
Gabon: Can National Parks save the forests?

National Parks are not playing a key role in the economic development of Central African countries. However, they are seen as the cornerstone of the world's conservation efforts. Thus the president of Gabon, El Hadj Omar Bongo Odimba, announced the creation of thirteen National Parks at the Earth Summit, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002.

Encouraged by notable international NGOs, Bongo Odimba enacted these parks in 2003; some of them have been selected as the key priority landscapes in the framework of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, an international initiative whose goal is to halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems functions in the Congo Basin for the benefit of the people of Central Africa and the global community.

These factors, along with the emphasis on ecotourism and the splendour of Central Africa's natural and cultural resources, suggest that Central Africa is working to conserve biodiversity and augment the economic benefits from its parks.

But, the reality is showing that this perspective has been too optimistic and that the possibility of changes in political commitments has been underestimated. Nowadays, this reality has caught up on optimistic proponents of speeding the creation of National Parks in Central Africa.

News from Gabon inform that large areas of Ivindo National Park are being logged by SEEF (Société Equatoriale d'Exploitation Forestière), while SOUTHERNERA (South African Company) and one Chinese Company have been authorized to oil exploration respectively in the Loango National Park and the Mount Cristal National Park (Ona, Environnement-Gabon, septembre 2004).

Of course, for NGOs, this called for a campaign warning about the destruction of National parks (Ona, Environnement-Gabon). Although it might be a reasonable short-term NGO reaction, this response is not sufficient, because it undervalues existing incentives in the country to welcome actors (foreign governments, financial institutions, companies or NGOs), which have the potential to mobilise financial resources and to respond to government and private economic interests.

Thus National Parks, which are competing with financial interests, should have stronger arguments than "Parks for people of Central Africa and the global community." Also, in Central Africa (as well as in the entire Africa), park development requires a much wider perspective than that provided by "conservation biology". Otherwise, National Parks will be insidiously but effectively allocated for resource-use.

All the above raise old, but critical issues related to biodiversity conservation in Central Africa, particularly given that Bongo Odimba created National Parks with the assistance of the world's greatest international conservation organizations. The question is: did these organizations carry out an in-depth assessment of the areas and the constraints before encouraging Bongo Odimba to create National Parks?

Because of logging and oil exploration- which can result in oil exploitation-, what exactly should

conservation be in the concerned areas? In terms of what societies need (for example, jobs and economic growth), what should the newly created National parks provide to the people of Gabon? Who are these parks to serve?

By: Assitou Ndinga, e-mail: ndinga_assitou@yahoo.fr