
Gabon: Polemic agreement on the Lope Reserve

Last July the government of Gabon, logging companies operating in the country and some environmental groups --among which the World Wildlife Fund-- reached an agreement to keep the Lope Reserve out of the reach of commercial logging. However, the deal includes a redrawing of the boundaries of the reserve subtracting 10,352 hectares of land on the southeastern flank --that holds the richest stands of valuable okoume trees-- and adding about 5,200 hectares of a previously not protected area of remote upland primary forests.

The agreement has generated opposite reactions. For those in favour, the net result of the agreement will be positive, since the new area incorporated to the reserve is a priceless reservoir of biodiversity. They also argue that thanks to the agreement loggers have committed themselves for the first time not to violate the boundaries of the protected area. According to one of the defenders of the agreement "we've gone from a situation where about two-thirds of the reserve was actually in logging concessions to the point where we've lost some land but the whole reserve is protected from logging forever. "For the logging companies, the now protected highland forest presented significant logistical challenges --requiring expensive road construction and costly harvesting methods-- and in exchange they will now have more access to the valuable okoume stands.

However, environmental groups such as the Rainforest Foundation, that have been fighting against logging in the area consider that logging companies --mostly French and Malaysian-- have too much economic power and influence on the government to actually comply with this commitment. They say that the loss of a previously protected area sounds much like a giveaway, while the right thing to do would have been for the government to enforce the existing laws. There is no guarantee that, in the name of "realism", in the future the protected area borders will not be changed again and again.

The attitude that the involved companies will take in the future is crucial. It is to be reminded that in 1995 the French timber company Rougier Group violated an agreement for the sustainable development of natural resources at the Ipassa Mingouli region, signed by the company itself, the Gabonese government, IUCN, and financially supported by the European Union (see WRM Bulletin 15). Finally, it needs to be stressed that no mention is made in the agreement regarding the opinion of forest people inhabiting the area.

Article based on information from: The New York Times, "Pact Is Reached to Save a Rich Tropical Forest" by Andrew Revkin, 1/8/2000, in Worldwide Forest / Biodiversity Campaign News 13/8/2000, sent by Glen R. Barry,