



# Children of the Forest

*Madina School: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Africa*



# Introduction

The African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) is one of Africa's oldest and largest conservation organizations. We believe conservation can only succeed in Africa if it is linked to the aspirations and mindsets of the African people. To that end, we support African conservation leadership and develop conservation solutions in partnership with African institutions, rural communities, and wildlife authorities.

As part of creating a conservation mindset, AWF provides conservation education to school children who call Africa's most important ecosystems home. One of those ecosystems is the Congo Basin rainforest, known as the lungs of Africa. It absorbs more carbon than the Amazon and is one of the most biodiverse places on Earth—1/3 of its trees and

plants are found nowhere else. The rainforest stretches across six African countries with 60% in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The DRC is one of the five poorest countries in the world. Since 2002, AWF has been working there to reduce deforestation and biodiversity loss while increasing opportunities for local communities that depend on the rainforest for their livelihoods. Commercial bushmeat hunting, which is often illegal, threatens wildlife. Bushfires, slash-and-burn farming, and cutting trees for logging and fuel are leading drivers of deforestation.





*Setting out from Boende*

**BOENDE**



*There is no road,  
just a narrow track*



*Sometimes, the only  
way is through....*

# The Journey

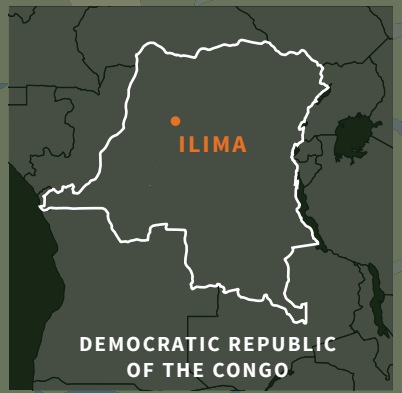
One of the first forest communities we worked with in the DRC is Ilima, a remote village in the northern part of the country. It is a grueling 12-hour motorbike ride from the nearest town, Boende.

The village is in a wildlife corridor between two nature reserves. Residents have partnered with AWF on strategies to stop illegal hunting and adopt sustainable agricultural practices.



*...or across*

**ILIMA**



As an incentive to the Ilima community for its commitment to conservation, in 2013, with the support of the Nancy and Charles Wall Family Foundation Fund, AWF constructed a primary school for the village.

Since opening in 2015, Madina Conservation School has educated 1,400 children in grades 1-6. Students learn how their environment plays a unique role as part of an ecosystem and why it is important to protect it. They bring this knowledge home, contributing to a better community-wide understanding of conservation.





*“I’m proud of these children because if you go into their homes, you can find a child forbidding his or her parents to cut down a tree for any reason. Children advise their parents not to kill wild animals because of what they’ve been taught.”*

Divin Nemo Bongwalaka  
Conservation Educator, Madina School







The bonobo, or “pygmy chimpanzee,” is an endangered great ape found only in the DRC. Population numbers are on the decline, with habitat loss and commercial bushmeat hunting posing the greatest threats. Bonobos, like forest elephants, serve an important ecological role in the forest as dispersers of seeds. The school’s interventions and other actions are reinstating eroding cultural norms and beliefs about coexistence with nature. For instance, eating bonobos is considered a taboo in the community.




Lokuli Ilima

1ST GRADE, 6 YEARS OLD



Lokilo Lokoka

2ND GRADE, 7 YEARS OLD



Lokuli Ilima, a six-year-old first grader, was one of 110 boys enrolled at the Madina Conservation School for the 2023-2024 school year. Second grader Lokilo Lokoka is one of 125 girls enrolled. Their school year is comprised of three terms, with a 12-week break from June to September. The typical school day starts at 7:30AM and ends at 12:30PM, with classes taught in Lingala, one of the local languages. Conservation is taught through clubs after school. In the afternoon, children return to their homes to do family chores.

A portrait of a young boy, Bongole Likolo Matthieu-Arthur, with his arms crossed. He is wearing a purple t-shirt with a cartoon pirate ship and clouds. The background is a textured wall. The image is framed by green leaf patterns on the left and right sides.

Bongole Likolo Matthieu-Arthur

5TH GRADE, 10 YEARS OLD

**I am 10 years old.**

In my village, you can find bonobos, the forest, and water.

And I like the bonobo best. I like it because it's useful for our survival.

We can protect bonobos by sending even five rangers or scouts into the forest. If they go in armed and a poacher passes by, they can make a face and make the poacher run away.

We're taught in our school how the bonobo is close to us, how

the bonobo gives birth, and teaches their children to pick the fruits from trees.

I want the people of the world to know that we are protecting the forests and we don't kill bonobos. In the Ilima village, we don't kill bonobos. We know they are helpful for our survival, and they can only live in our forest. So we have to make sure that no poacher enters it so that both the forest and the bonobo are safe from danger.



*Drawing by Bongole Likolo Matthieu-Arthur*

A portrait of a young boy, Buendo Nseka Jérémie, smiling and looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark blue polo shirt with a red and white striped collar. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green foliage. The image is framed by dark green vertical bars on the left and right sides, each featuring a stylized leaf pattern.

Buendo Nseka Jérémie

**3RD GRADE, 9 YEARS OLD**





**I am 9 years old.**

In my village, we have trees, streams, and animals. Of all those, I love trees the best!

I love them because they absorb carbon dioxide and bring us oxygen, and everyone needs oxygen. We can protect our trees by making sure nobody cuts them down because they're the ones that give us caterpillars. I also love caterpillars because we eat them a lot!

I want everyone to know about all the animals in Ilima: the cow, the pig, the goat, and even the elephants in the forest.

A portrait of a young girl, Lokuli Iyau, smiling and looking slightly to the right. She has dark skin and her hair is styled in small braids. She is wearing a light green t-shirt with some text on it. The background is a blurred green, suggesting an outdoor setting. The image is framed by a dark green border with a stylized leaf pattern on the left and right sides.

Lokuli Iyau

4TH GRADE, 8 YEARS OLD



**I am 8 years old.**

We live in a beautiful village that is surrounded by a forest that has animals, trees, fish and water. I love elephants the most, because I learnt that their droppings make a lot of trees grow.

We need to protect them very well, because there aren't many elephants left in the forest today, and the only way to make sure we have more elephants is by not killing them and letting them reproduce again and again.

*Water, I am water.*

*I am colorless, tasteless and odorless.  
I'm important to human life, animals,  
et cetera et cetera.*

*Who among you has not touched me this morning?*

*Protect me more.*

*Air, I am air.*

*I'm colorless, tasteless and odorless.*

*I'm indispensable to human life, animal life et  
cetera et cetera.*

*Who among you didn't see me this morning?  
Protect me more.*


*Fauna is the sum of all animals in a region.*

*Poem by Lokuli Iyau*

A close-up portrait of a young girl with short, dark, curly hair, smiling broadly. She is wearing a light green t-shirt with some red and white graphics. The background is a lush, green, out-of-focus forest. The image is framed by dark green vertical bars on the left and right sides, each featuring a stylized, light green leaf pattern.

Mboyo Elombe Niclette

**6TH GRADE, 11 YEARS OLD**



**I am 11 years old.**

In my village we have trees, air, water and the bonobo.


I love the bonobos a lot because they help us. When foreigners visit the bonobos and appreciate them, it will do us good. I know the bonobo can't survive outside the forests, so we must not cut the forest.

We are taught about the forests and the animals found there, and how to protect animals like the bonobo.









*Around Ilima and the Madina Conservation School, strong evidence suggests that bonobos and other wildlife have improved populations.*

*Learn more about our conservation work in northern Democratic Republic of the Congo:*

*[awf.org/mlw-madina](http://awf.org/mlw-madina)*

