

REPUBLIQUE GABONAISE

UNION-TRAVAIL-JUSTICE



**ICCF RECEPTION**  
**THE RIVER CLUB, NEW YORK**

**REMARKS BY**  
**HIS EXCELLENCY ALI BONGO ONDIMBA**  
**PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GABON,**  
**HEAD OF STATE**

*September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

*Excellences my fellow Presidents,*

*Distinguished Guests;*

*Ladies and Gentlemen;*

It is a real pleasure to be here tonight with such an eminent group of leaders in the field of conservation and sustainable development.

It is rare to see such a balanced group of leaders from government, private sector, NGO and multi- and bi-lateral agencies.

Indeed, I think it is only when I have joined events organized by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales that I have seen comparable balance in the room. That is why I like working both with Prince Charles' ISU and the ICCF.

Sustainable development has been the bedrock of my strategy to diversify Gabon's economy; it was a key component of both my 2009 and 2016 election manifestos and is now enshrined in a Sustainable Development Law that obliges all industrial projects in Gabon to balance the needs and ambitions of both current and future generations.

Recently we have been battling to contain the wildlife trafficking networks that have destabilized more than one nation on the African Continent. In just the last month our National Parks staff have been involved in three gun battles, in which the poachers they encountered in the forest fired on them without warning.

With the rise in gold and ivory prices over the last decade, we have seen organized criminal cartels take over the ivory, gold and diamond trafficking networks in Africa. In Gabon we are battling five ivory trafficking networks moving 15 million dollars-worth of illegal ivory annually. One of these networks is linked to Boko Haram. All five are also dealing in illegal gold and diamonds, to the tune of at least 25 million dollars per year.

In addition, a totally separate illegal forestry mafia has established itself, under our radar, in the last 5 years and is stealing an estimated 500 million dollars per year through sophisticated tax evasion schemes and illegal timber harvesting.

These criminal cartels have a pervasive power to corrupt and coerce government officials, including the judiciary. Only now, thanks to the work of our national parks and intelligence agencies, are we piecing together the drama that is unfolding in our forests.

I can tell you today, in no uncertain terms, that we are fighting a war against illegal natural resource extraction. If we lose, we risk losing control of our nation and of our destiny. That is not something I can tolerate on my watch., 8 years of protection is starting to pay off and wildlife populations are rebounding. Just last month elephants destroyed the garden of my beach house in Pt. Denis, adjacent to the Pongara National Park, just 15km from downtown Libreville.

Indeed, in two of our protected areas, Wonga Wongué and Loango, forest buffalo and red river hog populations have expanded to such an extent that even Dr. Lee White is now telling me we must re-open sport hunting to re-establish an equilibrium.

This is a dilemma we did not envisage just 5 years ago. In a way however it sums up our strategy and explains why, when I was here in June, I announced the creation of 20 new marine protected areas, covering 26% of our EEZ.

We believe that professional stewardship of natural resources will both strengthen democracy, ensure peace and security and enable us to gradually increase the sustainable harvest of natural resources, as we restore our ecosystems to their former productivity.

I think these are values that everybody in this room agrees with and I very much look forwards to working with you all to achieve this common vision.

**Thank you.**