
Equatorial Guinea: Logging ban and logging on the rise

For its size, Equatorial Guinea holds a remarkable biodiversity both in its continental zone --Mbini-- and in its two main islands, Pigu and Bioko. Continental Equatorial Guinea is covered by dense tropical rainforest that is exploited by the lumbering industry. It contains more than 140 wood species, of which the most commercially important are okume (*Aucoumea klaineana*), African walnut, and various mahoganies. This has attracted the logging industry, which has been the main responsible for a severe process of deforestation particularly in the coastal regions of Mbini. Many of the country's inaccessible interior regions still remain mostly undisturbed, but deforestation close to the coast has led the Spanish --and more recently Asian-- timber companies to venture deeper into the interior.

The country's main export-earnings come from oil, lumber, cacao and coffee. Until independence in 1968, the colonial economic model was based on cacao cultivation, which introduced a radical transformation to the country's landscape, particularly in Bioko. Oil was discovered off the north coast of Bioko in 1981, and production began in 1992. By the mid-1990s petroleum products accounted for over half of the country's export earnings. Coffee is grown mainly along the Cameroon border.

The island of Bioko, located in the Gulf of Guinea facing the coast of Cameroon, was a strategic and commercial centre for the Portuguese and Spanish conquerors during the 18th century. Descriptions from travellers and geographers who visited the island show their surprise and admiration for the rich flora and fauna that could be found there. More recent studies confirm the existence of high biodiversity and endemism levels in Bioko. Between 1991 and 1992 alone, more than one hundred new plant species were for the first time described by science. The presence of one endemic bird species, 46 endemic bird sub-species and ten species with a restricted distribution in the African continent have been registered.

The government of Equatorial Guinea has recently banned the cutting of trees in Bioko. According to the deputy minister of Water, Forests and Environment, Joaquin Mecheba Ivina, the measure aims at protecting the forests against the "abusive exploitation to which it is subjected by chain-saw operators." Logging companies were banned from Bioko in 1990 but they have since been replaced by small-scale sawmillers, whose activity is considered to be a threat to the forests.

However, no similar measures are being taken on the mainland. On the contrary, forest exploitation is on the rise. From 1993 to 1997 forest concessions have grown from 600,000 to 1,500,000 hectares, which means that all the country's commercially productive forest is now under concession. At the same time, there have been changes in the transnational actors involved and in the destination of exports. In 1993, most of the timber exports went to Japan, followed by Spain, Turkey and Portugal. Four years later, in 1997, 55% of wood exports went to China and 20% to Japan and only 5% to Spain.

The rapid growth of Equatorial Guinea's forestry sector is considered to be unsustainable and having devastating environmental impacts on water courses and coastal areas. According to an International Monetary Fund assessment, at the current rate of exploitation forest resources would be exhausted by the year 2012.

Within such context, the logging ban in Bioko --which only represents 7% of the total land area of the country-- appears to be a totally insufficient measure to counter the real problem of deforestation being caused by international trade.