
The Human Cost of Strictly Protected Areas in the Congo Basin

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In Africa's Congo Basin, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, the many promises of rights-based and participatory conservation have miserably failed to materialise. **For communities living in and around protected areas, the reality continues to be one of dispossession, impoverishment and widespread human rights abuses.**

At the World Park Congress in Durban in 2003, governments, conservation NGOs and multilateral organisations called for a “new conservation paradigm” (1), recognising past injustices and announcing that from then on, local people would be treated as equal partners and their rights would be respected. Much lip service has been paid since. But in the Congo Basin's rainforests, the reality is far, far off the mark.

The Rainforest Foundation UK has been working closely with forest-dependent communities across the region for three decades. Every time we came close to a protected area, we found the same story: forest-dependant communities, who had been managing and co-existing with their ancestral forests sustainably for generations, had seen **their lands and primary sources of livelihoods and income stripped away by protected areas that were imposed on them without their consent.** Communities have also been side-lined in the management of the forests they depend on, and having to endure heavy-handed enforcement of rules that were not properly explained to them, with **armed park rangers arbitrarily and disproportionately targeting them for ‘poaching’ instead of going after the real criminals.**

We started documenting the situation more systematically (2), collecting qualitative and quantitative evidence of how the rights of forest-dependant communities were being overlooked in protected areas' creation and management, and how **gross negligence on the part of ‘mega’ conservation NGOs were allowing human rights abuses by aid-funded park rangers to happen.** These issues were discussed at length in a 2016 report, dissecting the impacts of 34 protected areas in the region. (3)

Guns, guards and rights abuses

Conservation organisations are quick to report figures on poachers' arrests and seizures and the numbers of park rangers who lose their lives protecting wildlife, including in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These often make the headlines. (4) But behind these numbers hides a much more complex and darker story. For every poaching network dismantled, how many innocent indigenous people hunting for their livelihoods have been arrested and thrown into prison with virtually no right to a fair trial? **For every park ranger that tragically dies defending endangered species, how many local people have been arbitrarily arrested, extorted, tortured, abused or killed by other park agents?**

Recently, we supported a team of local investigators to conduct an in-depth research within communities living around UNESCO-protected Salonga National Park in DRC. (5) The research team interviewed over 230 people affected by the park, and almost a quarter of them reported having been **direct victims of physical or sexual abuse by the park's 'eco-guards'**, sometimes acting jointly with DRC's army (FARDC). The team interviewed victims and eye witnesses, and collected material evidence of **shocking human rights violations**. The most serious ones include **a case of gang rape, two extra-judicial killings and many detailed reports of torture and mistreatment**. **Salonga's park rangers are supported by the NGO WWF**, which co-manages the park since 2015, and receive direct and indirect funding from a wide range of international donors, including **Germany's developmental bank KfW, US-AID and the European Union**.

The park is as big as Belgium and the research team only visited a fraction of the 700 villages that are believed to be directly impacted by Salonga's conservation measures. Therefore there are good grounds to believe that **the abuses uncovered are part of a much wider, systematic problem**.

While the situation in Salonga is particularly alarming, **military-style conservation has produced many more victims across the region**. In Republic of Congo, we documented the case of Freddy, an alleged poacher who was tortured and killed in November 2017 by 'eco-guards' supported by the NGO Wildlife Conservation Society. (6) During a field investigation around Lac Tele the same year, the country's only so-called "community reserve", we met indigenous Baka families who had seen their houses burned down by 'eco-guards' and today decried facing repeated mistreatment when entering the forest.

In a context of widespread police corruption and lack of trust in authorities, most human rights abuses go unreported. When they are, no steps are taken to provide redress to communities.

Conservationist NGOs who train and support 'eco-guards', when alerted of such human rights abuses, tend to shield behind the fact that 'eco-guards' ultimately fall under the responsibility of the State. But, clearly, there is much more they could do to prevent, monitor and remedy violations that occur under their watch.

Land rights and livelihoods systematically undermined

Another deeply-rooted issue that conservation programmes often aggravate and largely fail to address is tenure insecurity, and related loss of livelihoods. One of the reasons why rights-based conservation has completely failed to materialise in the Congo Basin is that **local communities have virtually no legal rights to their lands and that customary rights are largely misunderstood and overlooked**.

Before setting up a national park, an obvious first step would be to document who lives there (and how they live), to ask if they consent and ensure they won't suffer from conservation-related restrictions on their traditional livelihoods activities. But this is almost never done in the Congo Basin. Our research into 34 protected areas across the region found no evidence of adequate documentation (such as mapping) of customary tenure taking place prior to, or informing, the protected area creation. (7) As a result, **protected areas are almost universally superimposed on lands that are customarily owned and used by local indigenous and farming communities – without their consent**. In an overwhelming number of cases, the creation of protected areas has involved some form of displacement of local communities, from physical relocation of entire villages to economic displacement of people who see their **access to land or resources limited or even entirely prohibited, with immense impacts on their economy, culture, livelihood and identity**.

One striking example of this is the Tumba Lediima Reserve in western DRC. (8) When its borders were arbitrarily drawn in 2006, mainly to protect the local population of bonobos (a type of chimpanzee), nobody thought it was worthwhile to properly document who was already living there, and how these people would be affected by conservation measures. Moreover, there was no acknowledgement that **local ethnic groups in the area had taboos on hunting bonobos and were therefore already playing a key role in protecting the species**. Community mapping revealed that over 100,000 people live in the area that they largely depend on forests for their livelihoods. Because these communities did not have a say in the establishment and management of the reserve, they have been hit hard by the restrictions on hunting and fishing that were imposed on them by the reserve's managers, to the point that the World Food Programme had to intervene and provide food supplements. (9)

We found a similar story near Salonga National Park. Communities living in the so-called "Monkoto corridor", many of which were forcibly evicted from their forests when the park was established in 1971, reported widespread malnutrition. They overwhelmingly attributed this problem to conservation-related restrictions on hunting and fishing. *"Every day we've wondering why they took us out of our ancestors' forests and put us here, in this hell? We need to be able to access the park as everything we need to survive is there"*, one villager told us.

DRC has recently passed community forestry legislation, paving the way for greater tenure security and community-based forest management. (10) While this is a ground-breaking development, there is a need to ensure that these community forests are developed for and by the communities themselves rather than being appropriated by some of the large conservation agencies as 'buffers' to protected areas as some reports have shown.

Where do we go from here?

Top-down, military-style wildlife conservation, as it continues to be the norm in the Congo Basin, besides being socially unjust, is short-sighted and ultimately undermines conservation efforts. It **pits local communities against conservation, alienating the very people who should be conservation's best allies**.

Moving forward, conservation NGOs and their donors need to do much more than applying sticking plaster onto a broken system – delivering one-off human rights training sessions to eco-guards or setting up a few ill-adapted alternative livelihoods programmes will not suffice to right the wrongs. **A complete overhaul is needed**, whereby forest communities' rights and needs are integrated into all aspects of conservation planning and management.

Governments should seek to implement alternative conservation measures that have proven successful such as indigenous and community conservancies and (genuinely bottom-up) community forests. (12)

For international conservation NGOs, it means that transparent community-based monitoring and grievance mechanisms need to be set up and remedial action where violations occur. It means truly involving local and indigenous communities in anti-poaching surveillance (and re-considering the need for armed eco-guards altogether, at least in some contexts). International donors, on the other hand, need to shift funds and support away from traditional top-down approaches and towards more rights-based models. The adverse human rights impacts of the trend towards militarisation of conservation across the region, also urgently need to be discussed.

For civil society organisations, it means **systematically documenting and exposing conservation-related abuses**, and building capacity of grassroots and frontline activists to do so. Applied new technologies can greatly assist in making information on land and human rights issues in remote forest areas much more accessible to decision-makers and organisations.

The Rainforest Foundation UK promotes a system called ForestLink, which allows communities to send near-instantaneous alerts of abuses, even in areas where there is no mobile or internet connectivity. (13) The Mapping for Rights initiative enables forest peoples to map their lands and livelihood activities, providing tangible evidence that **the lands earmarked for conservation, far from being “pristine wilderness”, are indeed human landscapes.** (14)

Until all this is properly considered and addressed, promises of rights-based conservation, in the Congo Basin context, will remain woefully unfilled.

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- (1) [The Durban Action Plan](#)
- (2) [Rainforests, Parks and People](#)
- (3) Rainforest Foundation UK, [Protected Areas in the Congo Basin: Failing both People and Biodiversity?](#), 2016
- (4) See related articles on [Global Conservation](#), and [The Guardian](#)
- (5) <https://salonga.org/>
- (6) Rainforest Foundation UK, [Aid-funded conservation guards accused of extrajudicial killing](#), 2017
- (7) See RFUK (2016) and www.rainforestparksandpeople.org
- (8) See video: target="_blank" rel="noopener" data-saferedirecturl="https://www.google.com/url?hl=es&q=https://www.youtube.com/watch?>v=5HHoSLEVoQk
- (9) [Tumba Ledima Nature Reserve](#), DRC
- (10) Rainforest Foundation UK, [A National Strategy for Community Forestry in DRC](#), 2018
- (11) [Achi Targets](#)
- (12) See [ICCA Consortium](#)
- (13) [Forest Link](#)
- (14) [Mapping for Rights](#)