
Congo, D.R: The case of the Twa of the Kahuzi-Biega National Park

The book written by Albert Kwokwo Barume recently published by the Forest Peoples Programme and IWGIA --"Heading Towards Extinction? Indigenous Rights in Africa: The Case of the Twa of the Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo"-- examines the fate of the Twa indigenous people in that country.

The author, a Congolese human rights lawyer, uses an indigenous rights framework to examine the case of the Twa indigenous "Pygmy" people located in the eastern region of the country, who were expelled from their traditional lands in order to create the Kahuzi-Biega National Park. The Twa, a hunting and gathering people of the tropical forests, face a dismal future. Denied access to the lands that they have depended on for millennia, they now live in miserable squatter camps on the margins of other villages in the area surrounding the Park. Deprived of rights, compensation or justice, and exposed to discrimination from other sectors of society, the Twa are also suffering an alarming rise in malnutrition and disease.

The wider context of African policies regarding ethnic identity and the rights of indigenous peoples are also examined. The report situates the Twa within two important new areas of thinking: the growing movement of self-identified 'indigenous peoples' in Africa, who are invoking emerging concepts of international law to renegotiate their relationship with the states that encompass them; and new models of conservation which recognise the rights of indigenous peoples, value their knowledge and seek to give them a central role in the management of conservation zones.

The Twa of Kahuzi-Biega have yet to benefit from either of these changes in thinking and this report therefore discusses land rights and possible options for the Twa to challenge their expulsion from the Kahuzi-Biega National Park and negotiate new arrangements based on the recognition of their rights. The report ends with concrete recommendations for reforms in the way the Congolese authorities, conservationists, and the aid agencies supporting them, are dealing with the Twa.

The contradiction between nature conservation and indigenous peoples rights is false. So the report does not seek to undermine the efforts of Congolese and expatriate conservationists who have struggled to protect the country's wildlife in war-torn eastern Congo. However, the need to respect the rights of peoples who have been and are being abused, is self-evident. The author asserts that conservation will be strengthened and not weakened when local communities experience it as a positive project for their own benefit.

The book contains the following chapters: 1) The Political context; 2) Indigenous Peoples in Africa; 3) Conservation in Congo and the Kahuzi-Biega National Park; 4) The Expulsion of the Twa from the Kahuzi-Biega National Park; 5) Land Rights; 6) Recommendations

