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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wildlife of Northern Central African Republic in Danger, Urgent Actions Required to Secure Remaining Wildlife Populations and Contribute to Stabilization of the Region

BANGUI, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC—The first aerial assessment of the impact of Central African Republic's recent conflict on wildlife and other natural resources in the northern part of the country shows that wildlife populations have been depleted in large areas of their former range, yet there is hope as some populations of Kordofan giraffe, giant eland, buffalo, roan, and other key species that still survive in low numbers. No elephants or signs of elephant were observed during the survey. Commercial poaching and wildlife trafficking, committed by heavily armed groups moving across borders as well as local actors, has greatly impacted the area. Significant pressures from transboundary pastoralism and local mining were documented. The vast magnificent savanna, forests, wooded savannas, and deep rivers habitats remain largely intact with potential for recovery of wildlife populations if urgent and robust conservation security measures are taken in this strategic area, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), ECOFAUNE+/AGRECO, and the Ministry of Environment of Central African Republic said in a report issued today.

Northern Central African Republic historically supported some the most pristine wilderness and intact and abundant wildlife assemblages in Africa, including species of global importance such as elephant, Kordofan giraffe, hippopotamus, lion, giant eland, and more. The wildlife populations of this spectacular landscape have been subject to heavy poaching during various periods over the past decades, and conservation efforts in the area, carried out thanks to longstanding EU financial support through PDRN, ECOFAC and ECOFAUNE projects, have been negatively impacted by the past three years of armed conflict. In addition to the armed conflict and resulting humanitarian crisis currently impacting the country, widespread natural resource pillaging (specifically mining, wildlife poaching and trafficking, and pastoralist pressures) involving armed groups has been widely reported.

The WCS and ECOFAUNE+ project (implemented by AGRECO) conducted the aerial survey in March-April 2017 (the late dry season) with funding from the Great Elephant Census, a Paul G. Allen Project, the European Union (through Fonds Bekou), and WCS. The aerial survey covered the areas of Bamingui-Bangoran National Park, Manovo Gounda St. Floris National Park, Vassako-Bollo, Gribingui-Bamingui, l'Aouk Aoukale, Yata Ngaya Reserves, Presidential Park Awakaba, and surrounding zones. In addition, the Nana-Barya Reserve and Mbitoye and Moyen-Sido areas were also covered. A combination of aerial survey methods (systematic surveys and recce surveys) were employed with a total of 16,778

km flown (45 hours 44 minutes of flight time) and an estimated 63,657 sq. km surveyed systematically. Two teams of WCS, ECOFAUNE+, and Ministry staff undertook the field work using two WCS Cessna aircraft.

The survey documented the presence of the highly endangered northern giraffe Kordofan subspecies, likely to be the last remaining population in CAR and in danger throughout much of its range in Africa. Giant eland and buffalo were encountered in some limited areas but were absent from large areas where they have been historically abundant. All large mammal species were found to have experienced dramatic declines compared to the populations levels observed in 2005 and 2010, with the exception of roan antelope and bushbuck which were observed to have remained stable since the last aerial survey. Grimm's and red-flanked duiker were common throughout the landscape while warthog declines were registered in some areas.

No elephants were observed during the survey nor was any sign of elephants (tracks, broken branches, skeletons). Surveys of the area in 1977 estimated 35,093 elephants. By 1985 the elephants had gone through a massive decline due, down to an estimated 4,803, during the massive ivory poaching crisis sweeping Africa. The population continued to be stable at around 4,025 through 1998, and then declined with surveys in 2005 estimating 929 elephants. By 2010 surveys indicated only an estimated 68 elephants remained in the landscape. Heavily armed ivory poachers, mostly from neighbouring Sudan and Chad but with local involvement as well, perpetrated this systematic poaching, and periods of instability further impacted the crisis. These threats continue to plague the region, though poachers have turned to commercial bush meat trade now that elephant populations are very low. Further surveys will be needed to investigate if any elephants remain in this zone or use it seasonally at all.

Human activity was quantified and mapped throughout the landscape. Livestock and pastoralist pressures were documented predominantly in the north of Manovo Gounda St. Floris National Park but with pastoralists and their livestock using nearly all areas of the landscape during the dry season. Local hunting camps were common and a network of motorcycle trails is used for commercial bushmeat transport as well as accessing small scale mining areas. It was also reported that within the past three years some armed groups had undertaken systematic bushmeat hunting and export to the north as well as to Bangui to generate revenue. Illegal natural resource exploitation by armed groups (local and transboundary) continues to plague CAR including the northern area surveyed. Important transboundary natural resource and security linkages between CAR and neighbouring Chad and Sudan were documented including transboundary pastoralists and heavily armed groups. Local communities of the area have suffered greatly from this insecurity, armed group threats and abuse, and nomadic pastoralist incursions and pressures on their lands. Actions to improve security for wildlife will also directly improve security for local communities.

The survey findings and analyses generated a series of critical recommendations for action, reinforcing activities already implemented by ECOFAUNE+. Recommendations include:

- ✓ Integrated Security, Park Management, and Law Enforcement
 - Establishment of conservation-security partnerships for protected areas and natural resource management (including NGOs, UN, other international entities) directly improving security for both local communities and wildlife

- Design and operation of a security mechanism with mobile rapid intervention capacity to detect, deter, disrupt, and stop armed groups involved in poaching and other illegal natural resource exploitation
 - Fully operationalize the UN mandate to prevent illegal natural resource exploitation and trafficking
 - Completely ban commercial bushmeat trade and export from the area
 - Secure remaining core areas and wildlife hotspots (core priority areas of Bamingui-Bangoran Park, Sangha, MGSF Park, hunting zones)
 - Establish long term management partnerships for National Park management as core governance centers in integrated landscape initiative
 - Expand anti-poaching and anti-trafficking (core areas, transport routes) in concert with local authorities.
 - Develop transboundary cooperations and alert systems with conservation and security actors of neighboring Chad, Cameroon, Sudan, and South Sudan.
- ✓ Land Management and Community Based Sustainable Natural Resource Management (NRM)
- Develop rangeland management and transboundary agreements and local agreements on transhumance – spatial management, reinforce corridors and develop zoning of grazing
 - Enforce a moratorium of 5 years on all hunting of large mammals and reassess after 5 years
 - Complete land-use planning process underway and maintain Parks as core areas of stability
 - Develop road network and settlements planning minimize impact on core biodiversity areas
 - Develop sustainable livelihoods and NRM programs with local communities (Lulu, Gum, Karite, Maringe, fishing)
 - Evaluate possibility of local subsistence hunting of selected small game species in villages zones for local communities, with absolutely no export, and strictly only where demonstrated sustainable
- ✓ Peace Building and Multi-sector Coordination
- Include wildlife conservation and natural resource management and transparency explicitly as part of CAR peace process and security and stabilization strategy
 - Coordinate and spatially target security, conflict mitigation, development, and conservation funding support to conservation and NRM programs in Northern CAR to enhance conservation security and protected area management for people and wildlife.

Her Excellency Minister, Arlette SOMBO DIBELE, Minister of Environment, Sustainable Development, Water, Forests, Hunting, Fishing of the Government of Central African Republic stated: “I congratulate ECOFAUNE+/AGRECO and WCS for their efforts to undertake the recent aerial survey of wildlife populations, natural habitats, and human activity in the northern region of our country. This assessment comes at a crucial time to guide both our anti-poaching and land-use planning programs and actions. I would like to reiterate the firm engagement of the Government of the Central African Republic, and my Ministry in particular, to work together in synergy with our partners for the protection and development of the wildlife resources in the northern region such that it becomes again a source of pride for our country and foundation for local development, as it was in the past.”

Dr. Paul Elkan, WCS Sudano-Sahel Region Director, who led the aerial survey team, said: “The global community must mobilize to secure the spectacular natural ecosystems of Northern CAR and its remaining critical wildlife populations. Combining international and local security approaches with protected area management, conservation, and natural resource law enforcement are critical to improving governance and security for local communities and wildlife and stabilizing the region.”

Images: CAR Wildlife, Habitat, Human Activity, National Parks

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Source: Wildlife Conservation Society/Ecofaune+/AGRECO

