

Logline:

SILENT FORESTS is an intimate portrait of conservationists and activists who are fighting against all odds to stop forest elephant poaching in Africa's Congo Basin region.

Story Summary/Synopsis:



We begin deep in the forests of Congo-Brazzaville with biologist **Clement Inkamba-Nkulu**.

Clement researches elephant clearings in the Bateke Plateau, doing acoustic monitoring to evaluate the abundance of elephants living in this dense forest. His studies are part of a larger regional effort called the Elephant Listening Project. The

ELP studies forest elephant communication to help deepen our understanding about how these complex and intelligent animals “speak” with each other and form social bonds. We follow Clement deep into the Congolese wilderness and observe the forest elephants interacting in their native habitat. Clement explains how the forest elephant is distinct from its related species, the savannah elephant, and how instrumental they are in shaping the forest ecosystem all around the Congo Basin.

But even at these remote clearings, the poaching pressure is starting to mount. Clement used to see herds more in the daytime, but with several poaching incidents that have happened nearby, he is noticing that the elephants are more wary and cautious - sometimes only coming out during the nighttime. He worries it is only a matter of time before he stops seeing them at all.



Another challenge that Clement faces is the logging companies that are working in the area. They create roads that penetrate deep into the forest, which are then used as pathways for poachers to enter the clearings by moped to kill the elephants. Clement is petitioning the government for help in creating a national park in this area, so it will be better protected and eco-guards can be hired to conduct anti-poaching patrols. But so far his efforts have not yielded any results, and his clearings remain defenseless.

In neighboring Cameroon, we meet eco-guard **Sidonie Asseme**. Sidonie is a mother of five who has worked as a park ranger for the last decade – she was, in fact, one of Cameroon’s very first female eco-guards. She treks for weeks on end in the dense jungle, searching for poaching camps – and her dedication has led to the arrest and detention of 15 poachers and counting. Not surprisingly, though, her work has made her a target: she has received death threats, beatings, and was once locked in a house by poachers who threatened to set her and three other rangers on fire. Sidonie is frustrated that she and her fellow eco-guards do this difficult work while being completely under-funded and under-resourced. They actually patrol the forest *without* guns, and are vulnerable to attack at any moment. They beg the Cameroonian government to give them the means to protect themselves, but so far their pleas have fallen on deaf ears.



An important part of Sidonie’s job is bio-monitoring, or observing the various animals that come and go from park clearings. Her favorite animals to see in the wild are the forest elephants; but in these same clearings that she used to see plentiful elephant herds at, she now sees none. “The poaching has

scared them all off, they are really threatened here.” To drive home her point, she and her fellow eco-guards find recently abandoned poaching camps all around the clearings they are monitoring.

Wildlife trafficking has become an increasingly high-level organized crime in recent years, and poachers sometimes have access to assault rifles to carry out their hunts on a massive scale. These sophisticated weapons are a threat for both the targeted animals, and the rangers trying to protect them. Sidonie puts her life in peril in order to protect this forest bloc from more militarized poaching gangs. When we revisit Sidonie later in the film, she reveals that the Cameroonian military is finally releasing guns to them so they can defend themselves on patrol. Per Sidonie: “It’s a real war now. And I must win.”

We travel from the depths of the forest to the chaotic streets of Yaounde, to meet **Eric Tah** and the LAGA Wildlife Law Enforcement Group. LAGA is a grassroots group of dedicated Cameroonian activists that have carried out countless operations into the web of wildlife crime in this region. They are just launching a new investigation into a trafficker who calls himself “Sans Peur”, or “Without Fear.” We observe the hours of work and planning that go into a sting operation. These investigations come with a high risk, especially when the criminals one is targeting are well-connected.



Adding to the difficulties is the endemic corruption at some of the highest echelons of police and government ministries. Sometimes the very same people who are supposed to enforce anti-trafficking laws are the ones breaking them. Eric and his team speak candidly about confronting corruption while trying

to work within the Cameroonian legal system. We'll embed with LAGA's undercover unit and follow the anatomy of an investigation from start to finish – including the critical moment that a trafficker is taken down.

Wildlife law enforcement can also come in furry packages – like Cama, Rick, and Shon. -These sniffer dogs are the Republic of Congo's gatekeepers for finding endangered species products that poachers are attempting to smuggle out of the country. The contraband they are trained to detect ranges from primate body parts to ivory to bushmeat. The dog team is led by **Arthur Sneigon**, a Czech conservationist who has spearheaded anti-poaching activism in Congo since 2014.

Recently, though, Arthur has struggled to get permission from the government to continue his sniffer dog operations. He laments that he is stuck in a web of bureaucracy and corruption, with administrators demanding bribes that he cannot pay. He tries to remain optimistic about the future of his dog program, but if something doesn't change soon, he fears he may run out of support from his program's funders.



But this setback doesn't keep Arthur out of the fight entirely... He is part of the same activist network as Eric's group LAGA, and the two sometimes work together across country borders to take down wildlife criminals. We follow Arthur from Congo to Cameroon, where he is part of an investigation into a major ivory trafficking network – with a ringleader who smuggles ivory through a U.N. refugee camp.

A final focus of SILENT FORESTS is **Jean-Paul**, a former elephant poacher who now owns a small cocoa farm and herd of goats. He is the head of a support group of reformed poachers in this area; they are atoning for their past actions and finding less destructive ways of making a living. We attend a meeting of this support group, where Jean-Paul and other members discuss the recent increase of poaching in the area, and plans for the future of their alliance.



Jean-Paul speaks about the poverty that drove him to poach in the first place, and he expresses regret at his decades of slaughter. “When I killed them, I felt terrible. The elephant – it’s like a person. When you kill them, the family sees it, and flees into the forest. If you hunted the Dad elephant, who did the Mom live with after that? What happened to his family?” The irony that his own concern for feeding his family caused him to decimate elephant families isn’t lost

on Jean-Paul.

Throughout the film we revisit each story as it progresses through its arc ... Sidonie on patrol with her team.. do they encounter poachers in the forest? Eric’s investigative unit... is their ivory sting operation with Arthur successful? We'll be there for those key moments of action, no matter whether they are of triumph or failure.

We will also witness how passionate and tenacious these conservationists are, even though they are up against huge institutional challenges like corruption and lack of funding that threaten to systematically derail all their attempts to save the endangered species of the Congo Basin.

In the end, SILENT FORESTS will be an in-depth look at one particular under-reported region as a microcosm to understand the global poaching crisis we face, and what it is like for the men and women who are on the front lines of this war for wildlife.

Topic Summary/Background Info:

We are in the midst of an elephant poaching epidemic across the African continent. Fueled by a growing middle class in Asia that is hungry for ivory status symbols, these iconic and intelligent mammals are being slaughtered for their tusks at an alarming rate. Experts say that if this trend continues, we may be living in a world without wild elephants in the next ten to fifteen years.

While there has been a lot of media focus on savannah elephants in eastern and southern Africa, very little light has been shed on the forest elephant crisis in central Africa. Here, in what some call Africa’s last Eden, a battle is playing out on multiple fronts for the future of the elusive forest elephant. After a 2011 forest survey revealed that more than half the forest elephant population has been lost to poaching in the last decade, there has been a concerted attempt to try and save those that remain. But it’s an uphill battle: A June 2015 report in *Science* highlighted the Tridom region (Congo, Cameroon, and Gabon) as one of the top three elephant poaching hotspots in the world today.

This is especially bad news given the forest elephant's important biological role within its larger ecosystem. Uniquely built for such a dense environment, the forest elephant makes its way through the thick underbrush by using its tusks to push plants and small trees aside. While this may sound destructive, it actually helps to let sunlight down to the forest floor, which allows new plants to grow and creates natural clearings and pathways for other animals to use. Their dung is a useful fertilizer, and their herbivorous diet means that the elephants consume and transport seeds all across the forest, aiding in the distribution of plant species. In fact, forest elephants disperse more intact seeds than any other animal in the African forest – and their stomach acids help germinate many of these seeds at a much faster rate. They are true gardeners of the jungle.

Links to background information:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-33186445>

<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0059469>

<https://phys.org/news/2017-10-forest-elephant-populations-collapse-central.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/31/african-forest-elephants-extinction-study>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/12/paradise-and-hell-the-battle-to-save-the-forest-elephant>

Director's statement:

SILENT FORESTS will be my third film that has to do with wildlife crime and illegal trade; it is a subject I am both passionate about and familiar with. My hope is that this documentary will shed light on the severity of the situation in central Africa, and how damaging the ivory trade is for all species -- humans included. I want audiences to leave SILENT FORESTS with a realistic look at what its like to be on the frontlines of conservation in this region day to day... including the dangers, the rewards, the frustrations – and how good efforts are riddled with challenges from dishonest and inept government entities.

One unique thing about this film that I believe makes it stand out from some other recent documentaries about poaching issues is that three of the four main characters are from either Cameroon or Congo. So this isn't just a story about figures from the international conservationist community going to save Africa's wildlife. This is about African activists, scientists, and eco-guards and who care deeply about what is happening in their own backyards. The very nature of their work can oftentimes put them at odds with their fellow countrymen, and the risks they assume to protect the animals of the Congo Basin are significant.

A way in which I hope SILENT FORESTS will help to transform discourse around the subject of poaching is through telling the story of someone who used to be involved in the ivory trade. I think that the viewpoint of a person who has been on the poaching side will bring nuance to an issue that is normally seen as very black-and-white. Former poacher Jean Paul's story will hopefully allow viewers to see that those at the bottom level of this criminal trade are not just terrible people who have a bloodlust for slaughtering elephants, but that they are driven

to commit an extreme and awful act by grinding and endemic poverty. The regret expressed by Jean Paul represents an often-unheard perspective, and his anti-poaching “support” group highlights one unique solution to the problem of poaching – rehabilitating former poachers by offering them alternate forms of income, and getting them involved on the anti-poaching side with financial incentives.

The eventual goal of this project is to invoke a sense of urgency about the plight of the forest elephant, and to show the root causes that keep poaching as problematic as it currently is in Africa -- poverty and corruption. My desire is for SILENT FORESTS to educate the public about this overlooked elephant subspecies, and engage audiences to support groups dedicated to ending the forest elephant poaching epidemic before it's too late.

Other Project Details:

We will have a 109-minute theatrical cut, and are also planning to do a 60-minute cut for broadcast options once we have a confirmed broadcaster.

SILENT FORESTS has so far screened at the following film festivals:

World Premiere: Santa Barbara Film Festival 2019, Social Justice Documentary Competition

Big Sky Documentary Film Festival – Finalist, Feature Documentary Competition

D.C. Environmental Film Festival

Taos Environmental Film Festival

Brooklyn Film Festival

SILENT FORESTS participated in the following pitches and doc markets:

American Documentary Film Festival Pitch 2016

Hot Docs “Deal Makers” 2016

Sunny Side of the Doc 2016

IFP Film Week “Spotlight on Docs” 2016

Big Sky Documentary Film Festival Pitch 2017

DOC NYC “Only In New York” Roundtable Meetings 2017

Production and Post-Production Schedule:

February – March 2015

First shoot in Cameroon filming with main characters

April 2015 – April 2016

Work Sample Edit/Fundraising

April-June 2016

Pre-Production on Second Shoot, attended Hot Docs “Deal Makers”

July - August 2016

Second Shoot – Cameroon; follow up with subjects, film with Arthur Sniegon

September – December 2016

Translation of material, continued fundraising, attended IFP “Spotlight on Docs”

January 2017

Third shoot – Congo to film sniffer dogs and forest elephant biologist, attended Big Sky Pitch

February 2017 – Summer 2017

Finalize transcriptions and translations, script film

Summer 2017 – Fall 2018

Post-production and edit, music composition

Completion: Winter 2018

Artistic Approach:

This film takes viewers to the frontlines of conservation using an immersive, vérité-style approach. SILENT FORESTS is a character-driven and cinematic look at the battle for the future of the forest elephant. We take advantage of Congo and Cameroon’s natural beauty by showcasing time lapses, slider “dolly” shots, wildlife scenics, and aerials to help make this film as cinematically captivating as possible.

The storyline is driven by scenes and vérité moments with our main characters. These scenes are buttressed by explanations from either on-the-fly interviews or main sit-down interviews with those characters, who speak to the big picture of what is happening right now in the central Africa... and what is at stake if they aren’t able to halt this ivory highway.

Received Funding from:

Rogovy Foundation Miller/Packan Film Fund, 2016

Eastman Fund Grant, 2016

Telluride Mountainfilm Commitment Grant, 2016

Kickstarter Campaign, 2016

Puffin Foundation, 2017

NYSCA Grant, 2017

OCE Foundation Grant, 2017

Private Donations

In-Kind Donations

Key Creative Personnel:



MARIAH WILSON, DIRECTOR and PRODUCER:

For over fifteen years Mariah Wilson has produced content for PBS (*Nature*, *History Detectives*), National Geographic (*Doomsday Preppers*, *Lockdown*), A&E (*Intervention*), Animal Planet, Investigation Discovery (*Hate in America*), History Channel, Discovery, Weather Channel, MSNBC, VICE Media, Google, Vocativ, and The Smithsonian Institution.

In 2010 she completed her first documentary [REVEALING HATE](#) about the white supremacist movement in America. The film played at film festivals across the country and received a “Courageous Filmmaking” award at the Durango Film Festival. It was distributed by Cactus Three Films and Dark Hollow Films, and has aired on PBS and LINK TV. In 2012 she completed [VOLUNTEER](#) (Honolulu Film Award recipient) a film about eco-volunteering experiences in Uganda and Fiji that touch on worldwide poaching issues. It was distributed by Optimum TV and Dark Hollow Films and has aired on First HDTV.

In 2016 she released [KAZIRANGA](#) (Humane Society ACE Award/Grant) about the rhino poaching crisis in India, and in 2017 she premiered [EEYA](#), about indigenous Baka tribes in Cameroon who are caught in the crossfire of poaching (Best International Short Director - Melbourne Documentary Film Festival, featured on National Geographic’s “Wildlife Watch”).

Mariah also worked on Andrew Berends’ film [MADINA’S DREAM](#) about conflict in Sudan’s Nuba Mountains (2015 SXSW Film Festival, 2015 Telluride Mountainfilm Festival), and Windy Borman’s [MARY JANES: THE WOMEN OF WEED](#) (Woodstock Film Festival 2017, Mill Valley Film Festival 2017)

Mariah’s current film [SILENT FORESTS](#) is about conservationists fighting to save forest elephants from ivory trafficking in Africa’s Congo Basin. The film was a recipient of a Telluride Mountainfilm Commitment Grant, and received additional funding from the Rogovy Foundation, NYSCA, and OCE Foundation. SILENT FORESTS was part of IFP Spotlight on Docs, Hot Docs Deal Makers, Big Sky Pitch, and DOC NYC Pro. It premiered at Santa Barbara Film Festival (2019), DCEFF, and was a finalist in the Feature Competition at Big Sky Doc Film Festival.

www.revealinghate.com

www.kazirangafilm.com

www.mariahewilson.com

www.silentforests.com



ZEBEDIAH SMITH, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY,
CO-PRODUCER and ADDITIONAL EDITOR:

Zebediah Smith is an Emmy Award-winning cinematographer who has filmed for Discovery Channel, Travel Channel, Oxygen, Sundance Channel, Investigation Discovery (*Hate In America, Black and Blue*), and PBS (*Travelscope*). On the branded content side, he has worked with clients such as Google, Toyota and Virgin America. He has filmed in over 30 countries while trekking the Himalayas, joining tribal rituals in the high Andes, and communing with Gorillas in Rwandan jungles.

At home in the U.S., Zebediah co-produced and edited the Sundance Documentary Fund winner [WHATEVER IT TAKES](#), which won Audience Awards and Grand Jury Prizes at festivals across the US for its intimate, character-driven cinéma vérité style. He looks forward to continuing to be a part of in-depth productions that inspire, inform, and entertain audiences worldwide.

JUSTIN JOSEPH HALL, LEAD EDITOR

Justin is an independent editor who has worked with Emmy and Oscar nominated directors including Jon Alpert, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, Tony Gerber, and Matthew O'Neill. His credits include *ROCK & A HARD PLACE* (HBO), *FRONTLINE: LIFE ON PAROLE* (PBS), and *THE NOTORIOUS MR. BOUT* (Sundance Film Festival).

SHANE CHAPMAN, COMPOSER

Shane Chapman is the lead singer and guitarist for Brooklyn Americana band anacortes. When he's not doing that, he is the guitarist and arranger for NYC's premiere Dolly Parton cover band Doll Parts. As a composer, Chapman has a foot in the rock world as well as the theater and film worlds. He has written music for *Comfort Dogs* and *The Iceman Cometh*, both reviewed by the New York Times which called the music "groovy" and "sonically gorgeous". More recently (as one half of the composition team - Chapman/Sirna-Frest) he wrote music for *Welcome to the Gunshow: A Chekhovian Song Cycle* directed by Patrick Vassel (Associate Director of *Hamilton*).

ALEXIS JOHNSON, ADDITIONAL EDITOR

Alexis Johnson is a Denver-born, Brooklyn-based film editor. She recently finished work on Alex Gibney's non-fiction murder mystery *NO STONE UNTURNED*. Her past credits include Netflix's four-part documentary series *COOKED*, as well as *STEVE JOBS: THE MAN IN THE MACHINE*, *GOING CLEAR: SCIENTOLOGY AND THE PRISON OF BELIEF*, *ZERO DAYS*, and the CNN Original Series *MORGAN SPURLOCK'S INSIDE MAN*.

JARED M. SILVER, GRAPHICS

Jared M. Silver is a Brooklyn-based motion graphics and visual effects artist. Recent projects include the Fan Girl and Crazy Famous feature films and I, Witness for Investigation Discovery. He can be found at jaredmsilver.com

Contact Information:

Mariah Wilson
House Tiger Productions, Inc.
75 Henry Street. #20D
Brooklyn, NY 11201
917 450 4539 // mariahewilson@gmail.com
www.mariahewilson.com