

The Rocher du Loup ICCA: A Sacred Forest Between Tradition and Urbanization

By ACDD – Action Pour le Développement Durable

How the Iyassa Community and ACDD Unite Tradition and Action to Safeguard Their Coastal Heritage in Cameroon

The sacred site of Rocher du Loup, encompassing both forest and marine areas, was self-declared as an ICCA in 2022 by the Iyassa community of Cameroon's southwest coast. Supported by Action pour le Développement Durable (ACDD), a Member of the ICCA Consortium, the Iyassa community undertook the organizational, governance, and documentation processes that led to its recognition as an ICCA. This collaborative effort forms part of broader community-led initiatives to safeguard the sacred forest of approximately 45 hectares and its associated marine

areas. The site is located in the Océan Department of the South Region of Cameroon, between the villages of Lolabe and Ebodje in the administrative districts of Kribi I and Campo.

In Cameroon, ICCAs—territories of life are areas and territories governed, managed, and conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities. These territories are characterized by enduring cultural, spiritual, and livelihood relationships between communities and their environments. Their recognition



Community of Campo-Beach

as ICCAs involves partnerships between communities like that of the Iyassa, civil society organizations, and NGOs such as ACDD, aimed at strengthening community governance and supporting biodiversity conservation.

The Iyassa Community's Territory, Culture, and Biodiversity

The sacred forest of Rocher du Loup constitutes both a spiritual sanctuary and an ecologically fragile living space for the Iyassa community, and its preservation is essential for sustaining local biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Sacred rites, such as the *Mokuku* and the *Idende*, are practiced there. These ceremonies, which mark the coming of age of young men, perpetuate the bond between the living, the ancestors, and the sacred spirits. Passed down from generation to generation to a circle of initiates, they bear witness to a profound relationship between the Iyassa community and its environment.

Spread across the Océan Department, the Iyassa community is primarily concentrated in six villages: Lolabe, Ebodjé, Bendji, Campo-Beach, Bouandjo, and Bokombe. Numbering approximately 10,000 people, the community maintains a close bond with the spirits of their sacred forest and their ancestors, a connection that is sustained through successive generations of initiates.

The Rocher du Loup territory has both terrestrial and marine components. It encompasses a humid forest of approximately 45 hectares, as well as a marine zone whose extent has yet to be determined. Together, they form a rich and distinctive ecosystem.

At its heart lies a rocky outcrop considered by the community to be the core of the ICCA, because of its religious and spiritual significance. According to community initiates, this rock, once nestled within the



The sacred rock, "Rocher du Loup."

forest, is said to have moved overnight and cast itself into the sea. Originally known as the *Rocher d'Elombo*, it was reportedly translated by Spanish explorers as "Rocher du Loup" (Wolf Rock), which today gives its name to the forest.

From an ecological perspective, this ICCA possesses tremendous conservation value. It is home to rich and distinctive biodiversity, with rare and threatened species such as the leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), the green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), and the olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). Also found here are the humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), the long-beaked common dolphin (*Delphinus capensis*), the Atlantic humpback dolphin (*Sousa teuszii*), a black seabird known locally as *Ndegui a Elombo*, as well as rare plant species such as the flowering tree *Guibourtia demeusei* (known locally as *essingan* or *bubinga*).

The ecological and cultural richness of Rocher du Loup underscores the importance of measures to conserve and legally secure this ICCA.

Threats to the ICCA

Despite its importance, this fragile territory faces a range of threats. The urban expansion of the city of Kribi is placing growing pressure on both the ICCA and

the lyassa community. The development of the Kribi Deepwater Port, together with the growth of industrial infrastructure, has further intensified these pressures.

Further certain internal dynamics—such as the illegal sale of land by community members who disregard the spiritual value of this space—are also contributing to the weakening of community governance over this territory.

Community Actions

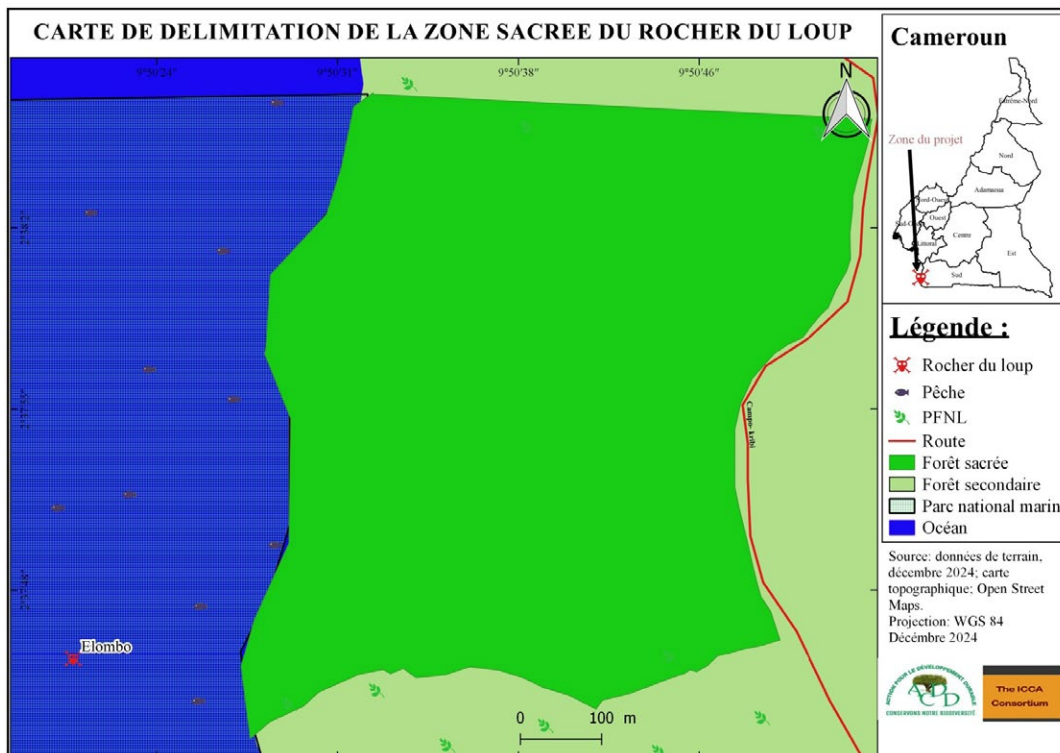
Since 2023, the lyassa community has expanded its initiatives, including training sessions, workshops, and advocacy efforts directed at local administrative authorities, to secure legal recognition and government support for the preservation of this ICCA.

As part of this process, a community association, ASCOLO (Association Communautaire de Lolabe) was established with the aim of promoting the economic development of the lyassa community over the next ten years, particularly through environmentally sustainable agricultural practices.

The six villages jointly drafted a petition to local administrative authorities, compiling the community's recommendations to secure the ICCA by having it recognized as an eco-tourism site showcasing lyassa culture, administered by a management committee composed of young lyassa leaders.

Beyond these efforts, a range of practical measures are being implemented to strengthen community climate resilience. ACDD has trained local leaders, both women and men, in the production of organic fertilizers from wood ash and in the multiplication of plantain banana plants using the PIF (*Plants Issus de Fragments de Tige*) propagation technique. Agroforestry training is also planned to help restore degraded agricultural land in the lyassa villages.

Several new initiatives are planned for 2026. These include a multi-resource inventory to assess the biological value of the ICCA and identify threatened species, together with an expanded mapping exercise that will fully integrate the site's marine component.



Map of Lolabe village, showing the sacred forest



Community meeting in Bouandjo village

Results and Outlook

Since the community's ICCA declaration, the activities undertaken have led to a greater understanding of the ICCA concept and its ecological, cultural, and social dimensions within the lyassa community. The community has also increased engagement with administrative authorities, facilitating opportunities to align community conservation efforts with broader national and international objectives.

These efforts have helped strengthen traditional knowledge, reinforce social cohesion, and foster a stronger sense of community pride.

Looking ahead, the community is exploring the development of an eco-tourism initiative linked to the ICCA, backed by traditional authorities and driven by the community itself.

Risks and Limitations

Despite these advances, several challenges remain. Land pressure remains high, with the ICCA facing increased interest from third parties seeking to develop or exploit the area for commercial purposes. Limited and irregular funding also limits the capacity for the implementation of activities and slows efforts to secure official state recognition of this ICCA, as well as broader dissemination of the ICCA concept in Cameroon.

In Summary

The Rocher du Loup ICCA encompasses a 45-hectare forest and an associated marine area that together support rich biodiversity and cultural value. The territory contributes to the fight against the effects of climate change through its humid forest ecosystem. It constitutes a sanctuary that embodies the history and culture of the lyassa community, for whom this place is inseparable from their identity and way of life.

It is therefore essential to ensure the long-term conservation and legal recognition of this sacred forest and marine territory of life.

The lyassa community calls for increased funding to strengthen the protection of this ICCA, better security of community land rights, support in preserving traditional knowledge, and the promotion of inclusive climate and biodiversity policies that foster local resilience.

Published by: The ICCA Consortium

Peer review: Vololoniaina Rasoarimanana and Aquilas Koko Ngomo

Linguistic revision and translation from French: Antoine Scherer

English copyediting: Jessica Merriman

Editing: Mohammad Arju

Recommended citation: ACDD – Action Pour le Développement Durable. (2026). *The Rocher du Loup ICCA: A sacred forest between tradition and urbanization* (A. Scherer, Trans.). ICCA Consortium. www.iccaconsortium.org

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