

THE LAST GREAT APE ORGANIZATION, CAMEROON LAGA

FIRST SEMESTER REPORT JANUARY– JUNE 2024



Executive Summary

Achievements were recorded in LAGA’s collaboration with the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF) despite several challenges posed over this period. These achievements were obtained in the fields of investigation, arrest, prosecution, media exposure, government relations and international activities. Focus was on the fight against the illegal wildlife trade in apes. The EAGLE Central Coordination Unit collaborated very closely with the investigations ensuring vital support that enabled the arrest of 3 traffickers.

The semester was marked by very poor results and only 3 traffickers were arrested and with one of them staying behind bars from the day of arrest for up to 7 days. This is a poor result and several efforts are being made to improve on the situation. No new cases were brought to the court within the period because the two ape traffickers who were arrested in April “escaped” from gendarmerie custody. The search for them to be rearrested continues and no charges have been filed yet. The third suspect is still under investigation and has not been charged. 3 traffickers were found guilty and 2 traffickers given prison sentences and ordered to pay fines and damages. A mandrill trafficker was given 4 months’ jail term in what was the stiffest court ruling the period but equally a very disappointing and weak punishment. In total, the courts ordered the payment of damages totalling 7,040 000mFCFA (about \$14,080) to MINFOF. Media exposure was at a rate of a media piece for every three days.

The EAGLE network achieved substantial results as 50 traffickers were arrested across 7 countries.

The work of LAGA was supported by OAK Foundation, The Dutch Gorilla Foundation, ProWildlife, Wildcat Foundation, OAT Foundation, Future for Elephants

LAST GREAT APE ORGANISATION, CAMEROON (LAGA)
SEMESTER REPORT
January - June 2024

OVERVIEW

Investigations

- A total of 67 investigation missions (of varying lengths) were carried out in 6 regions.

Operations

- The semester was marked by some poor results as only 3 traffickers were arrested. Strategies have been put in place to improve on the situation during the second semester of the year.
- Operations were carried out in 2 regions arresting 2 ape traffickers and a notorious ivory trafficker
- Gorilla heads and limbs were seized from two traffickers:

Legal

- No new cases were brought to court. Two traffickers escaped from gendarmerie custody before the charges could be filed against them. A search for the fugitives is on.
- 3 traffickers were found guilty and handed prison sentences and or fines and damages. Damages amounted to some 7,040,000 FCFA (about \$14,080). to be paid to MINFOF.
- 3 court rulings were passed during the 6-month period.

Media

- A total of 60 media pieces were produced in national media (radio, written press and internet) achieved at a rate one for every three days.

Management

- The annual report of 2023 was made available online.
- An external auditing team completed a full audit of the organisation.
- Focus was on maintaining high standards in every department and on improving recruitment for investigators.

External Relations and Policy

- Several meetings were held with MINFOF officials, the diplomatic community, national and international NGOs to discuss issues on collaboration, governance, wildlife law enforcement among others.

Strategic Highlights

- The operational focus over this period was ape trafficking.
- The strategic focus was on selecting, testing and recruiting good investigators, taking into the consideration the not too good results obtained for some time now.
- The CCU evaluated and provided strategic assistance to management, operational and organisational functioning.

EAGLE Activities

- A total of 50 traffickers were arrested across 7 countries of the network during this semester.

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Also available:

1. Annual Financial Statement 2023
2. Annual Activity Report 2023
3. Media archive – Excel database linked to recorded media pieces
4. Photo archive for media use

For copies contact email; eric@laga-enforcement.org

NARRATIVE REPORT

This report covers the period January to June 2024 and focuses on progress in the activities of each department notably investigations, operations, legal, media and management, strategic overview of and the impact of operations on wildlife crime in Cameroon, relations with the Cameroonian government, non-governmental bodies, collaboration with international partners and non-enforcement initiatives that LAGA undertook.

1. Investigations

LAGA's investigation unit carried out 67 investigation missions in 6 regions of the country during this period. Investigations were particularly difficult during the semester as traffickers are extremely cautious and aware of us. They have developed sophisticated and complicated modus operandi. The team is working on several strategies and techniques to meet up with the ever improving trafficking techniques. Focus have been on the strict respect of basic investigative procedures and techniques while devising new complementary techniques. Investigation as a whole take more time to come to fruition as compared to a couple of years ago. Particular emphasis was put on recruitment that was intensified with some candidates interviewed and three candidates retained for testing. One of them was later removed for failing to meet up with the ethical standards the organisation has set.

A new head of department was appointed following the departure of Serge Ania who held the positions for close to 10 years. Gilbert Njuana Atem was formerly the assistant head of the investigations department.

A long serving investigator was promoted to the position of chief investigator; a position that had been vacant for a long time.

The head of the department was part of the operation team during all operations carried out during the first period of the year and this greatly boosted the operation capacity of the whole team.

The country continues to face a challenging security situation in some parts and investigations were not carried out in these regions. Plans have been put in place to fully cover these areas once the situation improves.



Figure 1: Number of Investigations Missions per Month

2. Operations

LAGA and the Government of Cameroon carried out one operations in the East region resulting in the arrest of 2 traffickers and working with security forces in the Kye Ossi a long time ivory trafficker was also arrested. Several factors could account for the poor performances of the semester and management has brought in new orientations and strategies to keep up the high standards the organisation has always maintained. The three traffickers arrested below:

In April, 2 traffickers were arrested in Doume, East Region with parts of 2 killed gorillas The parts that included heads and limbs had blood still dripping indicating the gorillas were recently killed. The two were specialised in poaching and trafficking in great apes. The two disappeared from the Gendarmerie cell where they were remanded in custody with strong links to corruption. They were reported to have “escaped”. The hunt is ongoing and the corruption incident is under investigations. They operated mainly from Lomie and were specialized in trafficking parts of great apes – chimps and gorillas. They had strong connections around their base

In June, a trafficker was arrested in Kye Ossi, South Region in connection with the trafficking of several hundreds of kg of ivory and double identity. Using corruption, he negotiated his release from police custody in Nigeria. He was arrested by Nigeria customs in February at a border town with a handgun and 200 kg of ivory tusks he trafficked from Cameroon. He was also under investigations for his connection to the seizure of 132 elephant tusks in August last year and the arrest of 9 traffickers in Gabon. The ivory tusks were hidden deep inside a truck that was on the way to Nigeria via Cameroon. The truck had to be pulled open and parts removed to find the ivory. He had earlier been arrested in October 2020 in Cameroon, sentenced and served a jail term of only 4 months. He was found guilty of illegal possession of 626kg of elephant tusks that were seized by Cameroon customs at a border town close to Gabon. The elephant tusks were trafficked from Gabon. He is part of a transnational criminal syndicate that uses corruption to facilitate the smuggling of ivory tusks across the sub region and beyond. He was found to have a fake identity and made a set of new identification documents with the fake identity

Operations Table

<i>Number of Operations</i>	<i>Number of Traffickers</i>	<i>Contraband</i>
2	3	2 gorilla heads, 4 chimpanzee limbs, and 4 fresh gorilla limbs.

Figure 2: Operation Table

3. Legal

There were no new cases at the court because the 2 traffickers who were arrested with gorilla and chimpanzee parts escaped from gendarmerie custody before they could be fully charged. The second case against a notorious wildlife trafficker with links all over the sub region is still being handled by INTERPOL and therefore at the initial stages of investigations. Meanwhile old cases were scheduled in court and follow up by the legal team. Three traffickers were convicted and only two received

prison sentences buttressing the fact that the courts are giving weaker and weaker sentences. Too many times, the sentences do not look commensurate to the crimes committed. A mandrill trafficker was given a 4-month jail term in what made up the stiffest punishment during the period and clearly that was not good enough. Damages awarded to MINFOF amounted to some 7,040,000 FCFA (about \$14,080\$).

A total of 43 missions were carried out of the Centre Region for follow-up of new cases and the creation and strengthening of relations with judicial authorities. As a direct result of operations the missions were principally focused on the pangolin scales cases.

During the period 3 court rulings were passed with all three traffickers found guilty and one given a sentence of 4 months in jail while one other 2 months in jail.

In March, the Littoral Appeal Court reversed the judgment of the Bonanjo Court of First Instance against BOUNDOUMA Benoît and, ruling again, ordered the defendant to pay 3,040,000 CFA F (about 6\$) as damages.

He was arrested in Douala on the 03/08/2020 for the illegal possession of one rhinoceros horn.

In June, the Littoral Appeal Court reversed the judgment of the Bonanjo Court of First Instance against BOUNDOUMA Benoît and, ruling again, ordered the defendant to pay 3,040 FCFA (about 600\$) as court fees.

The Ebolowa Court of First Instance found the accused SOUA 2 Ulrich guilty and sentenced him to 4 months in prison and to pay 300,000 FCFA (about 600\$) as fine and 3,000,000 FCFA (about 6000\$) as damages. He was arrested in Ebolowa on the 18/08/2023 for the illegal possession of live mandrill.

The Ebolowa Court of First Instance found the accused Louck John guilty and sentenced him to 2 months in prison and to pay 300,000 FCFA (about 600\$) as fine and 1,000,000 FCFA (about 2000\$) as damages. He was arrested in Ebolowa on the 18/08/2023 for the illegal possession of live chimpanzee.

4. Media

A total of 60 media pieces were produced and pushed into media including numerous articles in all media – radio, television, written press and the internet; achieved at a rate of three media piece every week. This is far below the targeted number of media pieces and improvements to catch up with the situation shall be done during the second semester. The drop in the number of media pieces could be accounted for by the low number of operations obtained during the semester. February recorded the highest number of media pieces and March the lowest. No TV broadcasts were done during the period, a situation that shall be corrected during next semester.

Subjects focused on wildlife law enforcement including the arrest of a city council worker with a drill in Yabassi, the court hearings of wildlife traffickers including 4 traffickers arrested in Akonolinga with 28 African grey parrots and 2 traffickers arrested in Ebolowa with a chimp and a mandrill, the celebration of World Pangolin Day 2024, the arrest of 30 traffickers in 4 African countries during the first quarter of the year 2024, 2 other traffickers arrested in Doume, East Region of Cameroon with gorillas' heads and limbs

The distribution of Wildlife Justice Magazine continued. Wildlife Justice is a thematic journal that focuses on wildlife law enforcement and conservation issues.

No TV media pieces were published during the semester and efforts are being made to correct this discrepancy during the second part of the year.

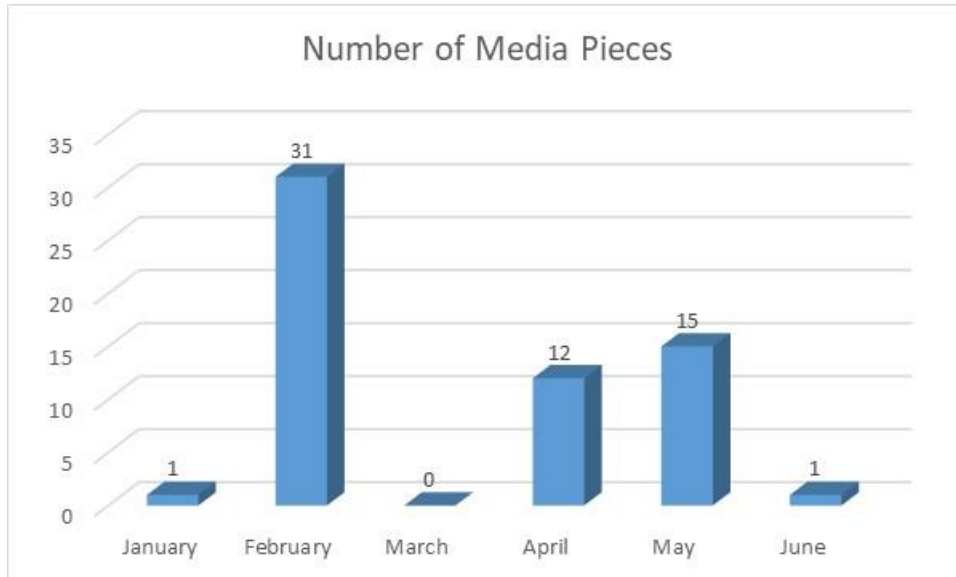


Figure 3: Number of Media Pieces Produced and Published

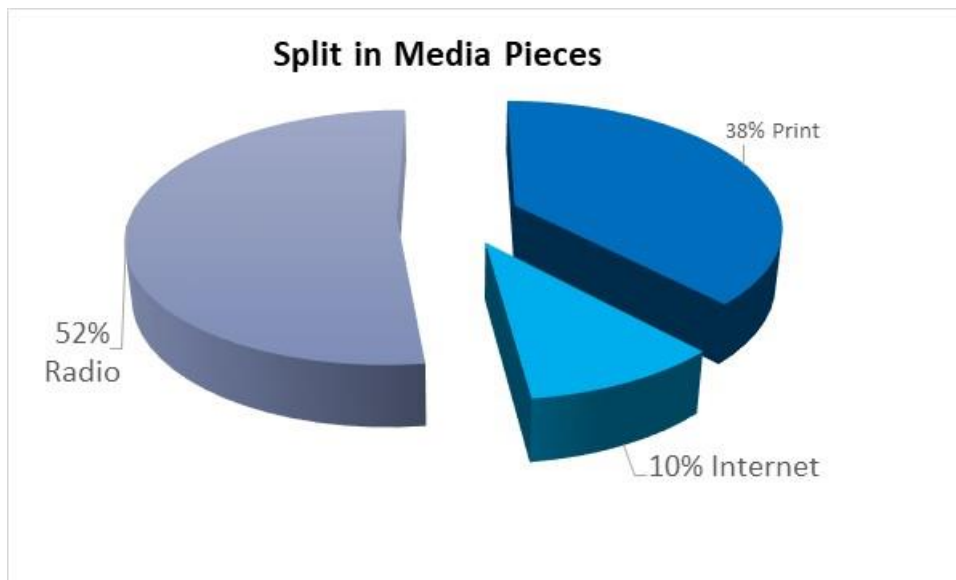


Figure 3: Split in Media Pieces

5. Management

Despite difficulties in ensuring adequate resources for the organisation all the departments worked hard to improving on the results of the semester. The annual report of 2023 was uploaded online. The

electronic versions are available online on the LAGA website www.laga-enforcement.org. This is a result of teamwork involving all the departments in LAGA – Investigations, Legal, Media, Operations and Management.

Several strategies were earmarked to be implemented during the next semester in an effort to improve on the poor results obtained during the first semester.

Two other regions of the country that are seared by security problems continue to pose a challenge but plans have been put in place to quickly cover the regions once the situation on the ground improves.

The annual financial and activity reports of 2023 were successfully completed. The activity report was published online alongside the second semester report of 2023.

An audit session was carried out by Moore Stephens and management provided a professional and conducive work environment and accessibility to all necessary documents to the auditors who successfully carried out their activity.

Recruitment for the investigations and legal departments continued and some candidates were interviewed, some put on test and one recruited at the legal department. Several interviews for the position of accountant were carried out and a new accountant recruited.

A couple of thought-provoking sessions of presentations and debates for the LAGA team were organised to foster activism and leadership skills. A wide range of topics including activism were presented and debated. This initiative also aims at strengthening the capacity, unity and values of the LAGA family.

6. External Relations and Policy

Several meetings were held with MINFOF officials, the diplomatic community, national and international NGOs to discuss issues on collaboration, governance, wildlife law enforcement among others. Here is a summary of some of the meetings.

The Deputy Director participated at a roundtable meeting organised by the Environmental Investigation Agency in Abuja, that brought together customs, wildlife, Interpol and financial investigation authorities from Nigeria, Cameroon and Congo Brazzaville. He did a presentation on the fight against wildlife trafficking in Cameroon.

During the missions he held several discussions with Nigerian and Congolese officials to strengthen collaboration in the fight against wildlife crime.

He participated at a ceremony organised by WWF to welcome their incoming National Director, Alain Ononino. The new country director of the organisation was formerly the Head of the Legal Department and the first ever Deputy Director of LAGA. During the meeting he had a brief discussion with the Head of the Department of Cooperation at the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife.

He held a meeting with the Chief of Service in charge of wildlife crime at the INTERPOL National Central Bureau to strengthen collaboration in the fight against wildlife crime.

The Deputy Director held a meeting with 3 American Embassy officials including the Head of the Political Section to discuss issues related to wildlife law enforcement in the country.

He participated at a virtual Regional INTERPOL meeting that was organised to discuss wildlife law enforcement and collaboration. He highlighted the importance of effective collaboration in wildlife law enforcement.

He participated at a workshop in Douala that wound up a two-year project of TRAFFIC on Ivory Stock Management. He did presentation on wildlife crime focusing on the causes, trends and impact. Participants included wildlife officials, the police, customs, justice and territorial administration officials.

7. LAGA and the EAGLE Network

LAGA's new model for NGO – Government collaboration establishing wildlife law enforcement, bringing about results with an innovative approach geared at changing the existing system and triggering a paradigm shift in the way NGOs tackle wildlife crime is being realised within the EAGLE network. The model is focusing on the prosecution of major traffickers, not the small-time poacher who is motivated by the city dwelling traffickers. This involves fighting head on the major obstacle to the application of the wildlife law in Africa – Corruption. LAGA's experience and model is currently operating within the EAGLE network that group 9 countries.

The replication of the LAGA model is also geared at taking cross section lessons outside of wildlife conservation; these include the fight against corruption, fostering activism, fight against child trafficking etc.

<http://www.laga-enforcement.org/Replication/tabid/166/Default.aspx>

The EAGLE network is now responsible for the replication activity of the LAGA model but LAGA continued to host training sessions in the country and in this regard, LAGA hosted a super volunteer who received training and participated in numerous field activities.

8. Fostering Activism

All the activism fostering activities carried out by the LAGA family are online; this could be gotten at the LAGA website – **<http://www.laga-enforcement.org/Activism/tabid/77/Default.aspx>**

Presentation

A power point presentation was given by Loveline (Legal Adviser) in view of the celebration of the International Women's Day (IWD) titled '*IWD 2024, time to accelerate*'. The presentation examined the political, social and economic achievements of women since the creation of IWD. It equally stated the need to accelerate things in order to meet up with its objectives of gender equality by 2049.

Movie Screening

A movie, 'Bringing down a dictator' was screened in the office as part of activities marking the commemoration of Labour Day celebration in LAGA. The movie centers on the use of peaceful or non-violent method in a protest to bring a positive change. It also outlines some qualities including determination, fighting spirit and teamwork a team should have in order to succeed in a common cause. The Otpor had all of these qualities which made it possible for them to bring down Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia.

9. Strategic Overview of Wildlife Crime in Cameroon and Operations' Impact

Beyond the number of operations and their effectiveness, there is an even more important factor in evaluating LAGA's work – the strategic value of the operations and its impact on the illegal wildlife trade. In this regard, LAGA is choosing diversified operations, which carry an added value to expose and map the different angles of wildlife crime in Cameroon. Consequently, the LAGA-MINFOF work sheds light on the nature of illegal wildlife trade in the sub-region. The strategic focus over this period was on chimp, gorilla and ivory trafficking.

9.1 Ape Trafficking

Two ape traffickers were arrested in the south east of the country in a locality not too far from Deja reserve that still has some viable populations of wildlife. The traffickers were specialised in poaching and trafficking of gorillas and chimpanzee parts supplying the special parts (heads and limbs) to some officials including traditional heads. They were quickly removed from the chain that slaughters and rapidly decimates ape populations in areas where you could still find viable groups of these animals. But unfortunately they were reported as “escaped” from gendarmerie custody and little is known about their whereabouts right now although we assisted authorities in a man-hunt. They could just as well be killing more of the apes – something the operation tried to stop.

10. Corruption and Wildlife Crime

LAGA has been an experiment field for methods of fighting corruption within a law enforcement and application process. All bribing attempts are documented into our case tracking systems. LAGA is not an observer of corruption; it was created to fight corruption, redirecting the positive pressures existing within the system, usually wasted in large conferences, to specific corruption attempts and the field realities that form corruption. These bribery attempts are vigorously fought against and vehemently condemned by LAGA. LAGA is not a watchdog group and not created as an observer, it fights directly whenever corrupt practices or bribery attempts have been observed.

This ongoing fight is directed towards issues that touch on corruption and bad governance. In April, 2 traffickers were arrested with gorilla parts and the prosecution procedure was well advanced when suddenly they were reported as “escaped” from gendarmerie custody.

In June, a notorious big time ivory trafficker was arrested in Cameroon. Using corruption, he had negotiated his release from police custody in Nigeria when he was arrested by Nigeria customs in February at a border town with a handgun and 200 kg of ivory tusks he trafficked from Cameroon.

Annex I – List of Cases of 2023

The list of cases and details of specific cases are made available on demand. Please contact eric@laga-enforcement.org for further information.

Annex II - the Semester in Pictures



Traffickers pose with law enforcement shortly after the seizure of 78kg of pangolin scales at a popular bus stop town in Centre Cameroon



Annex III- Some media links

Some online news sites carried stories on the trafficking and arrest, here are some examples:

In April, Alwihda info, a news site, published the arrest of 30 traffickers in 4 African countries during the first quarter of the year. These arrest were carried out with the technical assistance of NGOs in the EAGLE network. Click the link below to get the full story:

https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Afrique-30-trafiquants-arretes-dans-quatre-pays-du-continent_a131947.html?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR1EPlobwzyqpx0GtEG7Mvh-8w_Y48JgKEolf0T3EIDDFshQCwp8OMuWtbU_aem_AYaEKEn34xXqmkIGVDnqP1Pe9CbuVuB8yRHZJPA2Mv97IEj4x3FyBoSeZBsgjPAc5bA73ix1-ieI_cqFgMk3-zit

In May, Alwihda info, published the arrest of 2 traffickers with gorillas' heads and limbs. They were arrested during a crackdown operation carried out by wildlife officials in collaboration with the Gendarmerie and with the technical assistance of LAGA. Click the link below to read the full story:

[Cameroun : deux trafiquants fauniques arrêtés avec des parties de gorilles à Doumé
\(alwihdainfo.com\)](https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Cameroun-deux-trafiquants-fauniques-arretes-avec-des-parties-de-gorilles-a-Doume)