Congo, Democratic Republic: Selling biodiversity under World Bank assistance

Some years ago, wildlife photographer and bushmeat activist Karl Ammann had presented World Bank's President Wolfensohn with evidence linking industrial logging with the commercialisation of the bush meat trade throughout most of Central Africa.

Wolfensohn replied that "preventing the types of abuses you describe is a clear responsibility of the industry, as well as the government authorities concerned."

On December 2002, Karl Ammann replicated with an open letter. He denounces that in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) the World Bank appears to be on the front line of assisting with a proposed massive reactivation of the forestry sector.

According to Ammann, the projections outlined by a World Bank expert, in an Aide Memoire, "are terrifying to say the least, considering that we are looking at the remaining half of the Congo River Basin which has not been affected yet by industrial timber mining:

- The opening up, in form of new logging concessions, of 60 million hectares of primary rain forest.
- A projected annual extraction/mining of some 6-10 million cubic meters, essentially doubling the output from the Central African region.
- An estimated annual 'surface rental tax' income of some U$ 60 to 360 million.
- An annual industry turn over of some U$ 1-2 billion. Mostly of course staying in form of profits in some off shore accounts.
- The creation of some 60,000 jobs.

How realistic are these projections in the context of the results being achieved --partially under World Bank supervision-- in any of the surrounding countries? Bank officials are best placed to answer this question and some more regarding the actual cost-benefits of logging of primary rain forests. Based on the figures I have they are clearly a pipe dream. However pipe dreams put out officially by World Bank experts will make any conservation effort --especially the creating of additional protected areas-- a lot more difficult".

Karl Ammann considers that "As for logging sustainably 60 million hectares of primary rain forest, to be opened up within a span of only 5 to 10 years, there are World Bank experts on record stating: 'We are not going to try to define SFM (Sustainable Forest Management) because nobody can agree on it'. This is probably more true in Central Africa than anywhere else. I also have a copy of meeting minutes with World Bank officials being quoted as saying: 'In Central Africa dysfunctional governments have to be considered a given'."

The letter goes on considering that it is very likely that after most of the really valuable timber has been carted away, the 35 million people, now estimated to depend on these forests will actually be poorer than they are today. In most areas there will be no more protein from wildlife under the present projections and proposals.

The Aide Memoire by Mr. Debroux, the Bank's lead negotiator and advisor, dated March 2002, makes it clear that the Bank has been involved very actively in the drafting of the new forestry laws which were signed by President Kabila in August 2002.

Ammann notes that the word 'faune' or wildlife does not appear a single time in the Aide Memoire nor any reference to the logging industry having to accept the responsibility to actively manage the wildlife in their concession. Conversely, the Aide Memoire seems to suggest that this responsibility will be passed on to the relevant government departments, with the idea of getting revenues from taxes fixed on sport hunting (for capture and export) and byproducts such as ivory, rhino horn, skins, teeth, tails, skulls, etc. "An approach which has not worked anywhere else", he remarks.

Top decision makers, under World Bank advise, have made a conscient decision that Congo's wildlife might become a liability in maximizing the returns from the forestry sector --at least in areas outside the protected parks. Further developments show that neither local officials nor World Bank experts take into account the basic of trying to conserve biodiversity.

"We are clearly going backwards, in a country which offered some hope in the sense that a new approach to industrial logging would have been possible", is the disappointed conclusion of Karl Ammann.

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