
Cameroon: The trees beyond the forest

Cameroon, with a population of around 15 million and a territory of 475,440 sq km, has an estimated 22 million hectares of forests, 64% of which are tropical rainforests lying at the southern part of the country, while the remaining 36% are in the central and northern Savannah areas. Atlantic coastal forests grow in areas with relatively fertile soils and hold some of the greatest biodiversity found anywhere in Africa.

After the decline of the oil boom era, the government increased timber exports and estimates of deforestation situate Cameroon's rainforest loss at around 130,000 hectares per year. Deforestation has been aggravated by megaprojects such as road construction, and the building of dams. Logging activities, carried out by both local and foreign companies, are focused on few species: Sapelli, Ayous, Iroko, Azobe, Tali, Moabi, Movingui and Ngollon, for export to Europe, Asia and the rest of the world.

Benoit Ndameu, from Friends of the Earth Cameroon, warns that there will be no primary forest left in Cameroon in ten years time if major changes are not introduced. He identifies illegal logging as the big problem, and denounces that the government does not enforce its own regulations: "Of the 100,000 hectares logged each year, at least 40% of them are illegally deforested. Logging companies regularly exceed their concessions and export as much as they can with no oversight from the authorities."

Benoit Ndameu demystifies the role of so-called "slash-and-burn" agriculture in deforestation, often targeted as a primary cause of forest loss by vested interests. He explains that in the east of the country, where the worst deforestation is taking place, there are only between one to three people per square kilometre --farmers who stay in the same place for many years. Logging companies, on the other hand, have five-year permits to exploit enormous areas --after which nothing is left-- many of them financed by the World Bank.

Bollor, Thanry, Pallisco and Rougier, from France, Wijma from the Netherlands, Alpicam/Grumcam from Italy and Sfil and Sotref from Belgium are the most active foreign logging companies operating in Cameroon.

A new actor is now entering the scene. The pharmaceutical industry is increasingly interested in the medicinal value of Cameroon's trees and Benoit Ndameu says that French laboratory Plantecam has identified the tree *Prunus africana* as useful for treating prostate cancer, and ongoing research investigates the potentiality of *Ancistrocladus korupensis* to treat AIDS.

Together with other local NGOs, Friends of the Earth (FoE) Cameroon is trying to expose logging companies' operations and the government's non-compliance with its own regulations. Their joint strategy with FoE France has succeeded in uncovering facts about illegal activities being carried out by French logging companies in Cameroon, financed by the French government's development agency.

Unlike profit-making companies, the people of the forest establish a multipurpose link with the trees: they provide them fruit, food, bush meat, oil for cooking, and honey, as well as provide them with medicine. Pygmies even use the bark of the Moabi (*Baïllonela toxisperma*) to make a camouflage potion for hunting. The trees also enshrine sacred values for forest peoples: the Bantu believe that local Bubinga trees contain the spirits of their ancestors. The spiritual connection of these people with this tree, which during centuries has allowed the conservation of an extremely slow-growing species such as this, is not taken into account by forest exploiters who see only its hard, red-coloured wood to make furniture in Europe and Asia.

Article based on information from: Ann Doherty, "The true value of a tree", interview with Benoit Ndameu, FoE Cameroon, (<http://www.foei.org/LINK/LINK95/benoit.htm>); Wilfred J. Awung, Centre for Environmental and Rural Transformation Limbe, "Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Cameroon", (<http://wrm.org.uy/deforestation/Africa/Cameroon.html>); Ousseynou Ndoye and David Kaimowitz, "Macro-Economics, Markets, and the Humid Forests of Cameroon, 1967-1997", (<http://wrm.org.uy/deforestation/Africa/Cameroon2.html>)