
Central African Republic: Logging companies destroy "Pygmies" livelihoods

The rainforests of the Central African Republic's Dzanga Sangha national park are inhabited by the Ba'Aka indigenous people, which counts with some 20,000 members. Like many other so-called "Pygmy" groups of neighbouring countries, they have been hunter-gatherers living in the heart of the forest and have developed a whole body of knowledge on the local rainforest resources.

Until logging companies came, they had somehow resisted harassment of their home and livelihood by other Central Africans. But now the scale of the predatory activities are threatening their centuries-old way of life. The Bayanga Wood Company carries out logging of selected trees, but to reach those trees a network of roads is built, which not only destroy forest land but also open up the forest to outsiders, mainly immigrants from Congo and Cameroon seeking employment at the company. Poverty and unemployment drive many newcomers to poaching, supplying nearby bush meat markets with gorilla, elephant, gazelle and antelope.

Forest outsiders generally hunt with guns, which makes a difference with the traditional hunting practices of the Ba'Aka, who are also honey collectors and edible vegetable gatherers. The western-biased approach to forest conservation usually disregards the knowledge behind traditional wildlife hunting. The words of Jean Yamindou, of the World Wide Fund for Nature, reflect that: "These people aren't used to cultivating things. For centuries they've been used to getting up in the morning and killing an animal for that day's requirements". So, they are "teaching" the Ba'Aka and Bantu people to breed fish and poultry, in order to prevent the further killing of the animals.

Traditional hunting is now considered "poaching" and poaching is forbidden along the board. That implies that the Ba'Aka can no longer hunt elephants, which they used to kill to eat. Anyhow, they have welcomed that regulation since at least it means a decrease in poaching by outsiders. But their life is being changed --and everything indicates that not for the good. Loan opportunists leading to debt, traders, Western missionaries, alcohol, discotheques entering all of a sudden may disturb and distort any society. In the case of the Ba'Aka, they are even condemned by their culture: "The missionaries have told them their traditional music is tantamount to worshipping the devil", says a Bayanga resident. "Some of the young Ba'Aka don't know how to collect honey... Some listen to pop music and drink alcohol. Not all change is for the better", he adds.

But while "poaching" is forbidden, industrial logging is not. Logging companies constitute a major threat for forest conservation. Not only do they bulldoze the green frontier destroying fragile ecosystems, but also construct roads which leave the forest exposed and open to outsiders for commercial hunting. Shouldn't missionaries and conservationists "teach" logging companies a different way of reaping money?

Article based on information from: "Logging threatens Pygmies' forest life", BBC Focus in Africa, <http://www.newafrica.com/news/articlepg1.asp?ID=47710&co> ; "How the forest-dwelling Pygmies in Southern Cameroon model the forest to suit their nomadic way of life", by Edmond Dounias, Special issue of Le Flamboyant, no. 36

