



# CBI'S SCHOOL FOR INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE (SILK)

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**CBI** CONGO  
BASIN  
INSTITUTE





## OVERVIEW

The Congo Basin Institute is a joint initiative of UCLA and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, working in collaboration with local communities, universities, the private sector and civil society to find integrative solutions that conserve the environment and meet the needs of a developing Congo Basin. CBI conducts critical research on climate change, poverty alleviation, food and water security, human health, and biodiversity conservation—and how these issues interact—to inform policymakers as they tackle the interlocking challenges facing Central Africa.

One of its initiatives, the School for Indigenous and Local Knowledge (SILK) is an Indigenous-led conservation and knowledge revitalization program co-developed with Baka communities in southern Cameroon, established in 2018. Through SILK, the Baka, one of Central Africa’s oldest Indigenous forest peoples, are documenting, transmitting and mobilizing their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to strengthen biodiversity research, sustain cultural practices and create livelihoods connected to forest conservation.

Indigenous knowledge and stewardship are recognized as critical to achieving global biodiversity and climate goals. SILK provides a blueprint for recentering Indigenous peoples in conservation efforts by valuing their biocultural heritage and weaving their expertise into ecological research, forest monitoring and sustainable development in the Congo Basin.



## THE CHALLENGE AND THE SOLUTION

Despite decades of global calls for Indigenous-led conservation, implementation remains rare in the Congo Basin. Conservation models continue to exclude Indigenous communities, often eroding their knowledge systems and severing the relationship between culture and ecosystems. Meanwhile, TEK, intertwined with language, practice and landscape, is rapidly disappearing, threatening both biodiversity and the cultural survival of Indigenous communities.

SILK addresses this by centering Baka voices, knowledge and priorities in the governance of one of the world’s most critical tropical forests, the Congo Basin.

In 2018, elders of an indigenous Baka community in southern Cameroon that had long worked with CBI voiced their concerns that their traditional ecological knowledge was not being passed down to younger generations. CBI worked with the community to design SILK, which uses technology as an entry point to engage youth, and creates opportunities for them to learn critical knowledge from their elders and practice it with them in the forest.

Seven years later, SILK has helped Baka communities ensure their traditional ecological knowledge will live for another generation. Baka youth are becoming experts in a wide range of topics and are increasingly working as research assistants with CBI. The community is so proud of the outcome that they organize an annual gathering (a “libandi” in Baka) with CBI’s assistance to expand the project to neighboring communities.





## SILK OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

### 1. TEK Transmission and Ecological Research

- Trains Baka youth and elders to conduct ecological monitoring in the Dja Faunal Reserve.
- Pairs elders and youth for monthly forest missions focused on phenology and faunal surveys, which also serve as opportunities for intergenerational TEK transmission.
- Builds scientific skills while preserving Indigenous practices and supporting conservation.

### 2. Great Ape and Faunal Monitoring Network

- Establishes a Baka-led monitoring network in and around the Dja Biosphere Reserve.
- Trains Baka “professors of the forest” to lead great ape nest surveys and habitat mapping using mobile tools.
- Combines cultural values and conservation science to protect habitat around villages, in community forests and in logging concessions.

### 3. TEK and Language Revitalization

- Assesses the vitality of Baka TEK and language across different communities to track erosion and support language preservation.
- Co-develops and implements TEK revitalization plans based on baseline assessments.
- Strengthens knowledge exchange between Baka communities living in varied socio-ecological conditions.

### 4. Livelihoods, Voice and Visibility

- Creates dignified employment as research assistants and forest monitors, reducing reliance on commercial hunting and agricultural expansion.
- Supports access to formal education, including partnerships with national forestry schools to integrate Baka youth and TEK into scientific curricula.
- Fosters a new generation of Indigenous biologists and conservation leaders.

## IMPACT

### Cultural Revitalization

- Safeguards endangered Baka knowledge systems and language

### Biodiversity Protection

- Produces high-quality data for conservation planning in one of Earth’s most biodiverse and carbon-rich ecosystems.

### Community Empowerment

- Creates employment and builds skills, confidence and legitimacy for the Baka to influence conservation policy and practice.

### Conservation Innovation

- Pioneers a model for integrating Indigenous and scientific knowledge in biodiversity governance.







## 2024 SILK ACTIVITIES

- Over 150 Baka men, women and youth from 12 communities participated in trainings on field methods
- 84 people (56 men and 28 women) were employed in phenology and animal censuses
- 2 week-long field courses run in July 2024 with Baka professors and youth from eight local villages and in August 2024 with seven professors and 15 youth from two villages
- Nest counting initiated south of the Dja Biosphere Reserve: participatory mapping to identify hunting areas, ape presence conducted in 10 villages (75 participants); two line-transect trainings conducted for multi-village teams of Baka youth, men (21) and women (10) led by Baka experts from SILK pilot village
- 10 Baka youth identified as National Forest School 2024-25 candidates

## WHY PARTNER WITH SILK?

### The Congo Basin Institute has:

- Deep, trusted partnerships with Baka communities in southern Cameroon.
- Technical expertise in ecology, conservation biology and participatory research.
- Operational capacity including two co-managed field stations and a decade of experience in Cameroon.
- Regional credibility and strong relationships with local universities and practitioners, Cameroon's Ministry of Forests and Fauna, and civil society partners in the region.

## JOIN US

Your support will help expand SILK's reach to more communities, secure critical biodiversity data, and seed a new paradigm of Indigenous-led conservation. Together, we can ensure that both forests and the cultures that sustain them continue to thrive.

**UCLA IS DEEPLY GRATEFUL FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION.**

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