



BONGO, *Tragelaphus eurycerus*

Legal Status: CITES lists bongo as an Appendix III species, only regulating their exportation from a single country, Ghana. It is not protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act. The IUCN Antelope Specialist Group considers the western or lowland bongo, *T. e. eurycerus*, to be Lower Risk (Near Threatened), and the eastern or mountain bongo, *T. e. isaaci*, of Kenya to be Endangered. Other subspecific names have been used but their validity has not been tested.

Description: Bongos are one of the largest of the forest antelopes, and are considered by many to be the most beautiful of all antelopes. In addition to the deep chestnut color of their coats, bongos have bright white stripes on their sides to help camouflage them from their enemies. Adults of both genders are similar in size, with females weighing over 500 lb. and males nearly 600 lb. Both sexes have heavy spiraling horns; those of the male are longer and more massive. All bongos in captivity are from the isolated Aberdere Mountain portion of the species' range in central Kenya. Taxonomically they are known as East African or mountain bongo, *Tragelaphus eurycerus isaaci*. There are two other subspecies from West and Central Africa, taxonomic clarification notwithstanding.



Range: Historically bongos were found in three disjunct parts of Africa. Evolved for a life in dense forest, jungle and bamboo thickets, one population, the eastern/mountain bongo, is native to the Aberdere Mountains of central Kenya (from which all zoo-held bongos originate). The second is from Central Africa and the third is from West Africa. Today all three populations' ranges have shrunk in size due to habitat loss for agriculture and uncontrolled timber cutting as well as poaching for meat.

Habitat: Bongos are associated with disturbed forest areas and the forest-savannah ecotone in the West and Central African lowlands and the Kenya highlands. They prefer forest margins and areas of unstable preclimax forest vegetation, which

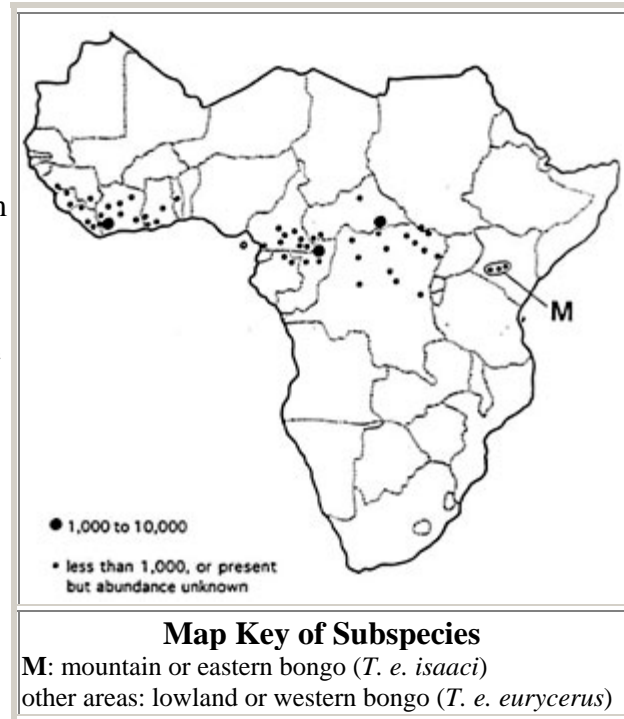
have arisen from shifting cultivation, logging or elephant concentration. They tend to be patchily distributed, with local concentrations occurring in areas of favorable habitat.

Diet: Like many other forest ungulates, bongos are browsers and feed primarily on the leaves of trees and bushes, vines, bark and pith of rotting trees, grasses and herbs, roots and fruits. Bongos have an insatiable craving for salt. Suitable habitat must have permanent water available.

Social Organization: Like other forest ungulates, bongos are seldom seen in large groups. Males tend to be solitary and groups of females with young seem to live in groups of 6-8. Bongos have seldom been seen in herds of more than 20. The preferred habitat of this species is so dense and difficult to operate in that few Europeans or Americans observed this species until the 1960's. Current living animals derive solely from Kenyan importations made during the period 1969-1978.

Threats to Survival: Few estimates of population density are available. Assuming average population densities of 0.25 animals per sq. km. in regions where it is known to be common or abundant, and 0.02 per sq. km. elsewhere, and with a total area of occupancy of 327,000 sq. km., a total population estimate of approximately 28,000 is suggested. Only about 60% are in protected areas, suggesting that actual numbers of the lowland subspecies may only be in the low tens of thousands. In Kenya, their numbers have declined significantly and on Mt. Kenya, they were extirpated within the last decade due to illegal hunting with dogs. Although information on their status in the wild is lacking, lowland bongos are not presently considered endangered.

Zoo Programs: An international studbook is maintained to help manage animals held in



captivity. Because of its bright color, it is very popular in zoos and private collections. In North America, there are thought to be over 400 individuals, a population that probably exceeds that of the mountain bongo in the wild. In 2000, the AZA Antelope TAG upgraded this species' management plan to that of an SSP. The target population for participating zoos and private collections in North America is 250 animals. Through the efforts of zoos in North America, a reintroduction to the population in Kenya is being developed.

Conservation: The western/lowland bongo faces an ongoing population decline as habitat destruction and meat hunting pressures increase with the relentless expansion of human settlement. Its long-term survival will only be assured in areas which receive active protection and management. At present, such areas comprise about 30,000 sq. km., and several are in countries where political stability is fragile. There is therefore a realistic possibility that its status could decline to Threatened in the not too distant future. As the largest and most spectacular forest antelope, the western/lowland bongo is both an important flagship species for protected areas such as national parks, and a major trophy species which has been taken in increasing numbers in Central Africa by sport hunters during the 1990's. Both of these factors are strong incentives to provide effective protection and management of western/lowland bongo populations. Trophy hunting has the potential to provide economic justification for the preservation of larger areas of bongo habitat than national parks, especially in remote regions of Central Africa where possibilities for commercially successful tourism are very limited.

The eastern/mountain bongo's survival in the wild is dependent on more effective protection of the surviving remnant populations in Kenya. If this does not occur, it will eventually become extinct in the wild. The existence of a healthy captive population of this subspecies offers the potential for its reintroduction. The total number of mountain bongos held in captivity in North America alone may already be similar to or exceed the total number remaining in the wild.



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