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#5 — Timber Tsunami Tracking Logging in the Congo Basin

This brief was written by the Global Forest Watch Project of **World Resources Institute**. For additional information please contact Jean-Gael Collomb, World Resources Institute; e-mail: jg@wri.org.

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Key Concepts

- The Congo Basin contains the second largest contiguous tropical rainforest block in the world.
- Though agriculture is a primary cause of deforestation, its impact is localized, affecting less than 10% of the landscape. Most of the landscape outside national parks and reserves is zoned for logging, resulting in significant degradation.
- Logging is a mainstay of Central African national economies, generating in taxes in 1997-98 U.S. \$60 million in Cameroon and U.S. \$31 million in Gabon.
- Gabon and Cameroon rank among the world's top five tropical log exporters. Central African timber was primarily exported to Europe, but recently exports to Asia's markets

have increased substantially.

- European companies dominate the logging sector thanks to greater capitalization and strong political links with and interests from ex-colonial governments.
- As only a few tree species are commercially valuable, Central African forests are usually selectively logged. Harvesting one to two trees per hectare typically damages less than 10% of the canopy. However, logging roads fragment the forest and open once-isolated areas to commercial hunters and immigrant farmers.
- Weak enforcement and implementation of forestry legislation result in rampant illegal logging, significant loss of local and national revenue, and environmental impacts.
- Little relevant and timely information on forest resources is available. Basic information on logging sector practices and production is not collected, synthesized and made public by governments.
- Though satellite remote sensing is useful to detect forest loss, illegal selective logging and hunting are major causes of forest degradation that may only be seen in field-based surveys.

The Spread of Logging in the Congo Basin

Logging is important as a source of revenue and as one of the primary causes of forest degradation. In 1998, timber generated 28% of all non-petroleum export revenues in Cameroon. The logging sector is one of the largest employers in both Cameroon and Gabon, and often plays a key role in bringing roads, education, medical care and electricity to rural areas. However, logging may cause considerable damage to forests as a result of road construction, and felling and removal of logs. Studies in Gabon have shown that logging causes approximately 10% loss of canopy size trees. In addition, up to 50% of the canopy could be disturbed, because several trees are typically damaged or destroyed in the process of reaching and felling a harvestable tree.

Industrial-scale logging in the Congo Basin began at the end of the 19th century with the establishment of European colonies. Timber was felled initially along the coast, then logging spread inland along major rivers as the logs could be floated down to ports where it was exported. As the supply of quality trees diminished and the demand for timber grew, logging companies advanced deeper into the forest interior (Figure 1).

High operational costs, poor infrastructure, and, most important, demand make loggers focus on only a few valuable species. Harvesting all large individuals of only the best quality trees of a few species reduce the commercial value of the remaining forest and alters its species and size class composition.

Most trees felled in previously unlogged forest are 400-1000 years old. As felling cycles are unlikely ever to exceed 100 years, logging in the Congo Basin is likely to be a two-step process.

The first is the “unsustainable” harvest of “old-growth” trees as a one-time “gift of nature.” Followed by a “sustainable” logging cycle that harvests trees at a rate equivalent to their replacement. Most logging in Central Africa is presently in the first phase, with Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Republic of Congo likely to run out of old-growth trees in 15-20 years.

As loggers sweep over the landscape in search of valuable trees, they cause rural economies to boom and bust, because once a logging company has removed the few valuable trees, it moves on to a new area. Logging also attracts immigrants looking for good-paying jobs and access to social services not provided by the state. This leads to increased agricultural and hunting pressures on nearby natural resources, pressures that continue even after the logging company has moved on. Logging roads left behind by companies open up pockets of forests that were previously inaccessible to hunters. Motorized transportation allows more, faster and cheaper transportation between the hunting areas and urban markets. This promotes commercial hunting, which is largely unregulated in most of Central Africa and can quickly decimate local wildlife populations.

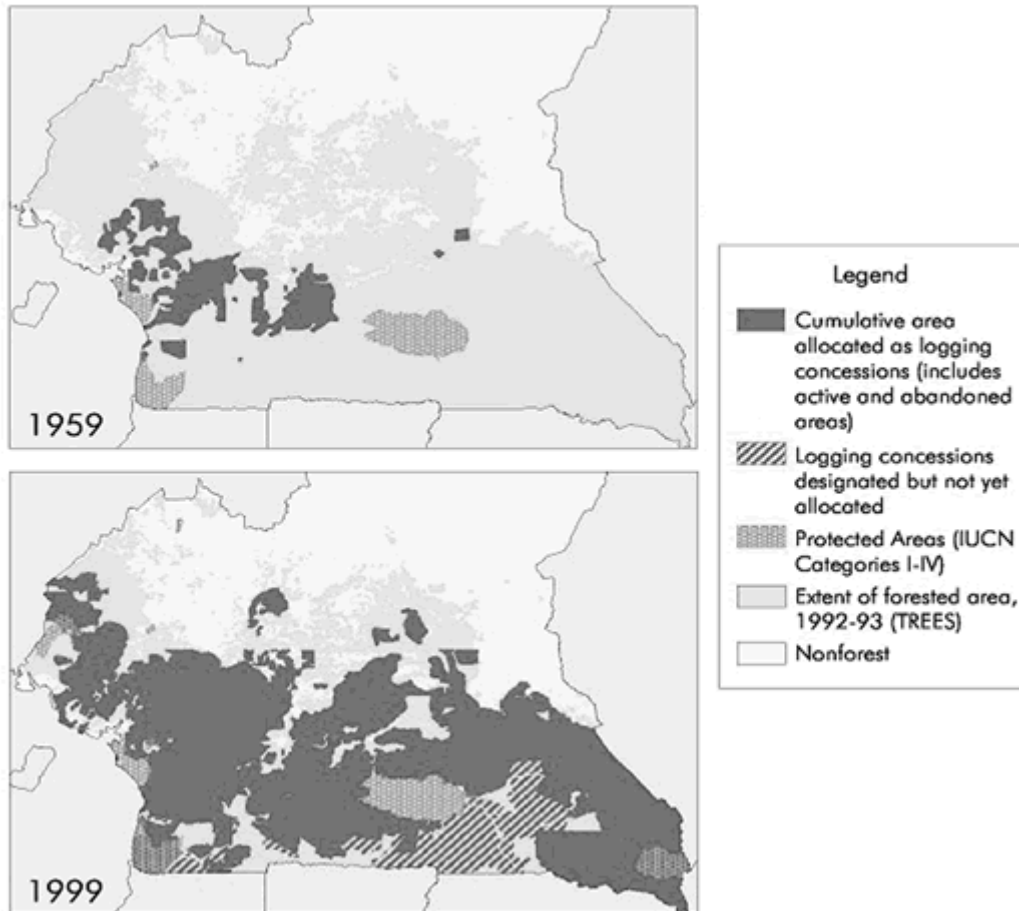


Figure 1: Evolution of Logging Concession between 1959 and 1999 in Cameroon.

Demand for Timber Keeps Growing

China imported 60 million m³ of timber in 1999, and is expected to import about 100 million m³ by 2010. The economic crisis that swept the globe in 1997-98 had a devastating impact on tropical timber production and trade (Figure 2), but a recovery seemed under way in 1999. Prices for African timbers have withstood the Asian financial crisis and demand remains strong. Cameroon's log export ban, which doesn't apply to sawnwood, has prompted other Central African nations to increase production to satisfy increased demand for African logs and sawn timber in Europe - a trend that is likely to continue. Though raw log exports from Central Africa declined in 1999, overall exports of processed wood increased; volumes still represent a small fraction of the global tropical timber trade.

Difficulties in Enforcing Forestry Legislation

The likely expansion of the timber sector could prove beneficial to Central Africa's national economies. However, the region has a poor track record of managing its natural and financial resources for social and environmental good. Central African nations are in the process of reforming their forestry policy but, as events in Cameroon have shown, the biggest hurdle to better forestry is not the law itself but the practical implementation of those regulations.

At present, no logging operation in Central Africa is certified using Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) international norms. Worse, most companies are far from meeting certification requirements, and certification has yet to be widely accepted as a potential tool to improve forest management.

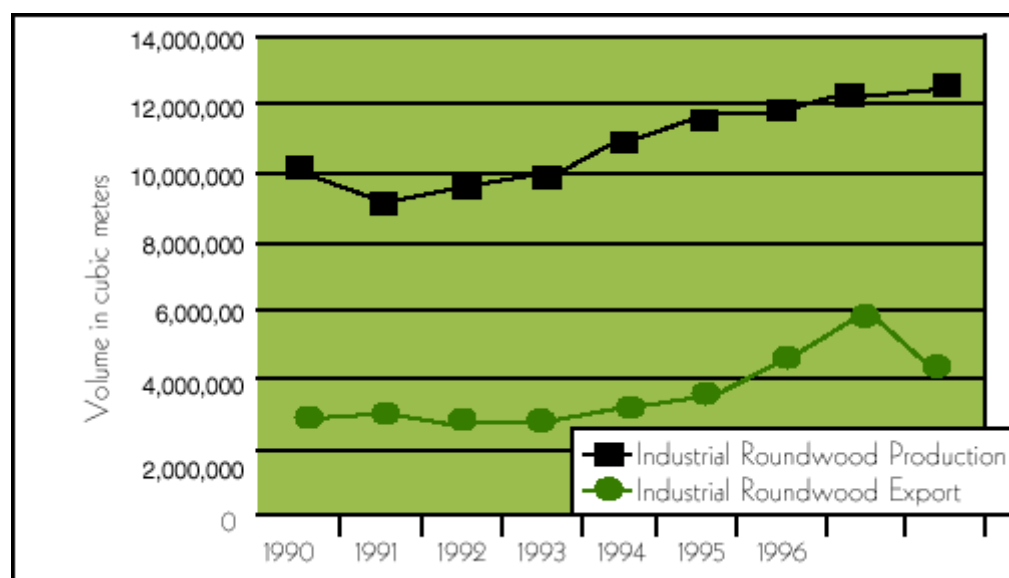


Figure 2: Log production and export trends in the Congo Basin.

The laws regulating the use of natural resources in Central Africa are poorly implemented and rarely respected. For example, three quarters of the planned application decrees, codifying the 1982 forestry law in Gabon, have yet to be written. Since 1997, the Gabonese Ministry that oversees the nation's forest estate has been engaged in the process of forest policy reform, but the new law has yet to reach and be accepted by the National Assembly. In Cameroon, the World Bank has supported the elaboration of a new forestry policy, which was enacted in 1995. It laid out strict and groundbreaking guidelines for the management, taxation and allocation of forestry concessions. Over half of the logging permits in 1997-98 and less than a third of the concessions allocations as of December 1999 fully complied with the new guidelines. (Figure 3). During the latest concession allocation round, two companies known to have violated the law were awarded new concessions. Furthermore, in both Cameroon and Gabon, logging concessions have been allocated within the boundaries of national protected areas.

Several factors may explain why laws are hard to implement and poorly respected. In Gabon, in 1997, only 100 forest agents were employed to monitor and inspect 84,000 k2 of logging concessions (roughly the size of Maine). Similarly, in the East province of Cameroon, on average, each agent was responsible for over 200 k2 of concessions. This is, in part, a symptom of the fact that most forestry revenues contribute to non-forestry related portions of the national budget instead of first supporting the ministry in charge of forests.

In addition, the region is plagued by corruption. Even when illegal activities are documented, there are only minor consequences. In 1992-93, only 4% of violations reported in Cameroon were brought to trial and fines levied. One out of five violation cases brought to the judiciary were dropped after "the intervention of an influential person."

Getting Information Into the Hands of Civil Society

Central African nations are in the process of reforming their forestry policy. However, basic information on logging sector practices and production levels is currently not collected, synthesized and made public by Central African governments. Lack of current forest sector information hampers the evolution of civil society institutions that can engage government and the private sector to reform forest management policies and practices to benefit nations as a whole. In Central Africa the public—and private—sectors dominate forest management decision making, and there are very few mechanisms in place to promote transparency and accountability within these sectors. As a result, the economic benefits of logging are seldom shared "equitably, and environmental concerns are seldom addressed.

Initiatives to increase public access, rather than simply public-sector access, to current and verifiable information are based on the belief that this will help empower civil society institutions to lobby government for changes in forest policies, and the private sector to improve their forest-use practices. Building civil society capacity to independently monitor the logging

sector is one step to helping prevent mismanagement of the forest estate, fight illegal logging, and expose corruption.

In recent years, three trends have been crucial to the development of these efforts. First, new technologies, such as computerized Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and the internet, have allowed information to be better synthesized and shared rapidly over great distances at low cost. Second, many wood products companies are adopting “green” purchasing policies, suggesting increased market demand for wood products from well managed forests. Third, ongoing economic crises in Central Africa encourage governments to make their economies more efficient, which may imply reforming resource pricing and decentralizing some responsibilities for forest management.

But change is slow to come, in part because powerful interests benefit from the status quo. Logging benefits a minority of people, often a mix of the national elite and foreign businessmen, who have accumulated great wealth from logging revenues. However, the international community is putting increasing pressure on governments to reform the forest sector.

New Initiatives to Better Track Logging Activities

To better monitor logging trends, it is important to know: (1) what logging activities are planned or underway, (2) where commercial logging is located, (3) who is involved, (4) whether or not the laws are respected, and (5) what the environmental and social trade-offs of these activities are.

To promote change, information must be targeted at a mostly non-technical audience: policy makers within national governments, the international donor community, media, advocacy groups, and others concerned about forest management issues. This entails a strong focus on visual information and basic well-documented facts. New tools, such as Geographic Information System (GIS), high-resolution satellite imagery, and the Internet, increase the quality, timeliness and cost-effectiveness of these efforts; however, they will never fully replace actions by groups “on the ground.”

To improve long-term management of resources, multiple efforts are under way to better document and monitor logging. The World Bank has launched a Congo Basin wide initiative, the Regional Environmental Information Management Program (REIMP), to synthesize and distribute environmental information among government agencies, research institutes, and civil society. The Canadian International Development Agency has helped the ministries in charge of forest management in Gabon and Cameroon create computerized databases for inventories and tracking production of concessions. The French Cooperation has also attempted to develop a logging concession map linked to a GIS to facilitate tracking of where logging is taking place. These initiatives, mostly within government institutions, may be powerful tools to develop sustainable management strategies. Their efficiency will be better assessed when the results are made widely available to civil society. Availability of open and transparent information is essential for sustainable management of forests.

Civil society has had a growing interest in logging issues. Local groups are looking for tools to monitor their forests and how they are managed. Non-governmental organizations in Gabon and Cameroon have recently assembled key forestry data sets and published them as part of the Global Forest Watch initiative. In Canada, the Sierra Legal Defense Fund (SLDF) conducted field audits of logging companies prompting greater public and government scrutiny of these companies' compliance with the law. Global Forest Watch facilitated an exchange between SLDF and a Cameroonian NGO, Cameroon Environmental Watch (CEW), which has resulted in similar audits in Cameroon.

The Democratic Republic of Congo: More Than 50% of the Congo Basin's Forests

A forest sector review in DRC carried out by International Institute for the Environment and Development in 1988 recommended legal reform. But the intervening years have brought political chaos and economic collapse. Kinshasa has been pillaged twice (1991, 1993), and the country has been invaded twice (1997, 1998). GNP has fallen by a half since 1990 and conditions are allegedly worse now than under ex-president Mobutu. Unpaid government officials regularly shake down businesses for spurious infractions, and the government has seized millions of dollars worth of logs for suspected tax evasion. Today, the forest sector represents less than 1% of the GDP. The very high cost of extracting wood and bringing in fuel and machinery are major barriers to wood exports. Some concessions are located 2,000 km upstream from Kinshasa, and wood that is shipped or floated down then has to be loaded onto a dilapidated single-track railway to be taken to the silted-up port of Matadi.

As a result, DRC's official industrial forest sector has shrunk at a time when wood exports have boomed elsewhere in Central Africa in response to strong Asian demand. Officially, only two foreign companies are active in DRC: the German SIFORCO and the Swiss SODEFOR. However, many anecdotal reports indicate that most natural resources (including wood) in the eastern part of the country are under severe pressure as a result of the armed conflict between DRC and its neighbors. There is no effective control as priorities are understandably focused on safety and humanitarian issues. Minerals, wood and game meat are reportedly extracted out of DRC through its eastern border.

What Can You Do About It?

National Governments

- Make basic data sets, such as lists of logging concession owners, timber export volumes and values, and taxes paid, available to the public through timely and accurate reports.
- Improve forest legislation enforcement, with the help of the international community if necessary.
- Incorporate the value of non-timber forest products into the national system of accounts.

Donors

- Support only those forestry sector projects where decision making is based on documented information “and where the decision processes are open and transparent.
- Support initiatives to fight illegal logging.
- Do not support activities known to have perverse social and ecological consequences.

Private Sector

- Make public more information about business and logging practices.

Consumers

- Ask questions when you buy wood products, such as: Where does the wood come from? Is the wood certified?
- Do not purchase wood products from companies known to either violate laws, or known to engage in environmentally and socially irresponsible logging practices.

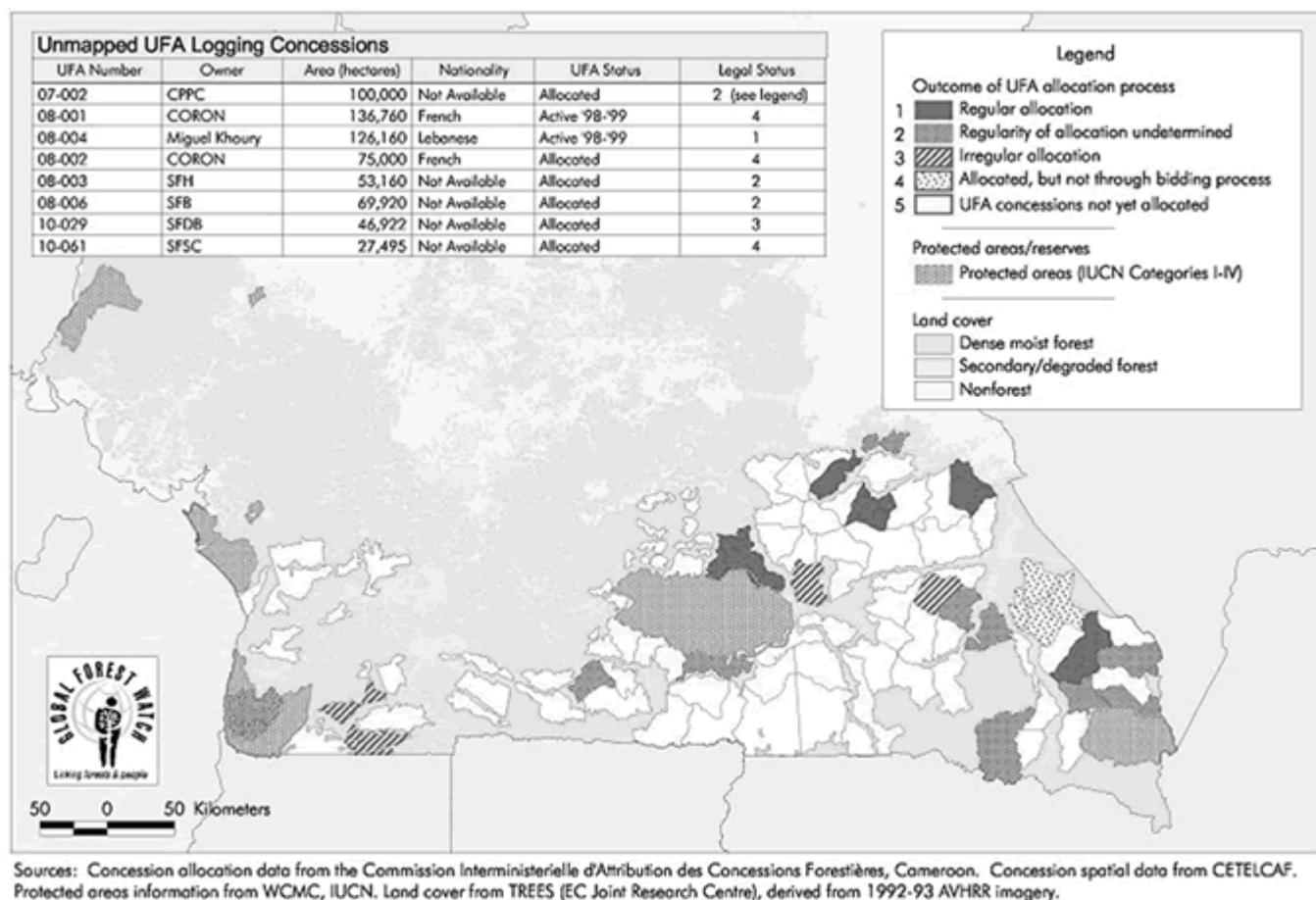


Figure 3: Irregularities in Concession Allocation.

For More Information

Technical Reports

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CARPE...What Is It?

Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE)

Launched in 1995, the *Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE)* engages African NGOs, research and educational organizations, private-sector consultants, and government agencies in evaluating threats to forest integrity in the Congo Basin and in identifying opportunities to sustainably manage the region's vast forests for the benefit of Africans and the world. CARPE's members are helping to provide African decision makers with the information they will need to make well-informed choices about forest use in the future. BSP has assumed the role of "air traffic controller" for CARPE's African partners. Participating countries include Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and São Tomé e Príncipe.

Web site:

<http://carpe.umd.edu>

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Biodiversity Support Program

1250 24th St., NW

Washington, DC 20037

Tel: 202-861-8347

Fax: 202-861-8324

E-Mail: BSP@wwfus.org

Web: www.BSPonline.org

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