
Liberia: Unique forests threatened by logging

The last two blocks of continuous tropical rainforest subsisting in the Upper Guinea forest in West Africa, are to be found in Liberia. The Upper Guinean forest, recognised as one of the twenty-five hot spots for world biodiversity, comprises a belt of fragmented forests located along the West African coast. It totally or partially covers some ten countries, starting at the west of Guinea and ending at the southwest of Cameroon. Of the world's twenty-five hot spots, this one hosts the greatest diversity of mammals. The Upper Guinean forest contains 551 different species of mammals and half the known species of mammals of the African continent. In addition, it is among the regions with the highest degree of priority regarding conservation of primates, thus forming part of the priority zones for conservation of world biodiversity.

It is considered that the Upper Guinean forest has lost 12.7% of its initial extension, that is to say 727,900 square kilometres. Some 45% of this forest is to be found in Liberia. The Liberian forest serves as a habitat for much endemic flora and fauna and represents a unique ecological niche for some of the world's rarest species. The zone has its own flora and fauna and conservation of its biological diversity has been recognised as a world priority, for although Liberia has a profusion of biological wealth, this wealth is not very common.

Unfortunately, the Liberian rainforest is seriously threatened, mainly by logging operations. Between 1997 and 2001, the production of roundwood increased in a spectacular way (over 1300%). As could be expected, this had an enormous impact on indigenous rural communities and the local population, whose means of subsistence came from the land and the forest. Their cultural and spiritual practices depend so closely on the forest that, with its rapid disappearance, the survival and growth of such communities are seriously threatened. The present level of poverty in these communities makes it possible to see what will happen if nothing is done to control the present trend towards forestry exploitation.

In the year 2000, the Save My Future Foundation launched an investigation on forestry industry activities. The first results revealed that an overwhelming majority of Liberians, in particular rural inhabitants, were in disagreement with the way that logging companies operate. They also expressed their major deception over the way that the Liberian government is spending income from the timber trade, neglecting to make the necessary investments of part of this income to improve the communities' living conditions.

The research team also reported on the existence of extremely dangerous and unsustainable development practices and the inhabitants of some regions declared that the militia of some logging companies had harassed them and attempted to put pressure on them.

These results also showed the need for more exhaustive research on the logging industry. For this reason the Campaign to Save the Liberian Forest and Respect Liberia's Human Rights, was launched to carry out a more detailed investigation on the activities of logging companies in Liberia. The objective of the present campaign is to protect the rainforest and promote respect for the indigenous peoples' individual and collective rights, working in close relationship with them for this

purpose. The project also aims at monitoring forestry exploitation activities, with the objective of illustrating and revealing infringements made regarding forests and facilitating public debates on these issues.

Article based on the introduction to "Pillage: La destruction silencieuse de la forêt pluviale du Liberia" (Plundering: the silent destruction of Liberia's rainforest), SAMFU Foundation, September 2002.