etc.). Kinloch emphasizes the complexity of his role: protecting wildlife while "safeguarding the livelihoods" of villagers.

He explains how he and his teams of rangers organized surveillance patrols, tracked animal movements, posted lookouts, confronted crop-raiding elephants, and tried to deter poaching despite limited resources. He also mentions the difficult logistics: patrols on foot, defensive weapons, deterrence tactics, the use of local information, and decision-making under pressure. The work gives a highly "on-the-ground" view of the ranger's job: not only as a defender of animals, but also as a mediator between nature and people.

In his study, the author shows how eco-guards adapt their strategies depending on the type of threat (wildlife vs. poaching). He illustrates the constant tension between conservation and local development—a dilemma at the heart of the rangers' role. The study also provides concrete accounts of patrols, which can serve as a qualitative basis for understanding operational challenges (terrain, resources, and security).

Richard Leakey and Virginia Morell [3] recount Leakey's leadership of the Kenya Wildlife Service in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Faced with a massive wave of elephant poaching, Leakey restructured the institution, replaced corrupt rangers, equipped eco-guards—including with semi-automatic weapons—and launched more aggressive patrols to deter criminal networks.

His book describes the risks taken by rangers: ambushes, violent retaliation by poachers, internal corruption, and even insufficient resources to equip all patrol units. Leakey also discusses ivory seizure operations, media strategies (such as the burning of confiscated ivory), and the political and international pressure to ban the ivory trade. He explains how, during patrols, ranger ethics, training, and discipline had to be strengthened to withstand highly organized poaching threats.

He describes the professionalization of rangers: greater seriousness, organization, discipline, and transparency. He illustrates how patrols can serve as a strategic. Deterrent tool (and not just a reactive one). He shows the logistical challenges (funding, training, weaponry) and institutional challenges (corruption, politics) that eco-guards face on the ground. He also highlights the interdependence between field patrols, conservation policy, and international pressure (for example, regarding the ivory trade).

The studies mentioned above show that eco-guards are not merely "guardians of nature": they operate within a very complex social, political, and economic context. In both narratives, patrols are not purely technical, but lie at the heart of a broader struggle (against poachers, but also against poverty and corruption).

Kinloch offers a deeply field-based, intimate perspective focused on daily patrols and coexistence with rural communities. Leakey, for his part, offers a more institutional and strategic view: he shows how ranger management (recruit-

ment, arming, and discipline) is transformed on a large scale to make patrols more effective.

3. Methodology

This research follows a qualitative approach [4], insofar as we seek to understand practices based on the accounts of the actors involved in eco-guard patrols in Kundelungu National Park and through their interactions. This research adopts a qualitative approach because we aim to understand practices through the discourse of the actors engaged in eco-guard patrols in Kundelungu National Park and through their interactions.

The qualitative approach goes hand in hand with an inductive process [5]. This study is grounded in an inductive approach. The choice of this method is logical because we did not begin with hypotheses to test or confirm in the field. We seek instead to start from the actors' own accounts in order to understand the meanings they attribute to practices during eco-guard patrol operations in Kundelungu National Park.

It is the researcher's responsibility to construct the field of study that will constitute the framework of the research—that is, to define it, delimit it, and characterize it intellectually [6]. With the aim of describing and understanding practices during eco-guard patrols in Kundelungu National Park, our field site was the park itself, located in the territory of Kasenga, 180 km from the city of Lubumbashi, specifically its integral section at the Katwe station, the park's management office, as well as the eco-guards' headquarters and command center.

The analytical field corresponded to the academic research internship period, which took place from May 10 to June 10, 2019. The month of June was particularly suitable for completing our research. Finally, the delimitation of the field—substantial in nature—corresponds to the nature of the elements studied: the actors' practices (understanding being centered on the actors, their daily lives, their perceptions, and their living or working environment). From a temporal perspective, the collection of empirical data was carried out over a period of thirty days.

Kundelungu National Park being vast, this study focused on the integral zone, one of the two areas that make up the park. More precisely, the research was conducted at the Katwe station, which serves as the headquarters of the park sector bearing the same name. It is the main base of the eco-guards, the seat of the Kundelungu National Park administration, and the location of nearby patrol posts.

Regarding the selection of participants, it is important to note that in qualitative studies we select a limited number of individuals. Statistical representativeness is therefore not required. The criterion that determines the value of the sample is its adequacy with the research objectives, taking into account principles of qualitative sampling—particularly diversification and saturation. To apply these criteria, we contacted participants while ensuring that no important situation was overlooked and that saturation was reached.

From this perspective, individuals were not chosen according to the numerical importance [7] of the category they represent, but rather for their exemplary characteristics.

Selection was carried out based on criteria we had established, namely: social status, position held, seniority, and age. Thus, we conducted interviews with different eco-guards assigned to the surveillance of Kundelungu National Park.

According to [8], through various negotiations and adjustments, the participant chooses a place he considers safer or neutral—neither professional nor family-related—where he can express himself freely. Such places include: a house, a quiet restaurant, an open maintained space next to a parish, a small hut adjoining a property, a small bar, or any other location away from the gaze of colleagues. In such environments, the discourse is free.

At the outset, entry into the field for data collection required certain preliminary steps, such as presenting administrative and academic documents: the internship assignment letter and the research form, which served as required access documents for conducting on-site investigation. As interns, we contacted several actors, including eco-guards and wardens responsible for the management of Kundelungu National Park.

Following the letter issued by the School of Criminology recommending the internship and addressed to the Provincial Directorate of ICCN (Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation) Katanga, which manages the protected areas of Greater Katanga, the latter, at our request, assigned us to the headquarters of Kundelungu National Park located in Katwe, the command post of the eco-guards, in order to facilitate the collection of data.

Table 1. Summary Description of Participants.

Sex	Number	Age Range	Total
Men	12	18–60 years	17 participants
Women	5	18–60 years	

4. Results

The 17 participants spoke to us about various themes from which we drew answers to our main concern: gaining a different understanding of the practices of eco-guards during patrols in Kundelungu National Park.

4.1. Missions and Organization of Eco-guard Patrols in Kundelungu National Park

The eco-guard patrol is a mobile surveillance activity in the park whose objectives include the following surveillance missions:

4.1.1. Ensuring Integrity

This consists of:

- 1) Combating illegal intrusions,
- 2) Identifying illegal activities, and
- 3) Deterring communities from cultivating or practicing poaching, as well as destroying wild crops or flora.

4.1.2. Bio Monitoring

Monitoring the evolving trends of different species, habitats, and threats; impacts linked to climate change; different bushfire regimes; as well as socio-economic aspects and ecosystem services (provisioning, regulating, cultural, and supporting services).

Bio monitoring is carried out through observation, meaning the collection of the following data: nests, dung, calls, carcasses, tracks including footprints, browsing signs, and food remains (particularly for important species such as antelopes, warthogs, kob, etc.).

4.1.3. Habitat Restoration

Habitat management consists of operations aimed at restoring a habitat to its original or natural state. In Kundelungu National Park, habitat management mainly involves controlled burning of dry grasses so that fresh green grass can grow—preferred food for herbivores. These operations are conducted mainly on the plateau during the dry season [9].

4.2. Types and Organization of Eco-guard Patrols

Eco-guards conduct different types of surveillance patrols. There are round-trip patrols and tent-based patrols, the latter involving a significant number of agents deployed inside the protected area for an average duration of about ten days.

The typology of patrols is specified in the surveillance standards document. Indeed, the following types are distinguished:

4.2.1. Round-trip Patrols

Round-trip patrols are organized at the various patrol posts and stations, with an average of three guards assigned to cover a specific area following the routes and instructions written on the service bulletin. These patrols are conducted daily and cover small areas located near the guards' duty stations.

4.2.2. Tent-based Patrols

In order to cover large areas of the Park, managers plan patrols lasting from two to several days, during which guards camp or conduct rounds inside the forest, targeting zones known to be used by poachers. These zones are selected based on investigative information collected by different persons in regular contact with the park managers or with the guards (local informants), or based on previous patrol coverage.

The primary areas of intervention for park surveillance agents are the territories inside the park. However, when necessary, unannounced checks may also be carried out around the periphery of protected areas to combat the illicit trafficking of natural resources that may originate from the park.

4.3. Organization of Eco-guard Patrols

Patrol organization in Kundelungu National Park is considered a priority activity by park managers, with the goal of reducing illegal activities that can lead to the depletion of wildlife populations. To deter poachers, managers organize both round-trip patrols and tent-based patrols from different patrol posts. The organization of surveillance operations follows the steps below:

4.3.1. Planning Eco-guard Patrols

The mission objective is clearly defined by the Coordinator of the mobile brigade or the Sector Chief to the mission leader or the entire team during a briefing. Orders for the operation are communicated to the agents during this exchange. The mission's purpose and the means to be deployed are identified beforehand. Technical and material preparation of the mission is then initiated to achieve the intended objectives.

The mission is prepared and executed according to the method: "personnel, weapons, uniform/individual or collective equipment, radio/communication, food/rations, command/organization, schedule/date, starting route, end date, and appointment time and place for the vehicles forming the group."

4.3.2. Execution of Missions

The composition of surveillance teams depends on the mission's objective and duration. Each team is led by a mission chief who ensures that the mission's purpose is achieved by issuing the appropriate orders to carry out necessary field operations. He also ensures the collection—using tablets and GPS—of information on the patrol and indicators of aggression against natural resources in the protected area.

4.3.3. Mission Report

Upon returning from the mission, the mission leader gives a debriefing to their hierarchical superior. Then, the data collected in the field are transferred and archived in the SMART database. These data are later visualized to better understand the report and guide subsequent analysis. Finally, the mission leader produces a mission report, which is archived and used for planning future patrols.

4.4. Eco-guards Practices During Patrols in Kundelungu National Park

From our observations, two types of practices emerge

among patrolling eco-guards: *formal practices and informal practices*.

4.4.1. Formal Practices of Eco-guards During Patrols in Kundelungu National Park

- 1) The practice of “kuyaja mikanda ya patrouille” or patrol data collection

The expression “kuyaja mikanda ya patrouille” is a Swahili term used by eco-guards that means “*filling in patrol documents*” in French. They use this term to refer to “*patrol data collection*.” According to the data collected in the field, patrol data collection is a practice carried out during patrols to help the hierarchy determine where upcoming patrols should be directed—identifying the most vulnerable areas to prioritize. It also allows the monitoring of evolving trends in species, habitats, threats, impacts of climate change, bushfire regimes, as well as socio-economic aspects and ecosystem services (provisioning, regulating, cultural, supporting).

The brigade chief at Katwe station, Eco-guard MUKEBO, explained it as follows:

“During patrols, we are always instructed to collect patrol data focusing on the following themes: waypoints (location), mammals, illegal activities, reptiles, birds, habitats, and other ecological features such as rivers, caves, cultural sites, and information on the limits of the protected area, such as signs and boundary markers. All observations are recorded on pre-designed sheets. Each must be geo-referenced using a GPS. Considering movement speed in the forest, every 30 minutes must be documented. Other points to record include: start of the patrol (daily), end of the patrol (daily), start and end of breaks, each change of transportation mode (e.g., boat, vehicle, on foot), and patrol camps.”

It should be noted that data collection is the *main practice* supporting the nature conservation policy in Kundelungu National Park. In the organizational dimension [10], the eco-guard brigade is considered a structural and collective form of rational action, having the same properties and dimensions as the global system in which it is integrated. Within the institution of Kundelungu National Park, this brigade is a structure of rational collective action whose responsibilities include patrol data collection—rigorously applying the patroller’s technical sheet, identifying all evidence of human-caused aggression on the site, recording all observed aggressions, taking GPS readings to geolocate the area precisely, and observing traces and signs of animal presence. These responsibilities align with the park’s primary objective: *nature protection and conservation*.

- 2) The practice of “kutshoma mayani” or burning dry grasses

The practice “kutshoma mayani” means “*setting dry grass on fire*.” This is a practice we observed among the eco-guards. On orders from their hierarchy, they burn dry grasses to eliminate them so that young green grasses can grow, as these are the preferred food of herbivores. These operations take

place mainly on the high plateau during the dry season.

The patrol post chief of Kabokoy, Eco-guard Malinga, told us:

“The job of an eco-guard is not limited to park surveillance; it also involves participating in habitat restoration. Here in Kundelungu National Park, habitat management consists essentially of burning dry grasses so that young grasses may grow. This operation is very important because the survival of herbivores depends directly on it, and that of carnivores indirectly.”

According to Scieur [11], in organizational theory, the eco-guard brigade can be understood as a structural and collective form of rational action with the same properties as the global system it belongs to. Here, we note that within Kundelungu National Park, the brigade is a rational collective structure whose responsibilities include active participation in park management operations—one of which is habitat management, including the burning of dry grasses.

Furthermore, as technical agents, all personnel employed by the Institute under a work contract and operating within a conservation, protection, inspection, management, tourism supervision, or rational resource use program—including wardens and eco-guards—are recognized as having these responsibilities (ICCN Personnel Statute, p. 7).

This practice is very important for ecological balance. In a protected area with wildlife populations, carnivores depend on herbivores; if herbivores struggle to find food, the consequences will affect the entire ecosystem.

- 3) The practice “ku bamba ba infracteurs” or “arresting offenders”

This activity is among the main responsibilities of Eco guards, meaning the protection of the park against all forms of human-induced aggression. Arrests within Kundelungu National Park during Eco guard patrols are carried out in accordance with Law No. 14/003 of 11 February 2014 on nature conservation, which defines the offenses punishable by the conservator.

Understood as a formal practice, one of the Eco guards, Mumbere, expressed it as follows:

“We Eco guards play a dual role, that of the military and that of the police, by protecting the integrity of the park and ensuring compliance with the laws within it. During patrols, if we find someone violating the law on the protection and conservation of nature, he is immediately arrested and brought before the conservator, who is an OPJ (judicial police officer) with limited jurisdiction in matters of nature protection and conservation.”

Article 14 of this law [12] states that: “Subject to the exceptions provided for by this law or by texts establishing an integral reserve, the following are prohibited in integral reserves:

To remove, hunt, fish, capture, harass or deliberately kill specimens of protected species;

To intentionally disturb these species, especially during periods of reproduction, dependence, hibernation or migra-

tion;

To destroy, damage, remove or collect their eggs, or alter their position;

To deteriorate or destroy breeding sites, resting areas or any natural habitat where these species live at any stage of their biological cycle;

To possess, transport, exchange, sell or buy, offer or give away specimens or any part of these species taken from the wild;

To possess, sell, buy or transport any product whose packaging or advertisement claims to contain specimens of protected species;

To display such specimens in public places.

To fly an aircraft at an altitude below 300 meters.

To cut, uproot, or intentionally destroy specimens of threatened plant species in the wild;

To possess, transport, sell or buy such plant species taken from nature;

To intentionally deteriorate or destroy habitats in which the presence of these plant species is established."

Viewed as a security mechanism for the park, this falls within an organizational framework guided by Eco guards. Moreover, the Eco guard unit functions as an organization that adheres to institutional values, since all their activities are dictated by the 2014 law on the protection and conservation of nature; this security mechanism is therefore regulatory. In this sense, the unit acts both as an institution and an organization.

4) The practice "ku pomona ma miteko" or "destroying traps"

Although rudimentary, this practice is among the most dangerous. Poachers can set dozens of traps in a single day, endangering many species, and the traps are often placed in concealed areas, making them difficult to detect.

Eco guard Kisseba explained it to us as follows:

"For poachers, setting traps remains the least expensive method, and due to the scarcity of big game, it is also the most effective way to catch small mammals and birds. It is also a hunting method that requires great discretion—no noise or gunfire—which makes it hard to detect. Here in the park, we are multitasking. During patrols, if we come across a trap, we are obliged to destroy it, regardless of the type of trap, because we are here to protect the animals. If we do not do this, animals may be caught and killed, since trapping is the method most used by poachers."

This testimony implicitly informs us that although poachers sometimes possess firearms, they rely heavily on traps, which remain the most commonly used method because it is inexpensive, accessible, discreet, and easy to set.

From this perspective, we understand how important it is for the conservator to emphasize de-trapping operations or the systematic destruction of traps. Traps represent a major threat to nature conservation in this protected area. Indeed, from our observations during patrols in areas farther from the Katwe station—such as around the Lufutishi River on the Katofyo road—traps are too numerous to count; within a

one-kilometer radius, one may encounter a hundred traps as well as nets used to capture large birds such as guinea fowl.

4.4.2. Informal Practices During Ecoguard Patrols in Kundelungu National Park

This section aims to present the informal practices observed during ecoguard patrols in Kundelungu National Park. Four types of informal practices were identified. Note that the names originate from natural language categories, and their meanings were clarified during interviews with different actors involved in ecoguard patrols.

1) The practice "Iyi njo bana turipiyaka" — "That's why we are paid" / "Exaggeration of observation data"

The expression "iyi njo bana turipiyaka" is Swahili for "That's why we are paid." It refers to the practice observed during patrols in Kundelungu National Park involving the false completion of patrol forms regarding wildlife observations. This consists of inflating the number of wildlife sightings to highlight the importance of ecoguards' work by making it appear that many animals were observed—even when this is not the case. The goal is to meet the expectation of having a minimum number of observations recorded in the service log.

Ecoguard Sanza described this practice as follows:

"Patrols today are very different from those in the past. Today there are many things to report on documents, beyond the simple surveillance done in earlier times. When we return from patrols without having noted many wildlife observations, our superiors think we are not doing our job properly. That's why, when we patrol areas with few animals or where sightings are rare—and since we are instructed to report something at least every thirty minutes—when we find ourselves in such a situation, we resort to falsifying the wildlife observation records."

According to the data collected in the field, this practice is used by ecoguards in order to enhance the value of their profession.

From the analysis of this testimony, a reality becomes clear regarding how observations are reported by ecoguards in Kundelungu National Park: given the scarcity of wildlife—despite ongoing park rehabilitation—and the pressure from their hierarchy, which no longer tolerates negligence during patrols aimed at minimizing or eliminating illegal activities, ecoguards feel obliged to inflate wildlife observations.

Under such pressure, ecoguards, wishing to keep their jobs, resort to this practice which, in their view, reinforces the value of their work. When they return to headquarters at the Katwe station or when they submit patrol reports from the field stations, their superiors feel proud when numerous wildlife observations are recorded.

2) The practice "Avantage ya terrain" or "the advantage of the field" / self-appropriation of poachers' belongings

The practice known as "avantage ya terrain" ("the advantage of the field"), according to field data, refers to a sit-

uation in which actors take advantage of patrols as an opportunity to help themselves to seized items.

Mr. Tumala, chief of a patrol post who, before the interview, did not want his real name or the post he supervises to appear in our work, explained to us:

“You know, we are soldiers because we carry weapons, and like any soldier, beyond the profession itself, patrols offer certain advantages. During arrests here in the park, we seize certain belongings from offenders, most of whom are poachers. This is Congo; not all seized objects reach the headquarters. Anything that can be useful to us—money, boots, machetes—we keep, and whatever does not interest us, we take to headquarters.”

Ecoguard Manone added the following:

“You know, provision of field equipment is not regular here. This is why, during our patrols, we do our best to catch offenders—this gives us an extra reason. We seize their belongings and use them, and this helps us save on certain small expenses, because if you don't know, we earn a miserable salary while having major responsibilities. Most of us are married and fathers of several children.”

The ecoguard, as an actor, is not someone devoid of initiative. Nor is he acting in a posture of automatism that implies performing actions without the involvement of will—in other words, blind obedience to formal organizational rules. Instead, he operates as an actor for whom the constraints of the organizational context force detours (...) obliging him to cheat with his own objectives or “bend” to the needs of his personality.

This reality—taking advantage of patrols to equip oneself, thus treating patrols as an opportunity—resembles the idea of “managing demonstrations as a livelihood,” described by Kayimbo Kabanda Adrien in his thesis on how public demonstrations are managed by the police in the city of Lubumbashi. His analysis shows how managing demonstrations becomes a source of income for police officers.

It should be noted that, due to the lack of regular supply of equipment, ecoguards use their presence in the field—patrols—to compensate for missing items such as boots, lighters, etc. At the same time, they also consider patrols as a livelihood. During arrests, offenders are stripped of everything they have on them; and when poachers flee, they usually abandon many items. Ecoguards sort through what may be useful to them, and deliver the rest to their headquarters.

3) The practice “Tuna fika mu parc” (“we have arrived in the park”) / consumption of animals killed by poachers

This practice consists of ecoguards deviating from the rules and instructions of their institution by consuming the remains or carcasses of animals killed by poachers who flee, abandoning them for fear of being caught. The rule, however, is that these remains must be taken to headquarters to be burned.

On this, ecoguard Malango told us:

“My brother, put yourself in our place. Today, a park ranger no longer has the right to kill even a mouse in this

park—otherwise it's straight to Kipushi prison. And here our food ration consists only of salted fish (bitoyo), and if it changes at all, it's maybe tiny fish. Life in this park is not easy, as the market closest to the Katwe station—where our camp is located—is about fifty kilometers away. And we don't have a salary that would allow us to make that trip for supplies. This is why patrols give us an opportunity to eat meat when we come across a poachers' camp that has been abandoned as they flee.”

In response to whether they are aware that ethically it is not good for a ranger to consume the meat of species they work tirelessly to protect, ecoguard Kipasú replied:

“Sir, we know it's not good for an ecoguard to get used to eating the meat of the species he is supposed to protect, because we all know that habit becomes nature. By eating them, we would always feel the desire to eat this or that species, which could become a serious danger for these animals. That is why our superiors forbid this practice, which in recent years has been considered internal poaching. But what can we do after spending weeks and weeks eating salted fish? Once the opportunity arises, we take advantage, and we keep it secret among those who participated in the patrol.”

From the analysis of these statements, many realities emerge in the daily life of ecoguards assigned to surveillance in Kundelungu National Park: insufficient salaries despite minor improvements, a lack of pay for new recruits, a monotonous food supply consisting solely of fish—these are issues that deserve attention.

There is indeed a paradox: these agents are entrusted with protecting immensely valuable national heritage while living in indescribable poverty—monotonous supplies, no guaranteed access to medical care, no decent housing, and unemployment among their children... These poor conditions make them vulnerable and unable to fulfil their mission properly, predisposing them to abuses.

4) The practice “Ashi kapimake tena” (“may he never dare again”) / terrorizing poachers

According to our empirical data, the practice “ashi kapimake tena”, which means “may he never dare again,” is carried out by ecoguards to prevent offenders—mostly poachers—from reoffending. This is done by terrorizing them during arrests, firing bursts into the air or near them to instill great fear of the park and of the ecoguards.

Regarding this practice, ecoguard Mupelambi stated:

“These days, it has become rare to see a poacher reoffend, because they know that the team currently in charge of surveillance does not mess around. What used to hurt us most was when poachers, once released and back in their villages, spoke disrespectfully about ecoguards, beating their chests and saying that we don't scare them and that we can't do anything to them because we are just civilians, even though we carry guns. All this because we had long been too soft with them. This is why we adopted this method: once we chase them down and control them, we

fire bursts of gunshots next to them or into the air to frighten them. It often happens that some wet themselves from fear, and then they either go to prison or flee, terrified.”

The ecoguard, as an actor, is not devoid of initiative. Nor is he a passive executor of movements dictated from outside, as determinism would imply. Instead, he is an agent with strategies to bypass institutional constraints [13], to innovate, to cheat with his own objectives, or to adapt them to the needs of his personality.

This reflects the kind of power defined [14] as the “capacity to exert influence over others and over social situations despite their resistance.” Patrols reveal this power by granting ecoguards leverage over interactions with offenders in the park.

In reaction to the disrespectful remarks poachers make once released and back in their villages, ecoguards, when face-to-face with offenders in the park, seek by all means to show them that they are the ones in control.

5. Conclusion

At the end of this study, which focused on the practices of eco-guard patrols in the Kundelungu National Park [15], we provide a descriptive analysis based on field realities, examining the practices observed around eco-guard patrol operations in the park [16].

After interpreting the empirical data, it becomes clear that patrol eco-guards mobilize both formal [17], and informal practices in the exercise of their profession. Among the formal practices, we can mention “ku yaja mikanda ya patrouille” or “inflating patrol data,” the practice of “ku tshoma mayani” or “burning dry grass,” the practice of “ku bamba ba infracteur” or “arresting offenders,” as well as “ku pomona miteko” or “destroying traps.”

Illustratively, the informal practices observed and employed by patrol eco-guards include “inflating false data,” “self-appropriation of items abandoned by poachers,” “intimidation of poachers,” and “consumption of animals killed by poachers.”

Alongside the official norms governing patrol eco-guards, other practices are established by field actors themselves. For these actors, such practices complement their work in maintaining the viability of Kundelungu National Park. This reality brings us to another interpretation: beyond the official rules designed to regulate order within a group of actors, other norms emerge and create an internal balance within the group, allowing it to function effectively and achieve its objectives.

As social actors, eco-guards—beyond the norms that govern their work—also organize themselves according to a dynamic logic, as demonstrated by the field data collected.

Abbreviations

CINC Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation

KNP Kundelungu National Park

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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