
Congo, Democratic Republic: World Bank's explanations explain nothing

In last month's issue of the WRM bulletin we quoted activist Karl Ammann's open letter to World Bank's President Wolfensohn --wrongly attributed to Jane Dewar-- in which he denounces that World Bank assistance to massive reactivation of the forestry sector would imply new logging concessions in primary rainforests with the subsequent detrimental impact on the environment and the people. (the ammended article is available at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/67/AF.html#Congo>)

World Bank's Country Director for the Africa Region Emmanuel Mbi, responded to Ammann, who in turn replied with a letter dated February 24, 2003. In his letter Ammann confirms that, contrary to Mr. Mbi's arguments, all the evidence he has gathered on the ground suggests that the Aide Memoire of the World Bank is indeed an advise on how to reactivate the forestry sector.

Ammann refers to a recent visit to Kinshasa, where he talked to logging industry representatives who told him that they had confronted Mr. Deboux --the Bank's lead negotiator and advisor, and author of the Aide Memoire-- with the fact that the present infrastructure, from the port in Kinshasa to the road to Matadi, would not even allow the export of a small fraction of the proposed timber production rate of 6-10 million cubic meters, and that "it would be up to the Bank to find the ways and means to improve the corresponding facilities." "If indeed the Bank is considering to upgrade the Kinshasa port or roads which lead to Matadi and other localities, how will they differentiate between the 'sustainably logged timber' making its way to the sea and the illegal and unsustainably logged wood?" Ammann quotes what appears to be an Internal World Bank evaluation of the new 'World Bank Group draft forest policy': "The scientific literature suggests that sustainability may not be possible in logging of some of the most natural forests, distant from surveillance and under unruly frontier conditions."

Regarding Mbi arguments that most of the existing concessions have been cancelled, Ammann expresses that: "To imply that the cancellation of very old leases, which have never been used for active logging, have anything to do with conservation would appear to be misleading to say the least. My data out of the "Conservation Atlas of Tropical Forests of Africa" lists indeed a total of 120 million hectares of forest, of which some 30 million hectares are classified as Degraded Lowland Forest, Montane, Swamp and Mangrove. Taking the areas already logged and the national parks into consideration, the proposed 60 million hectares seems to come very close to the maximum area which is commercially exploitable."

Another issue is taxation of wildlife utilisation, which is not just for wildlife utilisation but also for forestry. Ammann had accused the World Bank of supporting the killing of fully protected species and the taxation of such activity. Confronting the defensive arguments of Mbi, Ammann points out that "The Aide Memoire makes it very clear the ministry concerned would work closely with the World Bank experts on any future legislation. As such it is hard to imagine that the drafting of the forestry taxes was done without World Bank consultation. Since in the end the wildlife taxes became part of the same document, is it safe to assume that consultation had taken place?"

Unfortunately, it appears that the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is about the only country left in Central Africa with minimal logging pressure, may lose the opportunity of conserving its forests

"once World Bank officials project incomes of hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes and US dollars one to two BILLION in turn over." The usual recipe of trade-off between nature and money.

Article based on information from correspondence exchanged between Karl Ammann (kamman@form-net.com) and Emmanuel Mbi (World Bank Country Director Africa Region). Full texts available at:

- "An Open Letter to the World Bank President", 7 December 2002;
www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Congo/Ammann.rtf

- Response from Emmanuel Mbi, 24 January 2003
www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Congo/WBresponse.rtf

- Reply from Karl Ammann, 24 February 2003
www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Congo/Ammannresponse.rtf