
Central Africa: Logging one of the world's largest areas of primary rainforest

Six Central African countries --Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire), Cameroon and the Central African Republic-- share the rainforest ecosystem of the Congo Basin, which is home to one of the world's largest contiguous blocks of tropical rainforest, only second to that of the Amazon Basin in South America in terms of not fragmented forest areas.

Already well-known are the ecosystem services --watershed protection, maintenance of water quality and supply, regulation of local climate patterns and conservation of biological diversity-- provided by such region, which is also home to a whole range of peoples with diverse cultures who depend on those forests for food, shelter and medicines.

Central African rainforests have also gained outstanding importance after the depletion of neighbouring West Africa's rainforests through logging, fragmentation and clearing for agriculture. However, worrying as it may be, the governments of Central African countries, pressed by multilateral and bilateral creditors, are following a similar path by promoting industrial timber exploitation for export under structural adjustment and liberalisation policies. Meanwhile, local peoples have been excluded from decision-making processes which disregard their needs and lead to the destruction of their homes and livelihoods.

Commercial logging has been eroding more easily accessed coastal Central African rainforests for more than 40 years, and now is expanding to the remote interior forests of the Congo Basin. According to available data, Central Africa's forests cover 1.863.000 km², of which 68% in large contiguous blocks unbroken by public roads. However, it is important to underscore that the situation is rapidly changing for the worse, because 41% of those pristine areas have been allocated to commercial logging concessions, ranging from 33% in Congo (Zaire) to 68% in Equatorial Guinea.

Although focused on the most commercially valuable species, logging implies large-scale operations and has been identified as one of the primary causes of global deforestation, mainly because it entails the construction of roads to access forests and to transport logs extracted from them. The expansion of commercial logging opens a network of access routes into previously remote areas, with negative ecological impacts -- deforestation, forest fragmentation, microclimate changes, biodiversity loss, changes in quality and quantity in local hydrology--, negative social impacts --dispossession of local peoples' lands, loss of livelihoods, human rights abuses-- and unsustainable economic activities such as clearing for large scale agriculture and commercial bushmeat hunting. In all regions, commercial logging becomes the first step in deforestation processes.

Along the 1990s, timber exports (logs, sawnwood, veneer and plywood) from Central Africa steadily increased, with Europe as major importer from 1993 to 1999, though surpassed in 1996-97 by Asian countries. Given the financial and logistic resources required to carry out long-term, large-scale operations, most of the logging activities are in the hands of foreign multinational groups working within a complex web of subsidiaries, involving local and foreign companies.

National policies actually promote the same forest exploitation model brought about earlier by colonial powers to exploit forests as a source of timber under logging concessions. This heavy heritage, coupled with minimum standards in terms of forestry management practices as well as weak regulating, monitoring and enforcement capacity, has turned governments of Central Africa into an easy prey to the greed of transnational corporations, which find their way to concessions through the conditionalities imposed on governments by multilateral financial institutions and the World Trade Organisation.

The forest-for-export pattern does not have room for hunter-gatherers, small farmers and fisherfolk, nor for biodiversity conservation. It does not have room for the spiritual and cultural identities of the forest peoples or for long-term benefits equitably shared by local populations. It is high time the economic powers and the governments at least stop telling lies when arguing that industrial timber production contributes to poverty alleviation, when it is widely known and well documented that exploitation of forests cause an increase in poverty and that forestry development and deforestation generally go hand in hand, with a redistribution of wealth that benefits a minority (national elites and foreign companies), widening the gap between the rich and the poor.

The international community has acknowledged the key role of forests and has committed itself to conserve them through global processes such as the Convention on Biological Diversity. The international community obviously includes the governments of the six countries of the region, but also the governments of the European, Asian and other countries where most of the wood extracted is consumed, as well as those from the home countries of the logging corporations currently destroying and fragmenting this unique forest ecosystem. In this case, complying with commitments clearly implies the recognition that action to protect these forests must prevail over actions which destroy them, and that a concerted effort must be made by the international community to ensure that end.

Article based on information from: "An Analysis of Access into Central Africa's Rainforests", Susan Minnemeyer, World Resources Institute (WRI), http://www.wri.org/pdf/gfw_centralafrica_full.pdf ; and "Sold down the river", by Forests Monitor, March 2001, <http://www.forestsmonitor.org/reports/solddownriver/cover.htm>