
Gabon: Rich forests or cheap source of wood?

A report recently released on the situation of the forestry sector in Gabon confirms the existence of a negative trend that is leading to the destruction of the country's rich primary forests to the hands of a few foreign companies (see WRM Bulletin 28). The report titled "First Look at Logging in Gabon" and issued by the World Resources Institute (WRI) as part of its new initiative Global Forest Watch (GFW), where several Gabonese NGOs take part, reveals that more than a half of Gabon's forests have already been allocated as logging concessions and these areas have more than doubled in the last five years. In 1997, 221 companies and individuals held logging concessions, but only 13 companies were beneficiaries of 50% of the total area. According to the report, the five largest concession holders are the Europe-based Rougier-Gabon, La Compagnie Forestière du Gabon (CFG), Leroy-Gabon, La Compagnie Equatoriale des Bois (CEB) and Lutexfo/Soforga. The presence of a German and several Malaysian big companies had been previously reported as well (see WRM Bulletin 28). Greenpeace has informed that in 1991 more than three quarters of Gabon's forests -which still cover 85% of the country's total area- had been granted as logging concessions. China and France are the most important export markets of Gabonese roundwood.

The report states that Gabon's logging industry is vulnerable to market swings since it depends on just one tree species -the okoumé (*Aucoumea klineana*)- which is found only in a restricted area of the Congo Basin: Gabon, and parts of Congo and Equatorial Guinea. Although this precious wood has recently been used in important works in the North -as the new National Library of Paris and the Eurostar Train- it is primarily exported to make plywood.

Even though the report considers that the new Forestry Law, first proposed in 1997, provides an opportunity to help rectify the problems that face forestry by setting new standards for better natural resource management, as a matter of fact legislation to fight illegal logging is weak. Additionally, protection norms are poorly implemented and enforced by a government suffering from financial, human and logistic shortage. For example, the Forestry Law states that Classified Forests must be regulated by a management plan -but procedures and regulations for these plans have not been defined yet. In fact, in 1999 only 5 out of more than 200 logging companies had started -or were planning to start- writing a management plan. In 1997, only 100 government employees were available to monitor and inspect 322 logging concessions covering 86,000 square kilometres. It is difficult to imagine how this kind of control can be an effective tool to protect one of the world's richest and largest still existing forest ecosystems, menaced by foreign market forces, which see it just as an abundant and cheap source of roundwood.

Article based on information from: Dharman Wickremaretna, AFEJ, 10/6/2000; "Poor implementation of Gabon's forest legislation" by Filip Verbelen - Greenpeace