



# Escalating Oil Exploration Threats to **Conkouati-Douli** National Park in Republic of Congo

**A Threat Assessment by Partners**





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**Cover Image:**  
Where the waters of the rivers meet in Conkouati-Douli National Park, Republic of Congo. Image Credit: ©PNCD/Arthur Laboureur

Crabs swarming the beach in Conkouati-Douli National Park in the Republic of Congo  
Image Credit: ©PNCD/Noé



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conkouati-Douli National Park, the Republic of Congo’s (RoC) most biodiverse protected area, is facing unprecedented threats from oil exploration. Despite being legally designated to safeguard critical habitats, biodiversity, and the livelihoods of local communities, the Congolese government has recently approved **two controversial oil exploration blocks that together overlap more than half of the park’s terrestrial area and nearly 90% of its wetlands.** These developments threaten to irreversibly damage one of Central Africa’s last intact tropical forest and coastal ecosystems, undermining both national legislation and international conservation commitments.

Covering over 8,000 km² of tropical forest, wetlands, mangroves, rivers, estuaries, and marine areas, Conkouati-Douli National Park is home to a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) of global importance. It harbors significant populations of endangered wildlife, including an estimated 900 Western Lowland Gorillas, 7,000 Common Chimpanzees, and 900 African Forest Elephants, as well as the Atlantic Humpback Dolphin, whose small, shallow-water population is particularly vulnerable to disturbance. The park’s founding decree prohibits extractive activities in its core conservation zones and a 5 km buffer, allowing limited development only in designated eco-development zones that make up roughly one-third of its terrestrial area.

In February 2024, the government licensed the Conkouati oil block to the Chinese company China Oil Natural Gas Overseas Holding United, with 930 km² overlapping the park and 440 km² in its buffer zone. Less than 700 km² of this overlap lies in eco-development zones, raising significant legal and environmental concerns. In April 2025, the threat escalated when the Niambi oil block was approved, with 98% of its area overlapping the park. The Niambi permit was granted to ORIENTAL Energy with an 85% stake without public disclosure of an Environmental Impact Assessment, undermining transparency and due diligence.

Local communities are on the frontlines of these oil blocks which put the fishing, farming, and forest-based **livelihoods of approximately 7,000 people at risk.** Oil exploration risks polluting water sources, restricting access to traditional lands, and fragmenting habitats through road construction and other infrastructure. Civil society organizations have voiced strong opposition, calling for the immediate cancellation of oil permits within Conkouati-Douli National Park. Their calls have been ignored.

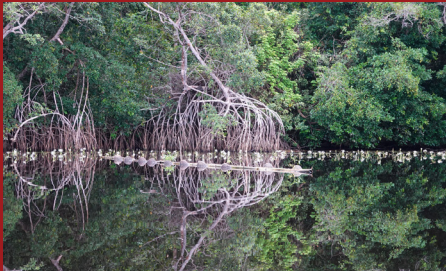
Oil development in Conkouati threatens to fragment intact forest corridors, increase poaching risk, introduce pollution, and accelerate biodiversity loss. These impacts would not only violate the park’s legal protections but also undermine the Republic of Congo’s commitments under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and climate agreements made at COP28.

## THE REPORT CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION:

1. Revoke oil permits overlapping Conkouati-Douli National Park and its buffer zones.
2. Uphold and enforce environmental laws to ensure protected areas remain free from extractive activities incompatible with their conservation goals.
3. Ensure transparent, inclusive decision-making, including full public disclosure of Environmental Impact Assessments and meaningful consultation with Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and civil society.

Conkouati lagoon.  
Image Credit: ©PNCD/Noé





(1) Whale passage in the Park’s Ocean Waters - June to September. (2) Release of a pangolin. (3) Mangrove islands in Conkouati Lagoon. Image Credit: ©PNCD/Noé

# Introduction

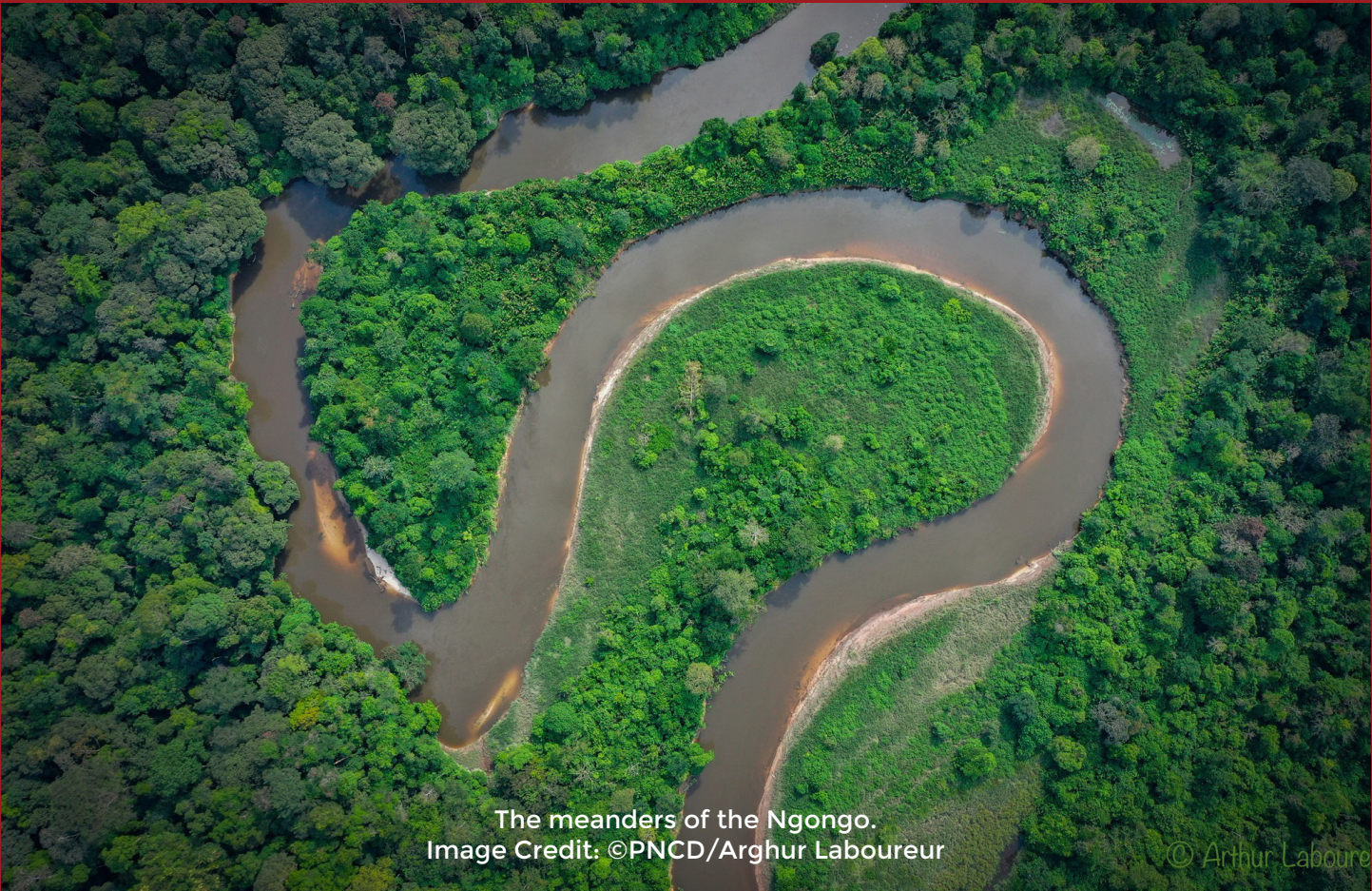
Protected areas are some of the last regions on Earth where ecosystems can thrive beyond the reach of industrial-scale development. As a vital element of global biodiversity conservation, protected areas safeguard critical habitats, carbon reserves, and support the livelihoods and cultural identities of Indigenous Peoples and local communities. **In a world facing an increasingly urgent biodiversity crisis and accelerated climate breakdown, protected areas are not optional; they are essential.**

Under the global 30x30 target, a cornerstone of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, governments have committed to protecting at least 30% of the planet’s land and oceans by 2030. But establishing protected areas is not enough—they need to be effectively managed for conservation in the long-term. This is increasingly difficult as extractive industries move into parks, reserves, and conservation landscapes meant to be off-limits to industrial expansion.<sup>1</sup>



Construction of the Congoflux tower in DRC. This research station provides essential data for understanding the forest’s role in the global carbon and water cycles, aiding in the conservation of the Congo Basin, the world’s second-largest tropical rainforest. Image Credit: CIFOR-ICRAF. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

This is especially prevalent in regions facing external pressures to repay sovereign debt and to develop their economies for short-term gain,<sup>2</sup> often at the expense of long-term ecological integrity and community well-being.<sup>3</sup> In these contexts, protected areas risk being viewed not as conservation priorities, but as untapped resource frontiers.



The meanders of the Ngongo. Image Credit: ©PNCD/Arghur Laboureur

© Arthur Laboureur

In the Republic of Congo (RoC), the tension between conservation and resource extraction is playing out in real time. Extractive industries continue to expand amid deep structural challenges, including weak institutions and underdeveloped governance systems rooted in a colonial legacy.<sup>4</sup> Despite formal commitments to conservation and climate action, including its role in hosting the Three Basins Summit in 2023 and climate and biodiversity pledges made at UNFCCC COP28 and CBD COP15, **the RoC has recently approved oil exploration permits with significant**

**overlap with Conkouati-Douli National Park— its most biodiverse protected area.** These developments raise alarms about the alignment between national development strategies, legal environmental protections, and global conservation goals. This report outlines what is at stake if oil exploration and development within Conkouati-Douli proceed, and echoes calls from Congolese civil society for a future free from fossil fuel and industrial expansion within protected areas.



# The Congo Basin Under Pressure

The Congo Basin is a vast expanse of forest that regulates regional rainfall, supports global climate stability, and sustains an astonishing diversity of life, from forest elephants and great apes to endemic amphibians. Spanning six countries, it is also home to millions of people, including Indigenous communities whose cultural and spiritual identities are inextricably tied to the land.<sup>5</sup>

**Despite its local and global importance, industrial pressures in the Congo Basin are accelerating.** Oil licenses are expanding not only in the Republic of Congo but also in neighboring countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where exploration blocks increasingly overlap sensitive forest and protected areas.<sup>6</sup> With impacts disrupting local livelihoods and global climate futures, the stakes could not be higher. The Congo Basin is the world’s second-largest rainforest and a vital carbon sink,<sup>7</sup> yet research has shown that the Congo Basin is approaching an alarming tipping point and that continued industrial expansion in the region could lead to catastrophic climate outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Even so, areas legally designated to be free from fossil fuel and industrial expansion are now under threat, as these mounting pressures bleed into national parks— areas intended to provide the highest levels of environmental protection for critical landscapes.



Chimpanzees in the Conkouati-Douli mangroves. Image Credit: Maryleine via Wikipedia. CC BY-SA 4.0

The Buya bog, in the territory of Bikoro, in the province of Equateur of the Democratic Republic of the Congo Tons of carbon are stored inside these peatlands. Image Credit: Ley Uwera/For The Washington Post via Getty Images



Vegetation on the banks of the Ngongo River. Image Credis: ©PNCD/Arthur Laboureur,



# Oil Threats to Konkouati-Douli National Park

One of the most urgent examples of this encroachment is in the RoC’s Konkouati-Douli National Park. Covering more than 8,000 km², Konkouati-Douli is one of the Republic of Congo’s most ecologically and culturally significant protected areas, and is home to more biodiversity than anywhere else in the country. Established by presidential decree in 1999, the park spans dense tropical forests, wetlands, mangroves, rivers, estuaries, and a marine extension added in 2023, making it both a terrestrial and marine biodiversity hotspot.

The park’s founding decree stipulates that exploration and exploitation permits can only be granted within areas of the park designated as ‘eco-development zones,’ and that extractive activities are not allowed within the 5km buffer zone on the south and east sides of the park.<sup>9</sup> These eco-development zones, intended to balance human development with conservation, span approximately 1,700 km² or roughly one third of the terrestrial portion of the park, and encompass the majority of the park’s human settlements.

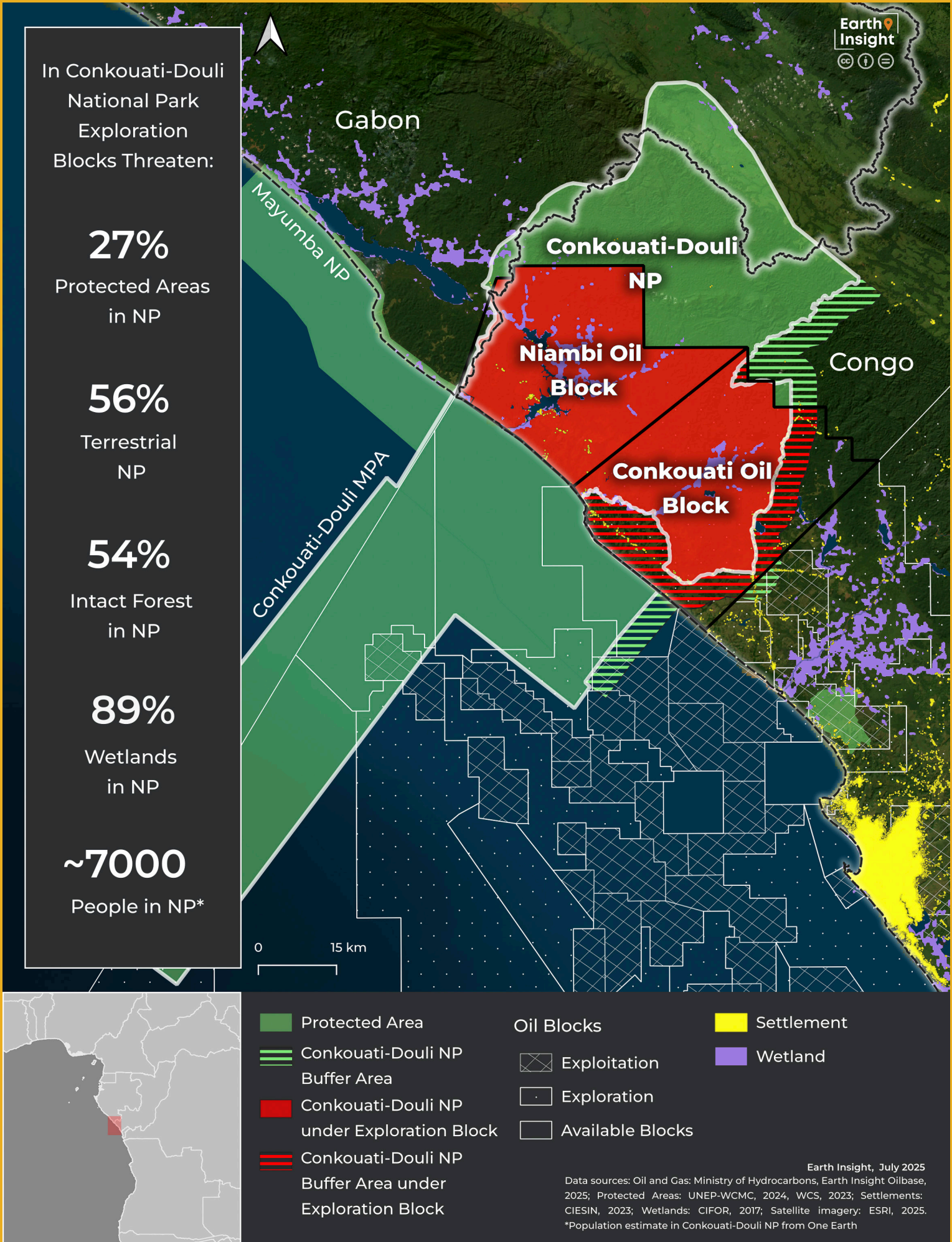
Despite the park’s legal framework, the government of the RoC put the national park under threat when it approved the Konkouati oil block for exploration in February, 2024, awarding the license to China Oil Natural Gas Overseas Holding United.<sup>10</sup> This move marked a turning point for the park’s integrity. The majority of the Konkouati block overlaps with either the national park or its protected buffer zone, with **930 km² of the Konkouati block falling within park boundaries, and an additional 440 km² overlapping the buffer.** Of the area within the park, less than 700 km² is located in designated eco-development zones—raising serious legal

and environmental red flags. Civil society in the RoC has been clear that oil development is not welcomed in the national park, with local actors advocating against the Konkouati oil block since its announcement in 2024, including through a public statement signed by 13 national NGOs.<sup>11</sup>

The situation escalated further in April 2025 with the approval of draft decrees for three additional hydrocarbon exploration permits, including one for the Niambi block, also located within Konkouati-Douli National Park. Together, the Konkouati and Niambi oil blocks signal an alarming escalation of threats to

one of Central Africa’s last intact tropical forest strongholds. **Combined, the oil blocks cover over half of the terrestrial area of Konkouati-Douli National Park and almost 90% of the wetlands protected in the park.** The threat of oil development jeopardizes the park’s biodiversity, compromises international conservation commitments, and puts local communities and livelihoods at risk. Without immediate intervention, the integrity of Konkouati-Douli National Park and the legal mechanisms protecting it may be irrevocably eroded.

Map 1. Oil Threats to Konkouati-Douli NP





# The Niambi Oil Block: A Closer Look

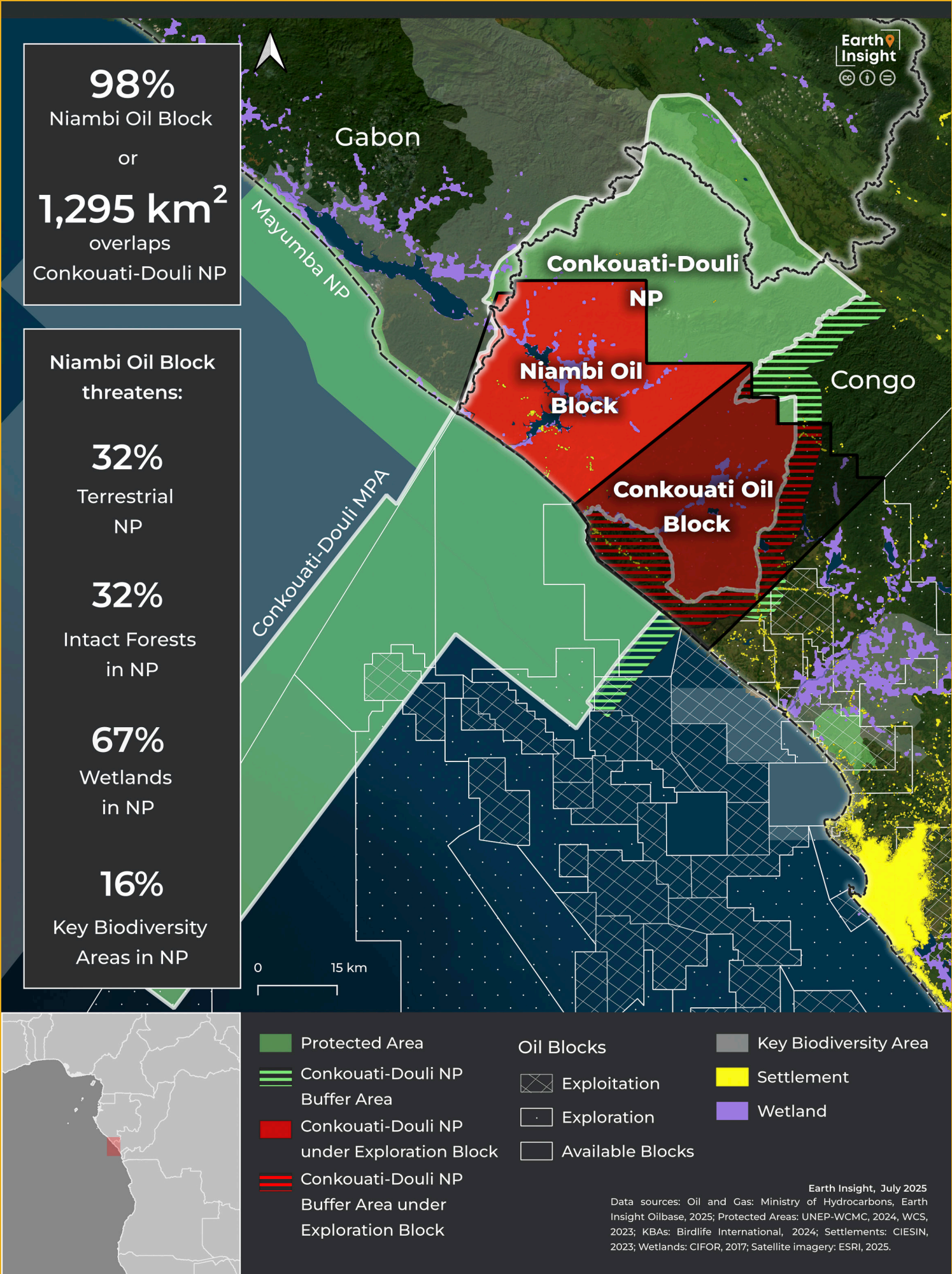
On April 18, 2025, the RoC Government adopted three draft decrees granting permits for the exploitation and exploration of liquid and gaseous hydrocarbons during its Council of Ministers meeting.<sup>12</sup> The move sparked serious concerns amongst RoC civil society, particularly with **the Niambi oil block, which has 98% overlap with Conkouati-Douli National Park.** This near-total overlap with the such a significant protected area raises serious questions about the legitimacy of the block as a whole. Despite public outcry following the approval of the Conkouati oil block a year earlier,<sup>13</sup> the government has once again demonstrated a willingness to undermine its own environmental legislation, deepening concerns about the erosion of legal protections for the country’s most critical ecosystems.



The Niambi block partially overlaps with terrestrial eco-development zones in the park where exploration could be allowed under certain circumstances, subject to a prior environmental impact assessment.<sup>14</sup> However, there has been no public announcement of an impact assessment, and most of the permit lies within a fully protected terrestrial zone where exploration and exploitation is prohibited. Despite this, the permit for the Niambi block was granted primarily to ORIENTAL Energy with an 85% stake.<sup>15</sup> This blatant disregard for the park’s own management plan and legal safeguards and the absence of critical environmental review not only threaten the integrity of Conkouati-Douli but also establish a dark precedent for the erosion of protections in other Congolese protected areas.

12 Mandrill captured by the Park’s camera traps.  
Image Credit: ©PNCD/Noé

Map 2. Niambi Oil Block Threat to Conkouati-Douli NP



98%  
Niambi Oil Block  
or  
1,295 km<sup>2</sup>  
overlaps  
Conkouati-Douli NP

Niambi Oil Block  
threatens:

32%  
Terrestrial  
NP

32%  
Intact Forests  
in NP

67%  
Wetlands  
in NP

16%  
Key Biodiversity  
Areas in NP

- Protected Area
- Conkouati-Douli NP Buffer Area
- Conkouati-Douli NP under Exploration Block
- Conkouati-Douli NP Buffer Area under Exploration Block
- Oil Blocks
  - Exploitation
  - Exploration
  - Available Blocks
- Key Biodiversity Area
- Settlement
- Wetland

Earth Insight, July 2025  
Data sources: Oil and Gas: Ministry of Hydrocarbons, Earth Insight Oilbase, 2025; Protected Areas: UNEP-WCMC, 2024, WCS, 2023; KBAs: Birdlife International, 2024; Settlements: CIESIN, 2023; Wetlands: CIFOR, 2017; Satellite imagery: ESRI, 2025.



# Local Opposition and Living with the Impacts on the Ground

The approval of oil exploration in Conkouati-Douli National Park has triggered widespread concern among local communities, conservation organizations, and Indigenous groups who depend on the park's ecosystems for their livelihoods and cultural practices. **An estimated 7,000 people live within and around the park now overlapped by oil blocks** and many local communities rely on fishing, small-scale agriculture, and forest resources to meet their daily needs.<sup>16</sup> Oil exploration and development bring with them the threat of pollution, restricted access to traditional lands, and increased infrastructure that could fragment ecosystems and disrupt

the delicate balance between people and nature. For communities that have long coexisted with the landscape, the arrival of extractive activities raises fears of displacement, loss of livelihood, and irreversible environmental harm.

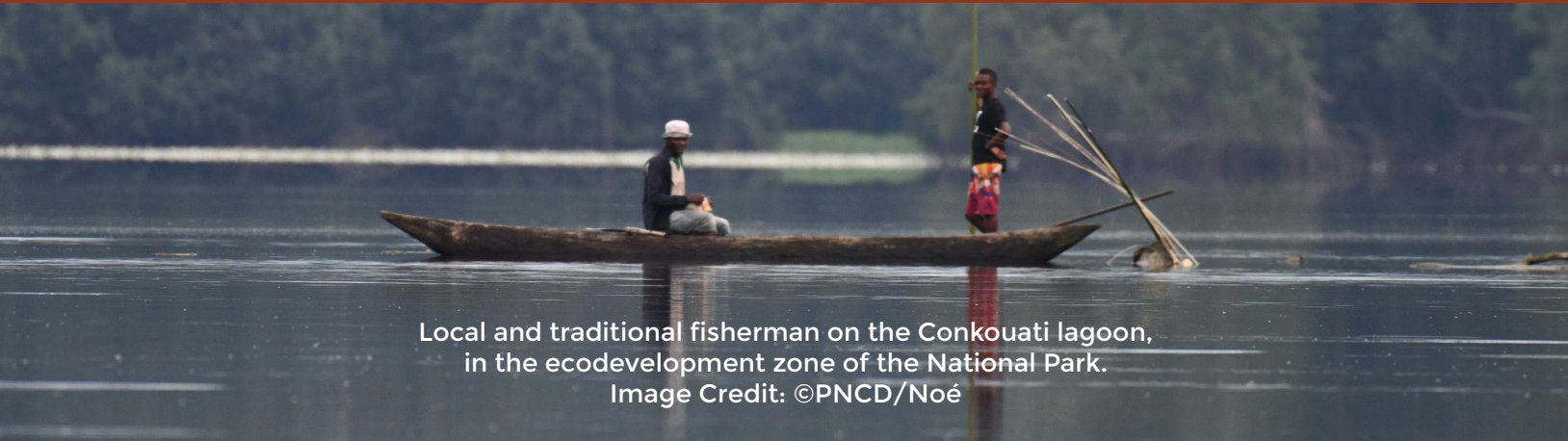
In addition to these direct impacts, the proposed oil blocks have already begun to undermine public trust in protected area governance. Community members report limited consultation and a lack of transparency around the permitting process, with many learning about the exploration plans only after decisions were finalized.<sup>17</sup>

Environmental civil society organizations have responded with

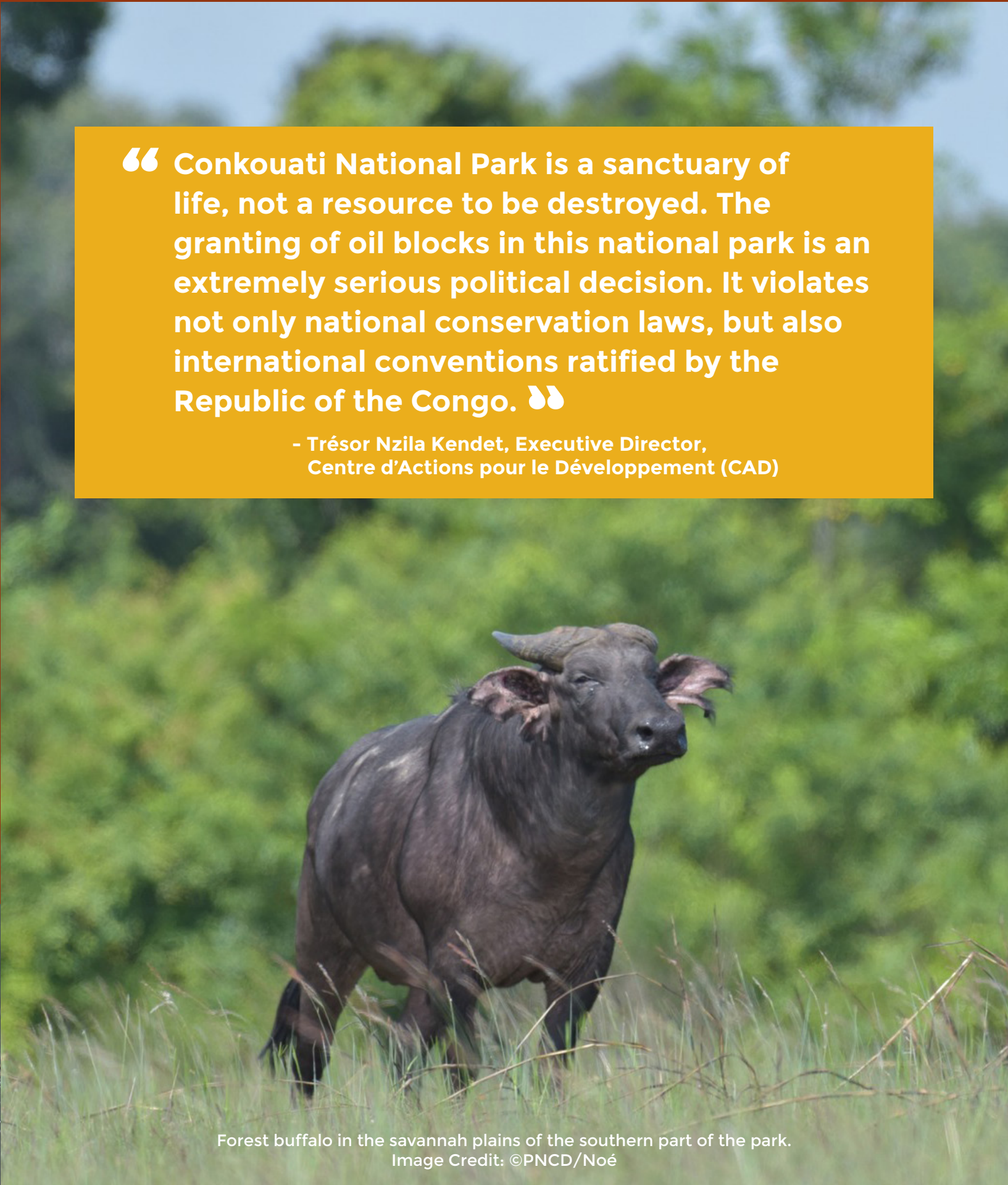
strong opposition. Local organizations have issued public statements, mobilized advocacy campaigns, and called for the revocation of oil blocks within the park.<sup>18</sup> Their demands are not just about stopping fossil fuel development; they are about defending the fundamental principle that national development decisions cannot be made without including the people who will bear the costs. Their opposition highlights the growing tension between extractive economic agendas and the rights and voices of communities on the front lines. As extractive pressures mount, local resistance has become a critical force in defending the park.

“Conkouati National Park is a sanctuary of life, not a resource to be destroyed. The granting of oil blocks in this national park is an extremely serious political decision. It violates not only national conservation laws, but also international conventions ratified by the Republic of the Congo.”

- Trésor Nzila Kendet, Executive Director, Centre d'Actions pour le Développement (CAD)



Local and traditional fisherman on the Conkouati lagoon, in the ecodevelopment zone of the National Park.  
Image Credit: ©PNCD/Noé



Forest buffalo in the savannah plains of the southern part of the park.  
Image Credit: ©PNCD/Noé





# Species At Risk

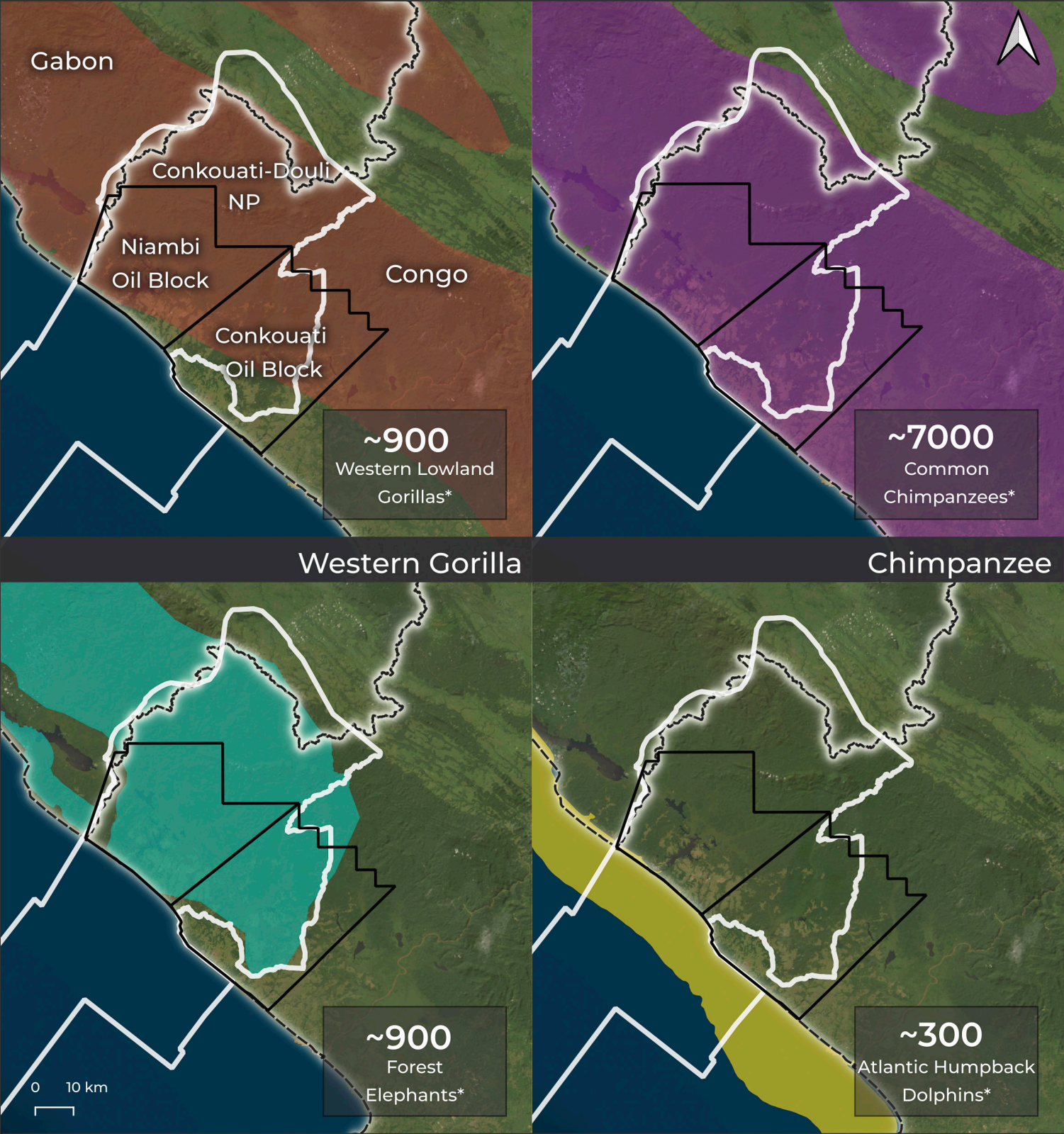
The Conkouati and Niambi oil blocks overlap one of the most ecologically important zones of Conkouati-Douli National Park, placing numerous endangered species at serious risk. The park is home to an estimated 900 Western Lowland Gorillas, 7,000 Common Chimpanzees, and 900 African Forest Elephants, representing some of the highest concentrations of great apes and forest megafauna in Central Africa.<sup>19</sup> These populations are part of what makes this region a recognized Key Biodiversity Area (KBA), a global standard used to identify sites critical to the persistence of biodiversity.

KBAs are identified based on rigorous scientific criteria, highlighting areas that contain threatened species, unique ecosystems, or significant ecological processes. They are meant to be priority areas for conservation, yet

**28% of designated KBAs in Conkouati-Douli National Park are now overlapped by oil blocks.** Oil development in this area threatens to fragment intact forest corridors, disrupt wildlife movement, and increase human access, which can accelerate poaching, disease transmission, and habitat degradation for species that rely on undisturbed ecosystems to survive

The threats from these blocks also extend to coastal waters that host the Atlantic Humpback Dolphin, a population of only ~300 individuals whose shallow range leaves them exceptionally vulnerable to noise pollution, spills, and other disturbances from oil and gas activities. From forest canopy to coastal waters, these blocks cut through KBAs, undermining the survival of iconic and endangered species.

## Map 3. Oil Threats to Endangered Species in Conkouati-Douli NP



- Species
- Western Gorilla
  - Chimpanzee
  - African Forest Elephant
  - Atlantic Humpback Dolphin

Earth  
Insight



Earth Insight, July 2025

Data sources: Oil and Gas: Ministry of Hydrocarbons, Earth Insight Oilbase 2025; Species range: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN, 2016, IUCN SSC Cetacean Specialist Group, 2017, IUCN, 2018, IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, 2021. \*Species estimates in Conkouati-Douli NP from Parcs de Noé





# Conclusion and Calls to Action

Globally, countries face the urgent challenge of balancing economic development and societal well-being with the need to transition away from fossil fuels like oil and gas. This balancing act is particularly difficult in developing countries rich in natural resources but highly vulnerable to environmental degradation and infringement on the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities. Catch-all solutions are hard to come by, and there is a need to find

balance. But in areas that have been set aside for conservation, the path forward is clear: no extractive activity, especially oil and gas extraction, should be permitted within the boundaries of protected areas, which are legally designated to safeguard biodiversity, ecosystem services, and cultural survival. Compromising these protections undermines both local and global efforts to conserve nature, protect local livelihoods, and secure a liveable planet for current and future generations.

Aerial view of the Conkouati lagoon and lakes  
Image Credit: ©PNCD/Arthur Laboureur



A Moustached monkey in the Conkouati-Douli Park.  
Image Credit: ©PNCD/Noé

In light of these realities, the following urgent actions are needed to uphold the integrity of Conkouati-Douli National Park and to honor the calls of Congolese environmental civil society:

## Revoke Oil Permits Overlapping Protected Areas

The Republic of Congo should immediately revoke all oil exploration and exploitation permits that overlap with legally designated protected areas, including Conkouati-Douli National Park and its buffer zones. Extractive activities are fundamentally incompatible with the conservation objectives and legal frameworks of protected areas.

## Uphold and Enforce Environmental Law

National environmental laws and park decrees must be respected and enforced. This includes honoring the restrictions on extractive activity in Conkouati-Douli's core zones and buffer areas, as outlined in the park's founding legal framework. Government institutions should ensure that legal protections are not bypassed by economic or political interests.

## Ensure Transparent, Inclusive Decision-Making for Protected Areas

All future decisions affecting protected areas and local communities must involve meaningful consultation with Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and civil society organizations. Transparent processes—including the timely disclosure of Environmental Impact Assessments—are essential to rebuilding public trust and upholding democratic environmental governance.



Methodology

Forest Cover

Forest cover within Conkouati-Douli National Park was quantified by intersecting the JRC Tropical Moist Forest (TMF) Cover dataset (Vancutsem et al., 2021) with the park boundary using the zonal histogram function. Only pixels with a value of 1, representing intact or undisturbed tropical moist forest, were included in the calculations. Pixel counts generated by the tool were summed and converted to area to determine total forest cover within the park. The same procedure was applied to both oil block polygons.

Wetlands

Wetland extent was calculated using the CIFOR Tropical and Subtropical Wetlands Distribution dataset (Gumbricht et al., 2017). Category 10 (“open water”) was excluded, and remaining wetland classes were summarized to determine total wetland area. The dataset was intersected with the park boundary and pixel counts were generated using the zonal histogram function. Pixel counts generated by the tool were summed and converted to area to determine total wetland cover within the park. The same workflow was repeated for both oil block polygons.

Protected Area Data

Protected area data were obtained from the World Database on Protected Areas (UNEP-WCMC and IUCN, 2024), which categorizes sites according to primary management objectives (Dudley, 2008):

- Ia – Strict Nature Reserve
- Ib – Wilderness Area
- II – National Park
- III – National Monument or Feature
- IV – Habitat/Species Management Area
- V – Protected Landscape/Seascape
- VI – Sustainable Use Protected Area
- Not applicable / Unclassified

Onshore Protected Areas

Protected areas with IUCN categories I - IV were selected based on IUCN recommendations that no oil and gas extraction should occur in these protected areas. National Parks without IUCN category data were reclassified as Category II to address missing attributes in some countries. Duplicate and overlapping features were removed prior to area-based analysis. The refined protected area layer was intersected with the park and oil block boundaries using the Intersection function and the overlapping areas were calculated.

Marine Protected Areas

At the time of analysis, the marine extension of Conkouati-Douli National Park was not included in the World Database on Protected Areas. To incorporate this update, the Marine Protected Area (MPA) boundary was manually digitized.

Eco-Development Zones

Eco-development zone boundaries were digitized from the PAPACO Management Effectiveness Training Tool report. The resulting layer was intersected with the Conkouati and Niambi oil block boundaries. These boundaries are approximate and should not be used as definitive boundaries.

Key Biodiversity Areas

The Key Biodiversity Area was generated using the World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas data layer (BirdLife International, 2024). The dataset was intersected with the park and oil block boundaries using the Intersection function and the overlapping areas were calculated.

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