Why I Was Banned From a Congo Rain Forest

World Bank should check 'ugly business' that loggers keep visitors from seeing

By Korinna Horta

A DEMONSTRATION of how much power a transnational company can wield in a poor African country hit close to home recently. I was visiting the Congo to participate in a meeting that brought African governments and nongovernmental organizations together to discuss the fact that the Central African rain forest, the second-largest expanse of rain forest in the world (after the better-known Amazon rain forest), may soon disappear unless some concerted action is taken.

Following the meeting and at the recommendation of Congolese environmentalists, I had planned to visit the northern part of the country. About 45,000 square miles of rain forest, an area about the size of New York State, was destroyed between 1980 and 1990 - and with it many plants and animals that can be found nowhere else in the world.

My plans were unexpectedly thwarted by a private German logging company, Congolaise Industrielle des Bois, which decided I wasn't a welcome visitor to a part of the country where the company is running a logging concession occupying land about the size of Delaware. While my entry visa into the Congo was good for the whole country, the company had such clout that a simple fax sent from its headquarters to the travel agent in charge of my transportation led to the cancellation of my visit. The fax said for certain reasons, which weren't specified, that no help should be given to me to reach this remote area, 600 miles from the capital. This was enough to intimidate those who had been ready to assist me.

"Logging is an ugly business," explained a foreign official. "For every tree that is taken, another more are destroyed and left to rot, and entire areas are turned into wasteland. Had you gone to that area, you would have seen the carcasses of dead gorillas and other endangered wildlife dangling from the logs being transported on company trucks, and that would have been bad public relations for the company."

The same company banned from the northern Congo other people it believed were environmentalists. In researching the company, I discovered there was a trail leading back to Washington and the World Bank. The company used to be a recipient of development aid provided by a World Bank branch that supports private-sector enterprises, the International Finance Corporation.

Why is this example of a single company important? Because the World Bank is preparing a strategy for the Congo Basin rain forest, which covers about 80 percent of Africa's remaining forest. The proposal should be given to operations of multinationals will be handled in a sustainable and responsible manner, although none of these companies has a record of protecting the forest and its wildlife or of contributing to sustainable development.

Ironically, the company with the best reputation in the Congo is the same German firm that tries to keep environmentalists out of the area of the country it operates. The World Bank's proposed strategy doesn't deal with the environmental and social aspects of the forest, promising that these will be taken care of later.

This has a familiar ring to those who have looked at past and ongoing World Bank forestry projects in Africa and elsewhere. In case after case, the timber-producing components of the projects have moved ahead, while promised environmental and social safeguards for people living in and around the forests were delayed or never got off the ground.

An example from the northern Congo is a sawmill project funded by the World Bank several years ago with the goal of expanding logging and wood processing in the area. It was supposed to include a study on how the Pygmies, population could be protected and benefit from the project. But a later World Bank report found that the study was never done.

Many of the multinational forestry companies in Central Africa previously logged the now-depleted forests in West Africa. Typically, the companies log the best timber and leave the rest of the forest damaged from the careless use of equipment. Previously inaccessible areas are opened up through logging roads that attract game poachers, as well as farmers who convert the remaining forest to agricultural use, although the soils are too poor to support permanent agriculture.

In Central Africa, the logging companies and those that follow in their tracks are likely to displace Pygmies and other forest-dwelling communities whose knowledge of forest ecosystems allows them to obtain food, shelter, clothing, and medicines from the forest without disturbing its delicate ecological balance.

If poverty alleviation and sustainable development are at the core of the World Bank's mission, then it should focus on helping countries create conditions under which forests can be protected.

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