
Nigeria: Either legal or illegal, commercial logging in Cross River State forest must be banned

Even though Nigeria's forests are only some ten percent of the size they were just two decades ago, they still provide an incredibly rich and diverse habitat. From the tropical highlands to the lowland rainforest, from the plateau grasslands to the savanna, from the swamps to the mangrove forests.

The forests of Cross River State in southeastern Nigeria are the last remaining rainforests in Nigeria and are home to 2,400 native forest communities comprising 1.5 million people, the highest primate diversity on the planet --including the world's most endangered gorillas--, and an estimated 20 percent of the world's butterfly species.

For global logging companies, Nigerian forests appear to be an easy target. Environmental regulations in the country are rarely enforced, and many officials in the recently ousted Abacha dictatorship were notoriously corrupt --more interested in personal gain than in the protection of Nigeria's natural resources.

Hong Kong-based Western Metal Products Company (WEMPCO) is one of the most destructive companies operating in the region (see also <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Nigeria/Odey.html>). Although they own the rights to log in some areas of Cross River State, WEMPCO flaunts regulations and logs illegally in the forest buffer zone surrounding the Cross River National Park, not only threatening to decimate the forest's magnificent hardwoods, but also endangering the livelihoods of Cross River State's forest communities.

Logging has significantly reduced animal habitat, shrinking the animal populations that serve as a traditional source of protein in Cross River State. The bushmeat that was once plentiful is now scarce. The plundering of trees which provide shelter has left whole areas without windbreakers or sufficient trees to check the devastating rainstorms. Thus, the roofs of houses are often blown off by the slightest rainstorm.

Since 1996, environmental and human rights groups across the world have been campaigning against the destructive logging activities of WEMPCO which has operated in Cross River State since 1992, illegally harvesting and exporting the state's forest resources, inciting and inflicting violence and threatening those who have spoken out against their activities. Prior to doing business in Cross River State, WEMPCO was kicked out of Nigerian Ogun State, for the same flagrant violations of forest management policies and laws.

Indeed, the threats to the rainforest continue. The Nigerian government commissioned in 2003 the operation of WEMPCO's wood processing factory and approved a new 540 square mile logging concession located on the river upstream from many forest communities and the national park. The logging concessions will devastate the remaining forest in the buffer zones surrounding the national park. The mill's voracious appetite has the capacity to process twice the amount of wood legally designated by the concessions, sending the company looking for more hardwood in nearby Cameroon. By-products of WEMPCO's hardwood processing mill threaten to pollute the water

sources of two million tribal people and threaten the habitat of the endangered gorilla and many other rare primate species.

Now, the NGO Coalition for the Environment and its members, including 2003 Goldman Prize Winner Mr. Odigha Odigha, Mr. Odey Oyama of Rainforest Resource Development Centre and Mr. Oronto Douglas of Environmental Rights Action, which has been actively opposing WEMPCO's logging activities, has something to celebrate. The Governor of Cross River State, Mr. Donald Duke, has recently approved the closure of the WEMPCO wood-processing factory and the immediate cessation of the company's forest-related activities due to what it described as unwholesome activities contrary to the earlier agreement reached with the company.

However, the great menace of an unsustainable global log trade pervades the whole logging activity, either legal or illegal. That is why West Africa Rainforest Network continues pushing for a ban on all commercial logging for the next 12 months.

Article based on information from: "West Africa Rainforest Network",
<http://www.earthisland.org/warn/> ; "Odigha Odigha",
<http://www.goldmanprize.org/recipientProfile.cfm?recipientID=124>