

## WILDLIFE



# Real-life “Tarzan” Lee White is on a Mission to Protect Gabon’s Forest Elephants

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[Michael Schwartz](#)



A FOREST ELEPHANT WADES IN THE DJIDJI RIVER IN GABON'S IVINDO NATIONAL PARK. PHOTO BY MALCOLM STARKEY.

Moviegoers are headed for the Congo rainforest when the Warner Bros. film, The Legend of Tarzan, hits the big screen this July.

Most people are familiar with author Edgar Rice Burrough's character—the orphan boy raised by apes who grew up to become lord of the jungle. However, few may know that much of the upcoming adventure film was shot on location in Gabon, a French-speaking equatorial country in western central Africa.

With only 1.6 million people, and almost entirely covered in pristine rainforest, Gabon is home to an abundance of wildlife species, including the elusive forest elephant, also set to be featured in the upcoming picture.

But while Tarzan may have been the first fictitious jungle custodian, there are real people who have dedicated their lives to conserving Gabon's roughly 40,000 forest elephants and the remaining rainforests of equatorial Africa that they inhabit.

## Gabon’s Brilliant Biodiversity



THE BREATHTAKING DJIDJI FALLS IN GABON’S IVINDO NATIONAL PARK. PHOTO BY LEE WHITE.

Some might recall the year 1999, when American ecologist and National Geographic explorer [J. Michael Fay and his team of Bambendjelle pygmies traversed 1,200 miles of Africa’s Congo Basin on foot](#), concluding a 14-month MegaTransect on the virgin shores of what would later become [Loango National Park](#).

It was a fitting end to an incredible journey. But the journey didn’t stop there.

After spending 455 days in Tarzan-like fashion—being charged at by forest elephants, wading waist-deep in waters teeming with crocodiles and leeches, hacking up cloud-covered inselbergs—it was Fay who, in 2002, got out of his hiking gear and into a suit and tie.

With the same determination and grit that saw him through to the end of the MegaTransect, he lobbied Gabon’s then-president, Omar Bongo, to safeguard this virtually unspoiled Eden of Africa.

Thanks to Fay, his team, and other conservationists, 11 percent of the country was set aside as 13 new national parks (Akanda, Batéké Plateau, Birougou, Crystal Mountains, Ivindo, Loango, Lopé, Mayumba, Minkébé, Moukalaba-Doudou, Mwangné, Pongara, and Waka).

Since then, Gabon has emerged as a beacon of biodiversity; a “paradis terrestre” (Heaven on Earth) where animals such as the forest elephant, forest buffalo, sitatunga, red river hog, western lowland gorilla, mandrill, hippo, leopard, crocodile, and a vast array of bird species live.

"As a biologist Gabon is paradise," British-born Director of Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (ANPN), Professor Lee White said, having lived and worked there since 1989.

### The Guardian of Gabon



PROFESSOR LEE WHITE, THE HEAD OF GABON'S AGENCE NATIONALE DES PARCS NATIONAUX (ANPN). PHOTO BY AILSA WHITE.

Whereas Fay is the tenacious explorer who, in the words of *National Geographic* writer, David Quammen, could be, "a half-mad, half-brilliant military commander," White is soft spoken and seemingly reserved.

With British and Gabonese citizenship, he softly teased about being a *mzungu* (white) person with a last name that also happens to be White.

"They call me the white Bantu," he said, referring to Gabonese friends who know him best.

Originally from Manchester, England, White moved to Uganda with his family when he was three. The tenure was short lived, however, due to former President Idi Amin's barbaric dictatorship, which included corruption, extrajudicial killings, and ethnic oppression.

White eventually returned to Africa post high school on a Wildlife Conservation Society-funded primate project in Sierra Leone. After finishing a Zoology degree at the University of London, he pursued his Ph.D in Gabon.

Instantly sold on the country's natural beauty, White helped set up the WCS-Gabon program, ran it for roughly 17 years, and shifted over to the government side of conservation in 2007, eventually becoming head of ANPN in late 2009.

He described Gabon’s environmental conditions at the onset of his work:

“When I started there weren’t really any protected areas. There were a series of wildlife reserves that were covered in logging permits. It was a strange situation because while logging was allowed, hunting wasn’t. Habitat wasn’t protected, but wildlife was.”



A BULL FOREST ELEPHANT (LOXODONTA CYCLOTIS) NEAR LANGOUÉ BAÏ. PHOTO BY DAVID GREYO.

It wasn’t until 2002, on the advice of White and Mike Fay, that the network of national parks were created, effectively cancelling about 2 million hectares of logging concessions.

With ample support from institutions like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, White was able to help turn the tide from what he called, “a sort of anarchy in the forest,” to slightly over 20 percent of protected land between the 13 parks and other protected areas.

In 2007 he wrote up a technical report for President Bongo, which he referred to as “a vision for the national parks,” which helped usher in additional funding.

After Omar Bongo passed away in 2009, his son, Ali Bongo Ondimba, was elected President, largely on what White referred to as an environmentally “sustainable platform.”

It was Ondimba who then promoted White to head of ANPN, and who continues championing the conservation of his country’s natural resources.

“[The President] goes to the parks literally every month,” White said.



With full government backing, and within his first four years as head of ANPN, White was able to double the staff each year, from 60 people then to around 750 today, including an armed wing to offset poaching.

Plans are to transform Gabon's economy into a new development model for Africa, or what White calls, "a sustainable development model."



A FOREST ELEPHANT, A LOWLAND GORILLA, AND A SITATUNGA AT LANGOUÉ BAÏ.  
PHOTO BY DAVID GREYO.

Yet in spite of the successes, a number of obstacles remain, which include continually fine-tuning park management, and also attracting investors for what White hopes will eventually become a geotourism hub.

### Building up Geotourism



SENIOR CONSERVATEUR OF AGENCE NATIONALE DES PARCS  
NATIONAUX, JOSEPH OKOUI. PHOTO BY LEE WHITE

Since Gabon is a country without a significant tourism history, White has the added responsibility of building it from the ground up.

Considering other African countries with longstanding tourism tenures, he didn't avoid admitting the enormity of such a monumental task:

"When you've got a choice between investing in a sure-fire lodge in Botswana where you know it works, and you know that the country and parks are set up for tourism, or taking a risk and setting up something in Gabon, most investors choose the sure thing.

"The challenge of starting something new in Gabon is that you're starting in this rainforest ecosystem, which is new for tourism in an industry where you really have to provide people with a circuit."

While that circuit would include lodges and other tourist amenities, one pitfall White wants to avoid is mass tourism and the untold damage it can wreak on the environment, as evidenced in [Kenya's Masai Mara](#).

Instead, White is looking to develop higher-end, lower through-flow geotourism in order that visitors can see the elephants walking along unpolluted beaches, watch gorillas forage in intact forests, and witness [surfing hippos and humpback whales breaching just off the coastline](#).

It is this model, coupled with the sheer volume of biodiversity Gabon has to offer, that White believes will attract the right type of investment, though he doesn't deny the long road ahead:

"We have about 60 percent of the world's forest elephants and about 20,000 gorillas. There's huge potential here. But my priority over the first five years was to develop ANPN because I don't believe we can attract tourism investors if we don't have well managed parks."

As it stands, the most critical step next to ensuring well managed parks is protecting Gabon's natural capital—the wildlife, and more specifically, Gabon's forest elephants.

### Protecting Forest Elephants



A SMALL HERD OF FOREST ELEPHANTS AT THE DJIDJI RIVER. PHOTO BY MALCOLM STARKEY.



Minkébé National Park contains the largest population of Gabon's forest elephants. It also happens to be rife with elephant poaching, primarily by impoverished villagers coming in from the neighboring country of Cameroon.

Aside from the fact that forest elephants aren't as easy to track as their savannah counterparts, what makes the situation especially difficult is that poachers have taken up arms against ANPN in recent years, even shooting at park rangers on sight.

In White's opinion, the reason for the uptick in violence is because poachers are "under a lot more pressure from the organized criminal groups working in Cameroon" who are seeking forest elephants for their ivory.

He added: "These criminals are unpleasant to [the poachers] when they return to Cameroon without ivory. And we're in a very unpleasant phase where the criminals are using poor rural people from forested southern Cameroon.

"They are sending them into Gabon. But they're so scared about what will happen to them if they go back without the guns and the ivory that they prefer to shoot at my rangers than to be caught."

Gabon's forest elephants are especially vulnerable to the poaching surge. Already lost are around 11,000 of them in Minkébé between 2002 and 2012. And due to the remoteness of the area, keeping forest elephants safe isn't as easy.

As White and his team are desperately fighting to protect the remaining population, he acknowledges that a key ingredient to the continued protection of the subspecies lies outside of Gabon's borders.

"We have to reduce the market," he emphasized. "If the prices don't come down, if people can still make U.S. \$2,000 a kilo from ivory, there's going to be very severe pressure on elephants and the populations are going to continue to dwindle. We need to control the markets, we need countries like China and Thailand to really engage."

For now, Gabon appears to be on the cusp of becoming one of the last bastions of true African rainforest, and a place where White and his fellow Gabonese conservationists continue working toward an ever brighter future—not only for the rainforest, but for its wildlife, and most notably, the forest elephants.

It's safe to say that though Tarzan isn't real, there are those out there with the strength and resolve to conserve what's left of what is arguably Africa's most pristine Eden.



## MEET THE AUTHOR

Michael Schwartz is a journalist and African wildlife conservation researcher. With field experience around the continent since 2005, his passion for Africa's wildlife is matched by his compassion for the people who live

there. A significant portion of his field work is carried out in Uganda, where he studies lion and elephant conservation. You can visit his website at <http://www.michaelwschwartz.com>.



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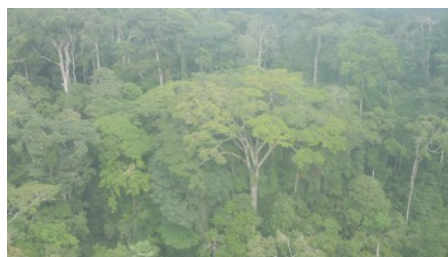
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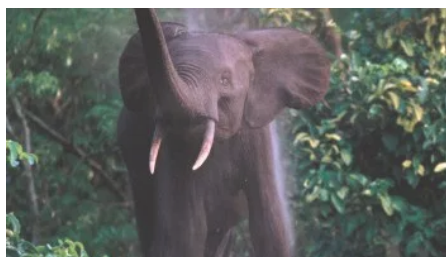
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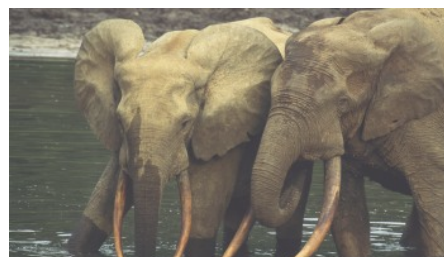
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the effort of Mr White is highly commendable. the forest elephants need to be protected from the destructive nature of poachers. I will advise the Gabonese govt borrow a leaf from south Africa. the SA govt have stem the tide of poachers from Mozambique coming across the borders into Kruger national park to poach on Buffalo and elephants. once again I commend the effort of the the conservationist.

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