# African Parks admits human rights abuses by rangers in Republic of Congo park



## African Parks Faces Scrutiny Over Human Rights Abuses in Congo

The prominent conservation charity, African Parks, linked to Prince Harry, has acknowledged serious human rights abuses committed by its rangers in the Odzala-Kokoua National Park, situated in the Republic of Congo. This admission comes after a thorough independent review, commissioned by the charity, confirmed allegations made by members of the Baka community. The specific findings of this review, however, have not been made public, prompting criticism and concern among human rights advocates.

The supposed abuses include accusations of physical violence and sexual assaults inflicted upon local villagers to prevent them from accessing their ancestral lands. Reports surfaced last year, initially highlighted by *The Mail on Sunday*, indicating that the abuses involved shocking acts such as beatings, waterboarding, and rape, actions allegedly taken by park rangers against the Baka people, whose rights have long been jeopardised by conservation efforts in the region.

African Parks' response included a formal statement in which it reiterated its zero-tolerance policy towards any form of abuse. The organisation claims to have improved its safeguarding measures over recent years. It has engaged the law firm Omnia Strategy LLP to conduct the independent investigation and has urged all individuals with knowledge of the alleged abuses to report these incidents either to the charity or to authorities in the Republic of Congo. Yet, despite these commitments, the lack of transparency surrounding the investigation's findings raises significant questions about accountability.

In recent communications, African Parks has insisted that it is actively addressing the situation. This includes implementing new policies and establishing partnerships with local human rights NGOs, aiming to better support the Baka communities. Furthermore, the organisation announced the appointment of an anthropologist to assist in fostering a more collaborative relationship with local populations. Critics, however, remain sceptical, arguing that such measures, while well-intentioned, have frequently fallen short of preventing human rights violations. Survival International, an advocacy group focused on the rights of Indigenous peoples, has expressed concerns that African Parks has known about these alleged abuses for over a decade yet has taken insufficient action to protect the affected communities.

The Baka community’s sentiment towards the conservation efforts is complex and often fraught with tension. The establishment of the Odzala-Kokoua National Park has historically displaced local populations, leading to a conflict of interests between conservation goals and Indigenous rights. There are allegations that park rangers, in their efforts to combat poaching, have resorted to violence against innocent villagers. This troubling reality raises ethical questions about the balance between environmental stewardship and the respect for human rights in protected areas.

Despite the ongoing investigations and promised reforms, the ethical ramifications of conservation efforts continue to linger. African Parks manages 23 protected areas across 13 African countries and is backed by various wealthy patrons. Nonetheless, its handling of these allegations may ultimately affect its reputation and ability to operate effectively within vulnerable communities.

As scrutiny intensifies, the global conservation community is left grappling with the imperatives of ecological preservation and the protection of human rights. The revelation of these human rights abuses presents a stark reminder that the fight for conservation must not overlook the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples. The path forward requires not only a commitment to accountability but also a genuine partnership with the communities that inhabit and uphold these biodiverse terrains.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq54dgv2p29o), [[2]](https://www.africanparks.org/statement-board-and-ceo-african-parks-regarding-allegations-human-rights-abuses-rangers-odzala)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq54dgv2p29o), [[4]](https://indigenous.arizona.edu/odzala-kokoua-national-park)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.africanparks.org/statement-board-and-ceo-african-parks-regarding-allegations-human-rights-abuses-rangers-odzala), [[3]](https://www.africanparks.org/african-parks-follow-response-allegations-human-rights-abuses-odzala-kokoua-national-park-republic), [[5]](https://news.mongabay.com/2024/02/african-parks-vows-to-investigate-allegations-of-abuse-at-congolese-park/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://indigenous.arizona.edu/odzala-kokoua-national-park), [[6]](https://fr.mongabay.com/2024/02/african-parks-sengage-a-enqueter-sur-des-allegations-de-violences-dans-un-parc-congolais/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.africanparks.org/african-parks-follow-response-allegations-human-rights-abuses-odzala-kokoua-national-park-republic), [[7]](https://news.mongabay.com/2024/06/unesco-accused-of-supporting-human-rights-abuses-in-african-parks/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq54dgv2p29o> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.africanparks.org/statement-board-and-ceo-african-parks-regarding-allegations-human-rights-abuses-rangers-odzala> - In January 2024, African Parks acknowledged serious allegations of human rights abuses by eco-guards against local people near Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo. The organization emphasized its zero-tolerance policy for any form of abuse and committed to upholding the rights of local and indigenous communities. An external law firm, Omnia Strategy LLP, was commissioned to investigate the allegations, and African Parks urged Survival International to provide any additional information to assist with the investigation. The organization encouraged individuals with knowledge of any abuses to report them to African Parks or Congolese law enforcement authorities to ensure perpetrators are brought to justice.
3. <https://www.africanparks.org/african-parks-follow-response-allegations-human-rights-abuses-odzala-kokoua-national-park-republic> - In February 2024, African Parks provided a follow-up response to the allegations of human rights abuses in Odzala-Kokoua National Park. The organization detailed immediate actions taken since June 2023, including verifying the alleged incidents against their grievance register and commissioning an independent legal investigation by Omnia Strategy LLP, supported by Doughty Street Chambers and a Baka anthropologist. African Parks emphasized its commitment to a zero-tolerance policy for human rights abuses and outlined existing mechanisms in place to prevent such incidents, including comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures, regular training, a clear chain of command, and grievance mechanisms. The organization also highlighted the employment of a social safeguards manager and a partnership with a local human rights NGO in Odzala since 2020.
4. <https://indigenous.arizona.edu/odzala-kokoua-national-park> - Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo has a history of human rights violations by park rangers against Indigenous communities accessing their ancestral lands. In 2013, African Parks initiated a firearm amnesty program, offering poachers positions as park rangers in exchange for weapons and intelligence. However, reports indicate that park rangers have been involved in assaults and accusations of poaching against local villagers, despite the absence of weapons or hunting gear. These incidents highlight ongoing tensions between conservation efforts and the rights of Indigenous peoples in the region.
5. <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/02/african-parks-vows-to-investigate-allegations-of-abuse-at-congolese-park/> - In February 2024, African Parks vowed to investigate allegations of abuse at Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo. The allegations, first published by the Daily Mail in January 2024, included testimonies from Indigenous Baka community members who claimed to have been beaten and sexually assaulted by park rangers employed by African Parks. In response, African Parks contracted the UK-based law firm Omnia Strategy LLP to conduct an independent investigation into the allegations. The organization emphasized its commitment to upholding the rights of local and indigenous communities and urged individuals with knowledge of any abuses to report them to African Parks or Congolese law enforcement authorities.
6. <https://fr.mongabay.com/2024/02/african-parks-sengage-a-enqueter-sur-des-allegations-de-violences-dans-un-parc-congolais/> - In February 2024, African Parks committed to investigating allegations of violence in a Congolese park. The Daily Mail had reported in January 2024 that rangers working for African Parks in Odzala-Kokoua National Park had beaten and raped members of the Baka community. In response, African Parks announced it had engaged the UK-based law firm Omnia Strategy to investigate these allegations. The organization emphasized its zero-tolerance policy for human rights abuses and urged individuals with knowledge of any abuses to report them to African Parks or Congolese law enforcement authorities to ensure perpetrators are brought to justice.
7. <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/06/unesco-accused-of-supporting-human-rights-abuses-in-african-parks/> - In June 2024, UNESCO faced accusations of supporting human rights abuses in African parks. The International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) criticized UNESCO for not enforcing the values outlined in its Constitution, particularly concerning Indigenous peoples' rights in World Heritage Sites. The article highlighted the case of Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo, where the Baka community's ancestral land was taken for the park, leading to displacement and alleged human rights violations. Despite these issues, the park was awarded World Heritage status by UNESCO in September 2023, raising questions about the organization's commitment to Indigenous rights.