

WHERE OKAPI WALK:

LETTER FROM JOHN LUKAS

Okapi have to walk through the forest almost constantly browsing leaves from over 100 different species of plants and trees to supply the energy they need to live. Okapi and many species of forest animals need an ecosystem that is undisturbed to thrive. Where okapi walk people also walk as they have coexisted together for thousands of years. Today keeping the forest intact and okapi safe requires a multipronged approach which the OCP staff applies to our programs with communities across a vast landscape.

At the forefront is support from Wildlife Conservation Society and OCP for ICCN ecoguards who patrol the forest removing threats to wildlife and habitat such as mining, poaching and slash and burn agriculture. In 2024, patrol coverage greatly increased with a subsequent increase in arrests and evictions of people involved in illegal activities. While on patrol the ecoguards monitor wildlife sightings, especially signs of endangered species like okapi, forest elephants and chimpanzees. From observations over time wildlife populations now appear to be stable. Monitoring by "Team Okapi" with camera trap images backs up what the ecoguards have observed.

The second prong of OCP's approach is to engage, assist and teach communities living inside and bordering the Reserve who walk through the forest every day, to value wildlife and live sustainably within their means. This is an immense undertaking as over 50,000 people live in these communities. The key to OCP's success is that our education and agroforestry teams along



with a sponsored Women's Group are based permanently in five communities in and around the Reserve. Our staff are part of the community where they hear about the problems of the people, offer assistance in improving farming production, bring conservation messages to the children and help them to see the value of respecting the rules that protect the integrity of the Reserve. Educational posters, lectures, maps and radio broadcasts provided directly by our staff, all help inform the people living alongside wildlife what they can do to help.

By engaging communities on their terms, we have many people now invested in protecting the forest so okapi can live undisturbed. They are essential allies in alerting ICCN ecoguards of illegal threats to the resources of the Reserve. Balancing conservation goals with community aspirations is a difficult task but staff embedded in communities are making progress making friends willing to give wildlife a chance.

The level of our support, which comes from all our donors and partners, for communities that we depend on to value okapi, is documented in this Annual Report, please enjoy. All OCP staff and their families thank you for caring and giving to support their livelihoods and commitment to conservation.

John Lukas, President Wildlife Conservation Global/ Okapi Conservation Project

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WILDLIFE PROTECTION:

SUPPORTING ICCN TO PROTECT THE RESERVE



Collaborative Conservation with ICCN

The Okapi Conservation Project (OCP) in 2024 made substantial progress in enhancing the protection of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR) by supporting the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) ecoguards. Despite operating in an environment characterized by persistent security challenges, the ecoguards regularly patrolled over 80% of the forests that make up the 13,700 sq. km. of the OWR.

During 2024, two major graduation ceremonies were conducted for new ecoguards with a total of 120 new ecoguards joining the Reserve's protection team. This expansion, supported by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), substantially increased the capacity of the ecoguards to go on more frequent patrols of longer duration. Professional development initiatives included workshops on illegal mining in protected areas,

bio-monitoring techniques, and management planning processes, strengthening ICCN staff technical competencies across multiple conservation disciplines.

A crucial component of the Reserve's protection strategy is the operation of an informer network within local communities funded by OCP through ICCN. This network facilitates the gathering of intelligence on illegal activities, allowing rangers to conduct targeted patrols and interventions. Additionally, OCP engages with communities through educational programs, radio broadcasts, and support for local initiatives, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the Reserve's protection.

Despite these concerted efforts, the Okapi Wildlife Reserve faces significant challenges. Illegal mining activities have encroached upon the Reserve's boundaries, leading to environmental degradation







and increased poaching. These developments underscore the need for continued vigilance and collaboration between local communities, conservation organizations, and governmental bodies to safeguard the Reserve's integrity.

Recognizing that healthy Reserve personnel are vital for effective conservation, OCP staff operate the Okapi Dispensary in Epulu 24/7 without interruption. This facility provides essential medical care to ICCN ecoguards, OCP, WCS staff and all their families. Special facilities are provided at the clinic for the Indigenous Mbuti people. Services range from routine check-ups to emergency care with complex cases being transferred to larger regional hospitals to ensure that those dedicated to protecting the Reserve are given every opportunity to remain in good health.

Research and monitoring organized by OCP through "Team Okapi" placed 15 camera

traps in the Bianje sector, enabling systematic documentation of okapi, chimpanzees, forest elephants and other key species. The videos collected from the camera traps provided ICCN with concrete evidence of where key species were found, enhancing their species-based management decisions.

This comprehensive support for ICCN ecoguards demonstrates how long-term partnerships can effectively strengthen national conservation institutions while achieving measurable improvements in protected area management effectiveness. The Okapi Conservation Project's holistic approach—integrating support for wildlife protection, community health, and local engagement—strives to ensure that the Okapi Wildlife Reserve remains a sanctuary for biodiversity and a source of well-being for its inhabitants.



EDUCATION INITIATIVES:

ENGAGING THE NEXT GENERATION



WCG/OCP's school-based education initiatives formed a cornerstone of their conservation outreach strategy in 2024, focusing on cultivating environmental awareness among the next generation. The education team distributed an impressive array of teaching materials designed to integrate conservation principles into everyday classroom activities throughout the Okapi Wildlife Reserve region.

At the beginning of the year, 4,000 calendars featuring the Mbuti and Efe Indigenous Peoples as forest guardians were distributed to schools, creating daily visual reminders of conservation values and Indigenous stewardship. These materials celebrated traditional ecological knowledge while reinforcing the importance of forest protection.

Classroom resources were significantly enhanced through the distribution of 720 Health and Environment modules and 220 class newspapers, providing teachers with structured materials to incorporate conservation concepts into their curriculum. Perhaps most striking were the 2,100 laminated posters of protected animals displayed in schools throughout the region, creating visual learning opportunities about wildlife diversity and protection status.

The education team conducted regular awareness sessions in schools surrounding the Reserve, reaching thousands of students with age-appropriate conservation messaging. These interactive sessions covered wildlife identification, habitat protection, and the ecological importance of the okapi and other endemic species. Students were encouraged to become conservation ambassadors in their communities, sharing knowledge with family members and neighbors.

During special commemorative events like World Okapi Day on October 18, schools became centers of celebration through conservation-themed games, art activities, and the distribution of 1,300 t-shirts and 1,000 stickers. World Tree Day on October 24 involved students in hands-on tree planting activities, creating tangible connections to forest restoration efforts.

School programs also incorporated visits to conservation sites where possible, allowing students to experience firsthand the forest ecosystems they were learning to protect. These experiential learning opportunities proved particularly effective in building emotional connections to conservation goals.

Through these multifaceted school initiatives, WCG/OCP worked to ensure that conservation awareness becomes embedded in the educational

experience of young people throughout the region, creating a foundation for long-term community engagement in protecting the unique biodiversity of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve.



UNIVERSITY ENGAGEMENT:

FUTURE CONSERVATION LEADERS



WCG/OCP significantly expanded its higher education outreach in 2024, recognizing the critical role of university students as future conservation leaders and decision-makers. The education team delivered a series of comprehensive lectures at seven universities and higher education institutions in Isiro, directly engaging approximately 1,500 students and faculty members.

These university sessions moved beyond basic awareness to address complex conservation challenges facing the Okapi Wildlife Reserve.

Lectures covered ecological research methodologies, conservation policy frameworks, human-wildlife conflict resolution, and sustainable development approaches compatible with biodiversity protection. These engagements aimed at connecting young people to nature as a means of creating a passion within them and gradually preparing them to become leaders and decision-makers who can work while protecting nature.

The university program fostered academic dialogue about conservation through panel discussions and Q&A sessions, encouraging students to consider careers in environmental protection and sustainable resource management. Case studies from the Reserve provided real-world context for theoretical concepts, helping students understand practical applications of their academic knowledge.

A particularly valuable component was the knowledge exchange with the Gorilla Rehabilitation and Conservation Education Center (GRACE), where both organizations shared strategies for community engagement and conservation education.

The education team also facilitated workshops on wildlife crime and natural resource management, inviting university participants to contribute to consultations about conservation policy. These experiences provided students with insights into stakeholder engagement processes and the complexities of balancing conservation goals with community needs.

Several universities incorporated field visits to the Reserve, allowing students to observe conservation practices firsthand and interact with WCG/OCP staff working on the ground. These experiential learning opportunities proved transformative for many participants, creating meaningful connections to the forest ecosystem.



Through these university partnerships, WCG/OCP invested in building long-term conservation capacity in the region, cultivating a network of educated professionals with both the knowledge and commitment needed to protect the remarkable biodiversity of northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo for generations to come.

RADIO PROGRAMS:

EXPANDING OUR REACH



Throughout 2024, WCG/OCP leveraged the power of radio broadcasting to reach deep into communities surrounding the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Partnering with eight community radio stations—including CANDIP in Bunia and Anuarité in Mungbere—the OPC broadcast 372 conservation-focused programs across northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Recognizing the region's linguistic diversity, program producers created content in French, Swahili, and Lingala, ensuring messages resonate across cultural boundaries. As one project report emphasized, "These community radios play a very important role as local communication tools," particularly in remote areas where radio remains the most accessible information source.

Radio listening clubs provided valuable audience feedback, helping producers refine their messaging to maximize community impact. New programming initiatives highlighted Indigenous Peoples' traditional ecological knowledge and practical agroforestry techniques, creating a bridge between cultural heritage and conservation science.

The radio education strategy particularly excelled during critical conservation periods. During hunting season, broadcasts reinforced messages



about sustainable practices and protected species identification, complementing the distribution of educational materials in villages. These timely broadcasts help communities understand hunting regulations and the importance of adhering to the OWR hunting calendar.

To enhance program effectiveness, radio broadcasts were coordinated with community events and field activities. Announcements about World Okapi Day celebrations on October 18 and World Tree Day commemorations on October 24 helped drive participation in these conservation-focused gatherings.

Radio also served as a platform for amplifying conservation success stories, featuring interviews with members of "Mamans Amies de la Réserve de Faune à Okapis" (MARFO) and other community conservation champions. These testimonials demonstrated the tangible benefits of conservation participation, including economic opportunities through sustainable practices.

In areas were resistance to reserve regulations occasionally flare between communities and Reserve management, radio programming creates space for dialogue and mutual understanding, helping build the shared vision necessary for long-term conservation success in this ecologically significant region.

"These community radios play a very important role as local communication tools," particularly in remote areas.

WOMEN'S GROUPS:

PROMOTING INDEPENDENCE



Named "Mamans Amies de la Réserve de Faune à Okapis" (MARFO) WCG/OCP has established women's groups in five locations—Epulu, Mambasa, Mungbere, Nia-Nia, and Wamba—these groups continued their important work in 2024. These groups that began with the WCG/OCP Director teaching crochet to a few Epulu women in her living room 25-years ago, have evolved into a significant component of the organization's community engagement strategy, supporting approximately 300 women living in and around the Okapi Wildlife Reserve.

Throughout the year, WCG/OCP provided the MARFOs with materials for sewing, embroidery, and gardening activities, enabling women to develop marketable skills while becoming conservation advocates. Their products included blouses, dresses, tablecloths, and various embroidered items that generated modest but meaningful income. The Epulu group alone generated \$928 during the year, demonstrating how conservation initiatives can create economic opportunities. These funds are an important second string to their household income that cover school fees and unforeseen bills. This may

not seem like much income, but considering the average daily wage in the DRC is \$1.00 per day, this is a significant boost to family income.

In Mambasa, 15 women achieved proficiency in cutting, sewing, embroidery, and knitting, though they faced challenges without access to personal machines that would allow them to graduate from the program and establish independent workshops. The WCG/OCP Project President provided funding for seven Epulu MARFO members to receive two months of accelerated training on a chain-stitch machine, enhancing their ability to create decorative designs and improve product quality.

The groups' financial monitoring showed consistent income generation across quarters, with members in Epulu earning \$165 in Q1, \$195 in Q2, \$330 in Q3, and \$238 in Q4. Similar financial tracking occurred for all five MARFO locations.

Members in Nia-Nia participated in International Women's Day celebrations, showcasing their skills and products. Throughout the year, regular inventories were conducted across all locations to track equipment and income generation. The women's active engagement in MARFO activities not only provided economic benefits to their families but also strengthened their roles as conservation advocates, creating a network of local women supporting the Reserve's biodiversity protection efforts.



AGROFORESTRY INITIATIVES:

A YEAR OF GROWTH AND CHALLENGE



Throughout 2024, Wildlife Conservation Global/ Okapi Conservation Project (WCG/OCP) maintained agroforestry operations across six branches in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve region, balancing biodiversity protection with community support.

The program directly assisted 1,092 farmers by providing essential tools and seeds, including nearly 12,000 kg of rice, 4,000 kg of groundnuts, and 3,000 kg of beans. Despite a challenging dry season early in the year, nurseries remained productive, generating over 115,000 seedlings of various species that ultimately supported nearly 4,500 people and covered approximately 287 hectares.

Reforestation efforts advanced through partnerships with local landowners to reforest

20 concessions spanning 23 hectares. Farmers planted species like *Terminalia superba* and *Cordia abyssinica*, receiving financial incentives for forest maintenance. The project also supplied seedlings to mark the Reserve's southeastern boundary and to reforest mining areas.

Community vegetable gardening emerged as a particularly successful initiative, with over 800 gardens established that benefited more than 1,100 households by improving nutrition and generating income. Communities increasingly appreciated these gardens' substantial benefits despite their small land requirements.

The program celebrated World Tree Day on October 24th across all branches, with schools and churches planting over 5,600 seedlings, strengthening community connections to conservation efforts.





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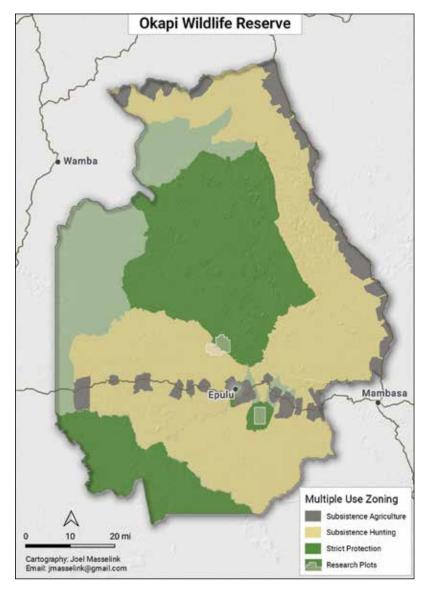
Infrastructure improvements included securing legal land registry documents and providing new motorcycles to agroforestry agents.

kg of beans-demonstrating its tangible impact on local food security and economic stability while advancing environmental protection.

Challenges persisted throughout the year, including security issues in Biakato and Mambasa, inadequate two storage facilities in locations, and ongoing tensions between local communities and the Reserve unit.

Despite these obstacles, the program collected substantial harvests—over 10,000 kg of rice, 3,300 kg of groundnuts, and nearly 2,000





OKAPI CLINIC:

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES, HEALTHY RESERVE

The Okapi Dispensary, served as a vital healthcare resource in 2024, providing free medical treatment to WCG/OCP, WCS and ICCN staff, their families, and Indigenous Mbuti people with ties to the project. Throughout the year, the clinic treated 8,658 patients—an average of 721 patients monthly—including 2,727 eco-guards, 844 Indigenous Peoples, and staff from our partner conservation organizations and their families.

The facility addressed a diverse range of medical conditions, with malaria being the most prevalent at 26.6% of all cases (1,503 patients). Other common illnesses included typhoid fever (12.15%), influenza (10.58%), and acute respiratory infections (7.73%). The clinic paid particular attention to vulnerable populations, with 1,671 patients (19.3%) being children under five years old.



Laboratory services were a critical component of healthcare delivery, with 10,069 diagnostic tests performed throughout the year. Malaria testing alone accounted for 4,339 tests, with 1,609 positive cases confirmed. Other laboratory services included hemoglobin testing, stool examinations, leukocyte counts, and tests for various infectious diseases.

Beyond basic consultations, the clinic provided specialized services including minor surgery for traumatic wounds, burns, and abscesses, as well as physiotherapy that treated 179 patients using various techniques such as massage, mobilization, and electrical stimulation.



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The pharmacy operated without interruption throughout the year, with medicines supplied from the CADIMEBU center in Bunia. Additionally, the clinic supplied medications to patrol posts for ecoguards working in remote areas and monitored for potential outbreaks of serious diseases including Ebola, MPOX, and COVID-19.

Despite successful operations, the facility identified several needs for improvement, including constructing a suitable isolation ward, providing refresher training for nursing staff, upgrading laboratory equipment, and establishing reliable 24-hour electricity to better preserve medications and reagents.





ENGAGING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES:

TRADITIONAL FOREST GUARDIANS



Throughout 2024, the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR) implemented a variety of activities engaging Indigenous Mbuti, Efe, and Batwa communities across Ituri and Haut-Uélé provinces. These initiatives recognized Indigenous Peoples' role as traditional guardians of the forest while supporting their livelihoods and rights.

A centerpiece of Indigenous engagement was the 2024 calendar featuring Mbuti and Efe peoples as "forest guardians," with 4,000 copies distributed. This thematic calendar aimed to promote Indigenous cultural values, highlights their contributions to forest protection, and reinforces their visibility among local communities.

Extensive awareness campaigns regarding sustainable hunting practices reached Indigenous communities in 154 villages. During these sessions, which engaged approximately 844 Indigenous individuals, community members

expressed concerns about outsider encroachment, cultural preservation, and livelihood challenges. In Mambasa alone, the campaign reached 70 Indigenous men and 67 Indigenous women across multiple camps including Bungupanda, Kenetata, and others.

Indigenous Peoples actively participated in the revision of the Natural Resource Access Directives, with special focus groups organized to collect their input regarding forest access rights. This participatory approach ensured Indigenous voices influenced regulations affecting their traditional forest use.

The Literacy Club at Makobasi camp supported 29 Indigenous children (9 girls and 20 boys), while the Okapi Dispensary provided free healthcare to 844 Indigenous People throughout the year - a tangible benefit from conservation endeavors.



A centerpiece of Indigenous engagement was the 2024 calendar featuring Mbuti and Efe peoples as "forest guardians," with 4,000 copies distributed.

Indigenous communities participated prominently in World Okapi Day celebrations across eight sites in both provinces, engaging in cultural performances that highlighted their traditional ecological knowledge.

The OWR also involved Indigenous representatives in forest boundary demarcation processes, particularly for the 18km southeastern boundary (Zunguluka), creating opportunities for collaborative land management.

These diverse engagements reflect OWR's recognition that effective conservation requires the informed participation and traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples who maintain deep connections to the forest ecosystem.



WORLD OKAPI DAY CELEBRATIONS:

OCTOBER 18TH 2024



World Okapi Day was celebrated on October 18, 2024 both in DRC and at several partner institutions globally. WCG/OCP organized events across eight strategic sites spanning the Ituri and Haut-Uélé provinces where the Okapi Wildlife Reserve is located. Celebrations were held in Badengaido, Bandisende, Durba, Mambasa, Nepoko, PK 51, Sokopa, and Tchagbo. The events, organized under the theme "the link between okapi and the forest," brought together diverse stakeholders to raise awareness about okapi conservation.

The celebrations successfully engaged approximately 8,500 people across both provinces, with particularly strong turnouts in Durba (3,000 participants) in Haut-Uélé Province, and Badengaido (2,000) in Ituri Province. Political, administrative, and customary authorities actively participated alongside local community opinion leaders and representatives of Indigenous Peoples.

Educational components included awareness conferences focused on okapi values, which were attended by approximately 1,500 people. In Durba alone, 600 participants (400 men and 200 women) attended these sessions, while Badengaido saw 197 participants (117 men and 80 women). These conferences emphasized the ecological importance of the okapi and its cultural significance to the region.

The celebrations featured diverse community engagement activities, including soccer matches, competitions, foot races, and traditional dance performances. The distribution of 1,300 World Okapi Day t-shirts to Reserve agents, local authorities, schoolchildren, women's groups, and community leaders across both provinces significantly increased visibility of the conservation message. Additionally, 1,000 stickers featuring okapi images were distributed to participants.



The celebrations featured diverse community engagement activities, including soccer matches, competitions, and traditional dance performances.

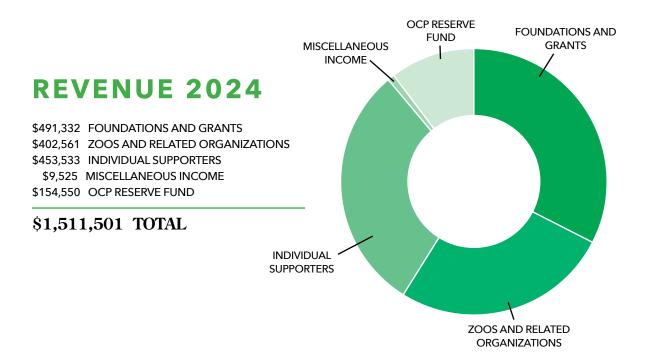
Mini-conferences held in various locations provided opportunities for more in-depth discussions about okapi conservation challenges and community involvement in protection efforts. These sessions were particularly effective in building local ownership of conservation initiatives.

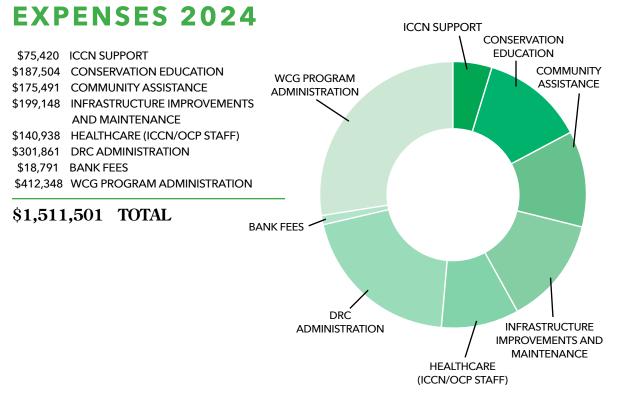
The cross-provincial celebration demonstrated the collaborative effort between WCG/OCP and WCS, successfully strengthening the connection between communities in both Ituri and Haut-Uélé provinces and the conservation of this endemic and endangered species.





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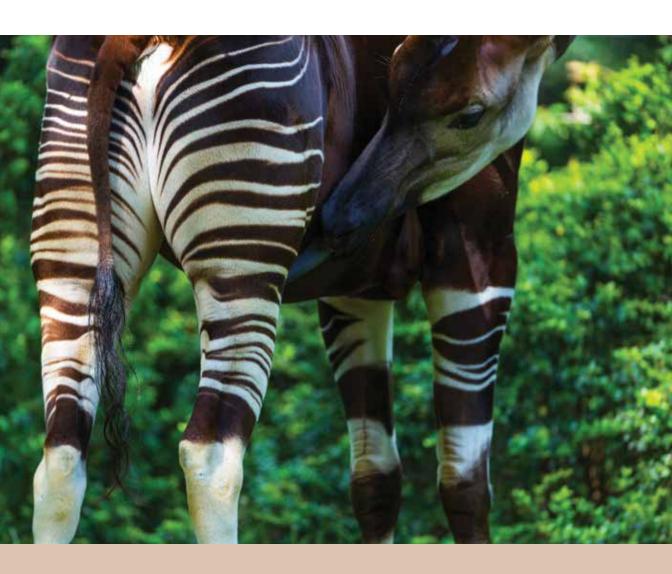
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Abdalah Morisho Traolin Alezo Ndrudu Alain Bayaa Gbama Jean Prince Kababo Mutubule Jean Marie Kambale Kavunga Charite Kasereka Katsuva Salvin Kasereka Mbange Roger Katsuva Kaposo Amza Mbete Nguma Theophile Mbusa Mughanda Anaclet Mombenga Mpela Sagesse Muhindo Maliro Melchisedech Muhindo Pilipili Patrick Panga Madro Rene Sagbolo Yuma Evariste Shafiko Morisho Umari Vusike Kiruzi Aime Yangunapayi Makasi Gerard

