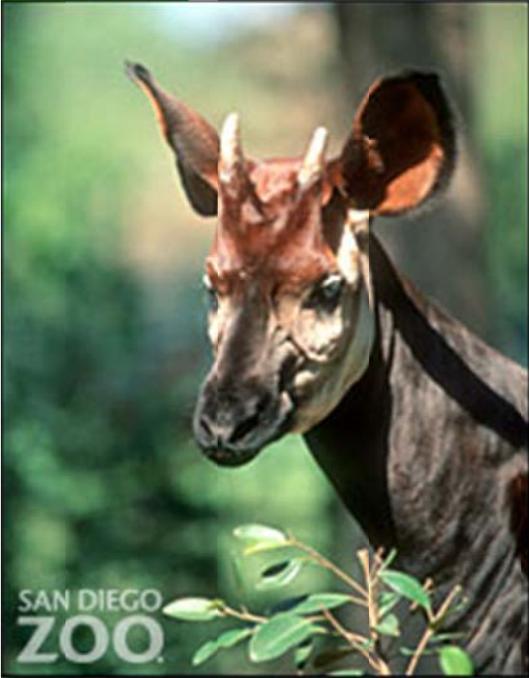


Okapi



Range: northeast region of Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) in Africa 🌐 **Habitat:** tropical rain forest



It's related to giraffes?!

The okapi (pronounced oh-COP-ee) is a beautiful and unusual animal. With its white-and-black striped hindquarters and front legs, it looks like it must be related to zebras! But take a look at an okapi's head and you'll notice a resemblance to giraffes.

The okapi is indeed the only living relative of the giraffe. Like giraffes, okapis have very large, upright ears, which catch even slight sounds, helping them to avoid trouble. They also have long, dark prehensile tongues, just like a giraffe's, to help them strip the buds and young leaves from the understory brush of their rain forest home.

Call me bashful

Okapis are hard to find in the wild. Their natural habitat is the Ituri Forest, a dense rain forest in central Africa. Okapis are very wary, and their highly developed hearing alerts them to run when they hear humans in the distance. In fact, while natives of the Ituri Forest knew of okapis and would occasionally catch one in their pit traps, scientists did not know of the animal until 1900. The secretive nature of okapis and the difficulty most humans have of traveling in their habitat have made okapis hard to observe in the wild. Therefore, researchers can only estimate how many okapis live there. It is believed that there are currently about 25,000 okapis in the wild.



Made for a rain forest

Why does the okapi have zebra-like stripes? These markings, which seem very bold to us, give the animal great camouflage when hiding in the partial sunlight that filters through the dense rain forest. The stripes may also help young okapis follow their mothers through the dark forest, and they may help adult okapis find each other, too. The okapi's dark purplish or reddish brown fur feels like velvet. It's also oily, so water slides right off, keeping the okapi dry on rainy days. Only the males have horns, which are covered by skin and are short so they won't get tangled in forest branches.

If okapis are related to giraffes, why aren't they as tall as giraffes? In a rain forest, there are trees with branches hanging down, as well as roots and tree trunks to dodge. Okapis need to have shorter legs and necks to help them swerve around these obstacles. Being really tall is not a good idea in a forest!



Hide and seek

Okapis often travel up to a half mile (0.8 kilometers) a day in search of food, usually along trails worn down by generations of okapis. They are generally solitary animals, unless an adult female has a calf with her.

Adult males, whose home ranges cover more area, can travel up to 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) a day. The males try to keep other males out of their territories but will allow females to travel through in search of food. Both males and females are most active during the afternoon through the evening. They are browsers, eating 40 to 65 pounds (18 to 29 kilograms) of leaves, twigs, and fruits each day. Okapis have also been seen eating clay and burnt charcoal, probably for minerals. And just like giraffes, sheep, and goats, okapis are ruminants. At the San Diego Zoo and the Wild Animal Park, okapis are fed alfalfa hay and pellets, leafy acacia branches, carrots, and yams.

I heard it through the grapevine

While okapis travel for the most part by themselves within their home ranges, they still have ways of communicating with others whose ranges overlap. A scent gland on each foot leaves behind a sticky, tar-like substance wherever they have walked, marking their territory. By checking the ground, an okapi can tell if another okapi has been there. Males also mark their territory by urine spraying. Normally silent, female okapis vocalize only when they are ready to breed.



Calf care

Okapi newborns can stand up within 30 minutes of birth and will nurse for the first time within an hour of birth. They have the same coloring as an adult but have a short fringe of hair along the spine, which generally disappears by the time they are 12 to 14 months old. In the wild, mothers hide their newborn calves in one spot, returning regularly to allow the calf to nurse.

Okapi calves defecate (poop) for the first time between four and eight weeks of age. This adaptation helps keep predators from sniffing out the hidden newborns until they have had a chance to grow and gain strength. Calves will triple their size by the end of their second month but will not reach full adult size until three years of age.

Helping the okapi

The changing politics of central Africa and the continued loss of habitat threaten the beautiful okapi. Fortunately, in 1952, one-fifth of okapi habitat in Africa's Ituri Forest was set aside as a wildlife reserve. The Okapi Wildlife Reserve, with support from the San Diego Zoo, other zoos and conservation organizations, and the local people, continues to protect and to support study of this rare and unusual forest dweller.

Photos and information retrieved from

<http://www.sandiegozoo.org/animalbytes/t-okapi.html>

(go to the San Diego Zoo website for more information/activities on the Okapi)