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## Press release

# Okapis in danger

## Journalists report on attack at the Okapi Wildlife Reserve in DR Congo

Zoo Berlin has been supporting the Okapi Conservation Project for more than 30 years in an effort to protect the mysterious “forest giraffe” and its native habitat in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo). But this task remains a challenge, as civil unrest in the region has drastic consequences for the efforts of on-site nature conservationists. The savage rebel groups that operate in this part of DR Congo are financed primarily through poaching and illegal gold mining. By setting up okapi conservation stations in occupied areas, project workers make it harder for the rebels to conduct their illegal business. But these actions have consequences. Back in June 2012, Mai-Mai rebels committed a revenge attack on the Okapi Conservation Project headquarters and the nearby village of Epulu. The attack left six people and all of the centre’s 14 okapis dead. The centre was destroyed, equipment and medicine were stolen, and several people were kidnapped from the village.

Another attack was made on the Okapi Wildlife Reserve in July 2017. This time, unidentified attackers targeted a camp within the reserve that housed a group of ICCN rangers and three foreign journalists – two Dutch and one American. The journalists were there to gather material for a documentary about the dangers faced by the okapi reserve and its rangers, who risk their lives every day to protect these rare creatures. Five of the rangers were killed in the attack, while eight managed to escape along with the three journalists. Shortly before World Okapi Day on 18 October, the journalists published an article in British newspaper *The Guardian* describing their experiences: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/04/the-day-we-witnessed-wildlife-rangers-being-gunned-down-in-congo>

Despite these repeated and devastating setbacks, the project workers and local people are determined to keep the conservation station up and running and continue protecting the okapis. The Okapi Wildlife Reserve remains the most secure reserve for okapis in DR Congo.

## Background

The exotic okapi is only found in a handful of European zoos – and since the 1980s, Zoo Berlin has been one of them. Okapis were not discovered by scientists until the early 20th century and still remain something of a mystery today. A close relative of the giraffe, the okapi is endemic to DR Congo in Africa – which means it is not found in the wild anywhere else in the world. The animals are very striking with their dark, reddish-brown coat and zebra-like stripes on their upper legs. In recent decades their numbers have fallen by 50 percent, resulting in their current “Endangered” status on the IUCN Red List. Zoo Berlin supports the Okapi Conservation Project (OCP), founded in 1987, which works with the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN) to protect both the okapis and the entire ecosystem of their Ituri Rainforest habitat. Ituri covers an area of 63,000 km<sup>2</sup> in north-eastern DR Congo and contains a rich variety of species. Occupying 13,700 km<sup>2</sup> of this lowland rainforest is the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, which is home to some 5,000 okapis and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996. Here, the OCP established a research and conservation centre as a base for its work protecting the okapis and their habitat.

Zoo Berlin currently houses two okapis: four-year-old Bashira, who was born in Berlin, and her partner Zuri, also aged four, who moved to Berlin from Lisbon Zoo last year. It is hoped that the

couple will produce young in the future. Antwerp Zoo manages the international okapi studbook, which contains data on all the okapis held in zoos around the world.