
Cameroon: Legal forest biodiversity destruction

Industrial logging is one of the main direct causes of forest biodiversity loss. Many organizations and governments have focused on illegal logging and less so on destructive legal logging (see WRM Bulletin N° 98). In this respect, a recent report (“Legal Forest Destruction. The Wide Gap Between Legality and Sustainability”) provides a broader perspective by looking at the Dutch timber trade, its focus on legality and the impact of legal logging on forests.

“Legality is often presented as a necessary first step toward sustainability”, states the report, an idea which it rejects, presenting the negative social and ecological effects of legal logging that results in “legal forest destruction”, defined as “harvesting of timber and/or other forest products in accordance with national legislation, but which is economically, socially and/or environmentally detrimental”. “Legality and sustainability must be combined”, concludes the report.

Cameroon is one of the ten cases of legal forest destruction presented by the research. In the Cameroonian forest of the Southwest Province, rich in Azobe (*Lophira alata*), the national timber company CAFECO has a logging permit for an area of 2.500 hectares over a maximum period of three years --a Vente de Coupe (VC) that can be renewed twice, each for a period of one year-- and without need for a proper management plan. This makes the VC-system a mining-like type of operation in which the logging company feels --and has-- no long-term responsibility for the area, implying inherent unsustainable logging.

The Centre pour l’Environnement et le Développement (CED) conducted field investigations in March 2005 and found logging operations in VC 11-06-18 to be ecologically and socially very disruptive and clearly unsustainable. Trees are cut down and abandoned on site, some of them are felled on steep slopes, making it risky and difficult to be removed. Generally, about 18-20 per cent of the felled trees are wasted. This practice, without being necessarily illegal, contributes to the depletion of the forest and consequently to the disturbance of ecosystem functions.

Furthermore, huge unplanned forest roads and temporary timber yards (parc à bois) are build in the forest, causing further destruction and fragmentation of the forest. Logging roads built on slopes and the use of heavy bulldozers also increase soil erosion and pollution of water sources, making the water unsuitable for consumption by local peoples.

The villages surrounding the area --Dipemda, Koba, Ibemi and Mosanja-- are highly dependant on the forest and its resources in sustaining their livelihoods. A number of socially and culturally useful tree species such as Djabe or Moabi (*Baillonella toxisperma*), Djanssang (*Ricinodendron heudelotii*) and Bush Mango (*Irvingia gabonensis*) have been destroyed by CAFECO. These trees are used by villagers for food and medicine. Furthermore, their farms have been destroyed by roads. Fifteen farmers from Koba village reported the destruction of their farm and notably cocoa stems (the main cash crop for local communities) during road construction.

Research on the area has exposed that logging operations in VC 11-06-18 contribute to the impoverishment of local communities, to the destruction of their livelihood and to the ecological

degradation of the rainforests. The fact that such logging is legal only makes matters worse.

The full report “Legal Forest Destruction. The Wide Gap Between Legality and Sustainability” is available at: <http://www.greenpeace.nl/raw/content/reports/legal-forest-destruction.pdf>