
The endangered primary forests of Gabon

Gabon is one of the few countries in Central Africa where most of its forest still remains unlogged. But unless something is done soon, it will follow the path of neighbouring Cameroon, where two thirds of its forests have been logged at least once during the past few years. As loggers deplete African forests, they turn their attention to the few remaining frontier forests and Gabon seems to be the ideal candidate for those activities. Log production has already increased from 1 million cubic metres in 1975 to almost 3 million by the late 1990s.

Gabon's forests hold high levels of endemism (species that do not occur elsewhere) and therefore deforestation implies the complete loss of those species. Selective logging of some few commercial species (50% of Gabon's timber exports concentrate on the tree species 'okoume') has enormous impacts on the forest, because it implies opening up extensive areas through a network of roads and trails to reach and extract the desired species. This transport network is then used by commercial hunters, resulting in an increase in the bushmeat trade, including endangered and legally protected species. The opening of the forest by roads and selective logging is usually followed by the conversion of forests to cash crop plantations.

Logging in Gabon is a typically mining operation, generating few incomes in the country but huge profits for foreign companies. Almost all timber exports consist of raw logs, thus creating only few and badly paid jobs in logging and almost none in the wood-based industrial sector. Foreign currency obtained through roundwood exports is also low, due its the lack of added value. On the other side, just seven companies have access to more than a third of the country's remaining frontier forests. French company Thanry holds a 600,000 hectare concession; Malaysia's Rimbunan Hijau some 530,000 hectares; Germany's Glunz 500,000; three further Malaysian companies hold 650,000 hectares, while a company of unknown nationality (Bois et Scierie du Gabon/FOBO) has a 430,000 hectare concession.

Source: "Buying Destruction. A Greenpeace report for corporate consumers of forest products", 1999