

The Ecologist ^①

Vol. 21, No. 3, May/June 1991

The Last Big Rush for the Green Gold The Plundering of Cameroon's Rainforests

by
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The Government of Cameroon sees the country's extensive rainforests as a prime source of foreign exchange to help alleviate its economic crisis. Encouraged by the international development agencies, logging companies are rapidly cutting down the forests before possible restrictions on tropical timber imports into Western countries start to affect their markets. Local communities have not been consulted by either their own government or the aid agencies, and the customary land rights of the indigenous forest dwellers who stand to lose most from the logging have been totally ignored.

In terms of the ecological destruction and mismanagement of the world's tropical rainforests, Cameroon is on the frontline. To its north lies Nigeria, a country so severely deforested that it has become a net timber importer over the past decade.¹ To its south lies the Congo Basin, the world's third largest area of mostly undisturbed tropical moist forest covering the Congo, Gabon and Zaire.

Cameroon is often described as "Africa in minianure". In the north and extreme north extending up to Lake Chad, the country is covered by Sahelian savanna, the centre has the characteristics of high altitude moist savanna and the south is covered by dense tropical rainforest. The country's population of 11.2 million (1988) is concentrated in the north and centre of the country with about 40 per cent living in urban areas.

About one-third of Cameroon's 475,000 square kilometres is covered by one of Africa's most ancient forest blocks. These forests are home to tens of thousands of indigenous Baka and Bakola people. Aside from its human population, Cameroon's rainforests are extraordinarily rich in wildlife, including a high number of endemic species. Among the wildlife are primates and other large mammals, many of which are listed by the International Union for the

Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources as rare, endangered or threatened with extinction.² The country's biological wealth has led the World Bank and IUCN to classify Cameroon as a "megadiversity" country. This means that a high percentage of the world's biodiversity will be lost if Cameroon's biological resources are not adequately protected.³

An Economy Après Pétrole

Political power in Cameroon is vested in a single political party under President Paul Biya who holds both the office of head of state and of party chairman. The offices of prime minister and vice-president do not exist. Biya was "elected" with 98.75 per cent of the vote in 1988, down from 99.98 per cent four years earlier.⁴ Calls for the establishment of a multiparty system have met with persecution and police brutality. Although the Government has recently made conciliatory moves by repealing a 1962 law on subversion, Cameroon remains a police state where civil liberties and human rights are not respected. There is little — if any — public accountability of political power.

Like the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, Cameroon is experiencing a deepening economic recession accompanied by mounting political unrest. Over the past five years there has been a steep fall in the price of oil, coffee and cocoa — Cam-

eroon's main export commodities. Even if oil prices should recover, Cameroon would not be able to increase its exports substantially as its known oil reserves are close to exhaustion and no new investments in the sector have taken place.⁵ Given the world's structural overproduction of coffee and cocoa, world prices for both commodities continue in the deepest of slumps. The result has been a deterioration of nearly 50 per cent in the country's terms of trade. Investments and imports decreased by 50 per cent and 40 per cent respectively and private consumption is estimated to have fallen by at least 25 per cent since 1986.⁶ As a consequence, Gross Domestic Product has been negative since 1985/86; in 1989 alone it fell by about 6.5 per cent.⁷

What has not fallen is the country's foreign debt burden of over \$4 billion. Still classified as a "lower middle income" country because of past oil revenues, Cameroon does not qualify for any of the current schemes of debt relief. The country is statistically too middle income to obtain debt relief under the Toronto terms and not middle income enough to be considered by the Brady Plan. In 1987, about 30 per cent of the country's export revenues were used for debt service; with further declining commodity prices, this percentage must be higher today.

Given its economic woes and the official disregard for the country's ecological wealth, both the Cameroonian government and a host of multi- and bilateral creditors

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look at the country's large block of rainforest as a golden egg, a cheap way of generating foreign exchange earnings.

People of the Rainforest

There are few — if any — forests empty of people in Cameroon. Sometimes forest use by indigenous peoples is not evident at first glance because their way of living in and with the forest requires a high degree of mobility. Nonetheless, these forests are intermittently occupied and exploited by people whose way of life and subsistence depends on moving through the forest. Despite the fact that central Africa's rainforests — including those of south-eastern Cameroon — are sparsely populated, a larger number of people in central Africa depend directly on the forest for survival than in any other area of tropical forest in the world.⁸ This basic fact, however, is mostly ignored by the Government and the international development agencies that help design and support government policies.

Although no precise demographic studies exist, it is known that the rainforests of southern Cameroon are home to several tens of thousands of indigenous forest dwellers that European languages refer to as "Pygmies", meaning people of small stature. These hunting-and-gathering societies feel that the term Pygmy is derogatory and prefer to be called by their proper ethnic name. There are about 20,000 to 35,000 Baka people in Cameroon's south-eastern forests while the Bakola, estimated to number about 3,500, are dispersed in the coastal forests of south-west Cameroon.^{9,10}

The Baka people live as semi-nomads, spending several months wandering through the forests during the rainy season and returning to small hamlets when the dry season arrives. A symbiosis between the Baka and their sedentary Bantu neighbours has developed over many generations. Baka hamlets with their low, round thatch huts are interspersed with traditional Bantu villages. The Bantu rely on the Baka's intimate knowledge of the forest for a variety of essential products, such as bushmeat and medicinal plants. Baka medicine extracted from the forest is often the only health care available in the region.¹¹ In exchange, the Baka receive metallic objects, such as knives, an occasional piece of clothing or cultivated food.

Although some Baka have started to plant their own small gardens with plants — maize (corn) and cassava, they re-



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Basket weaving in a Baka village. The Cameroon government wants to make the 20-35,000 semi-nomadic Baka become settled farmers. The Baka can only obtain rights to the forests in which they have lived for thousands of years by converting them to agriculture and thus destroying the ecological basis of their hunter-gatherer economy.

turn deep into the forest as soon as the rainy season gets underway. The intact forests provide very well for the Baka. Their hunting and gathering activities yield a nutritional value far above what small-scale agriculturalists can expect to extract from their land.¹² The main reason may be the abundance of bushmeat that the Baka consume, ranging from small rodents to antelopes, with giant pangolins as the occasional catch of the day. Baka hunting is done by bow and arrow and by an elaborate network of snares spread out through the forest area near their overnight camp. The Baka are the experts of the forest and know how to extract resources from it without

disturbing its delicate balance. Aside from providing for the Baka's physical livelihood, the forests are essential for the social organization, culture and spiritual life of the Baka. The survival of the Baka as a people depends on the conservation of their ancestral homelands.

A Growing Stranglehold on Indigenous Peoples

The Government of Cameroon regards the country's indigenous forest dwelling peoples as backward in comparison to settled rural society. Traditional hunting and

gathering activities are strongly disliked — possibly because these are difficult for the one-party state to control and do not directly benefit the national élite. Cameroon's current Sixth Five Year Plan (1986-1991) contains a chapter on the hunting and gathering populations and their potential — once sedentarized — to contribute to the general efforts at national construction.

The Ministry for Social Affairs and Women is in charge of what is referred to as the integration of "marginal social groups", that is the Baka and Bakola peoples, into the mainstream of Cameroonian society.¹³ The goal is to lead these traditional societies to a "rational occupation of land", which probably includes paying taxes and voting for the single political party. The Baka and Bakola peoples have no opportunity to obtain legal rights to the forest lands they have inhabited for thousands of years. The law requires the "mise en valeur" of the forests, that is the forests must be cleared for agricultural production before legal title may be granted. At the same time, Cameroonian law establishes that populations in national parks or wildlife reserves are illegal by definition.¹⁴ The combination of these two government policies effectively denies the forest people any legal rights to the natural resource base they have depended on for thousands of years.

The Government's project for the socio-economic integration of the country's forest peoples mentions the need to reduce the exploitation of the Baka and Bakola by their Bantu neighbours. The emphasis, however, is put on the need to "disinfect" (*assainir*) the socio-economic life of the hunter-gatherers so that they can become productive members of society.¹⁵ This reflects official prejudices and reveals a complete ignorance of the social and economic benefits derived from the traditional exchange relations between the hunter-gatherers and the farmers. More gravely, efforts to sedentarize the Baka and Bakola fail to recognize the value of indigenous forest knowledge and the economic contribution of their use of forest resources on a sustainable basis.

Thus far, lack of resources has prevented the Government from pursuing its acculturation policy in an aggressive manner. At this stage, it is the pressure from commercial logging interests that represents the greatest threat to the integrity of the forest dwellers way of life.

Cut, Cash and Run Logging

Over the past decade, Cameroon has become one of the nine key tropical countries with the highest rates of loss of tropical forest.¹⁶ IUCN conservatively estimates that the rate of deforestation in Cameroon's dense forests is 10-11 times higher than the rate of regeneration.¹⁷ This tragic devastation is the direct and indirect result of vastly increased commercial logging operations in the country.

Endless convoys of flatbed trucks trans-

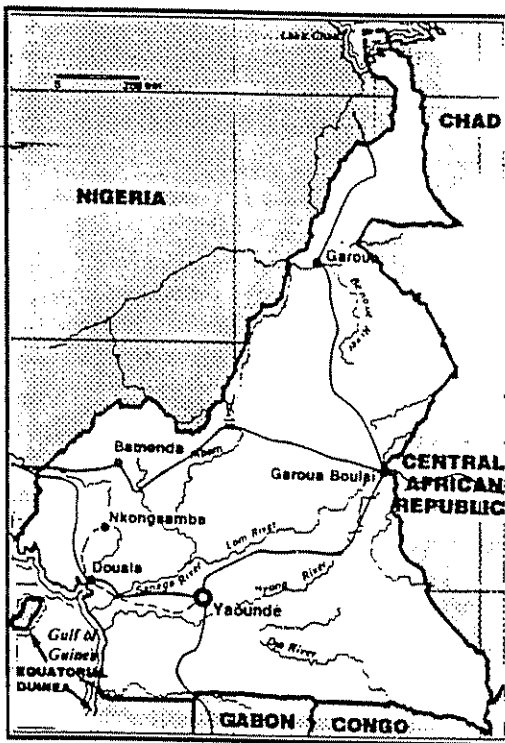


Figure 1. The Republic of Cameroon

porting large logs are a common sight on the dirt roads in southern and south-eastern Cameroon. Logs cut in the heavily exploited forests in the Yokadouma and Moloundou areas float down the river system until they reach the Congolese port city of Pointe Noire, from where they are exported. Freshly logged areas look as if they have been devastated by warfare. Although logging companies only retrieve a small number of tree species, the cutting and hauling of these trees with heavy equipment destroys everything in their path. The open access to forest lands created by logging leads to increased immigration from the centre and northern parts of the country and has already led to a massive land grab in the area of the provincial capital of Bertoua.

The logging companies are mainly French, German, Dutch and Italian. Tim-

berexports in 1989 totalled 525,187 tonnes, of which 80 per cent were in the form of raw logs. They are often supplied by local loggers who are paid prices far below world prices.¹⁸ Government legislation and controls on logging operations in the forests are weak or non-existent. There are no legislative mechanisms or economic incentives to ensure that logging is carried out in a careful manner or to protect concessions once logging has ended.¹⁹

Logging companies fear that the emergence of the "green consumer" may eventually curtail their lucrative business. They are now bracing for an all-out rush to cut valuable timber species as long as there is still a market for it. The political upheaval in Liberia and the exhaustion of timber supplies from Côte d'Ivoire have recently increased logging companies' interest in Cameroon and the Congo basin forests in general. Timber companies are rapidly moving deeper inland, with logging areas often located hundreds of miles from the nearest seaport.

Good public relations requires timber companies to pay lip-service to "sustainable logging practices", but reality on the ground is something else. The US company Brookside Veneers, which imports Cameroonian timber through the Italian-based ALPI company, is using the services of a Chicago marketing agency to distribute information about the environmental soundness of their timber sources. It praises the progressiveness of the Cameroonian government and cites Cameroon as a leading example of harmony between industry and environmental concerns.²⁰ Another example is the German timber company, Feldmayer (HIF/TT), which boasts of its environmental awareness at home, but in Cameroon purchases about 70,000 cubic metres of round wood every year, mainly from Lebanese entrepreneurs, whose logging practices are based on the sole principle of cutting as many trees as quickly as possible.

The forests being logged are so-called "national forests" belonging to the state. In reality, these are common lands to which people living in the forests have customary rights and claims. Industrial forestry is of little importance to people who depend on the traditional contribution of the forests to their livelihood.²¹

The Bakola people in south-west Cameroon have felt the impact of the receding forest most directly. Logging concessions, sawmills and European-owned

The Tropical Forestry Action Plan for Cameroon, drawn up by FAO and UNDP, aims to expand logging dramatically. The Government is now lobbying aid agencies for the funds needed to implement the TFAP.

palm oil plantations have cut deeply into their traditional forest lands. Many Bakola appear to be part of the labour force of the French and Dutch logging concessions in the area. As they move from their traditional communities to the shacks that make up the desolate logging towns, their sense of cultural and social cohesion seems to evaporate. Alcohol consumption and prostitution become prevalent.

A similar fate is being suffered by the Baka who live in areas close to the Congo and the Central African Republic where logging companies are running extensive operations. According to knowledgeable sources, the Baka culture in those areas is being devastated.²² Njabe trees, the fruits of which provide the seeds that the Baka press into cooking oil, are becoming scarce. Now the Baka work for the logging companies and with the little income they receive buy imported cooking oil. The new settlements created by logging concessionaires face severe health and sanitation problems, unemployment and low incomes.²³

The lack of cash income in the local economy, due to the fact that the National Coffee Board has not paid the Bantu villagers for their coffee and cocoa crops over the past two years, has an immediate impact on the Baka, who have traded with their Bantu neighbours for many generations. They feel the need for items of clothing, knives and similar objects which are very difficult to obtain under current economic conditions. It is a tragic twist of fate that the logging companies are the ones most likely to fill the vacuum, at a terrible long-term cost of which the Baka are fully aware.

In areas not yet affected by logging, as along the Abong-Mbang/Lomie axis, the Baka are painfully conscious of the difficulties faced by the Baka in the logging areas further south-east. They fear for their children's future as well as their own once timber companies move into their area. Young Baka say they may have to go and



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look for work in the capital. The most telling indication, the Baka say, is that the Jengi, the Baka's God, who is the spirit of the forest and essential to the initiation of young boys into manhood, has not been seen in some areas for a long time.

The International Aid Connection

The Tropical Forestry Action Plan, launched as a global initiative to stem the destruction of the world's tropical forests in the mid-1980s, revealed its major faults in the national TFAP drawn up for Cameroon by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the United Nations Development Program.²⁴ TFAP's line of action for Cameroon is to exploit the country's timber resources on an unprecedented scale with the goal of turning the country into Africa's largest timber exporter within the next decade. To make this timber export strategy workable, the TFAP considers it to be essential to build a 600km road to open up 14 million hectares of pristine forest in the south-east of the country. Exports are to be facilitated further by the building of a deep-water port at Grand Batanga.

Cameroon's forest-dwelling peoples are not accorded a single word in the four volume TFAP for Cameroon.²⁵ No socio-economic surveys were undertaken and local communities affected by the proposed TFAP were never even consulted.

The Government of Cameroon is determined to implement the TFAP in order to have commercial timber exploitation play

a major role in what it calls national development.²⁶ The Government is heavily lobbying foreign aid institutions to obtain funding for the TFAP. There are unconfirmed reports that President Biya made use of his recent visit to Japan to ask the Japanese government to fund the road and port that TFAP made a centrepiece of its strategy.

The World Bank

The World Bank provided the funding for a joint FAO/World Bank forestry review which served as the base line study for the country's TFAP.²⁷ When environmentalists criticized the TFAP for Cameroon, the Bank responded by stating that it would design its own forestry project for Cameroon, independent of TFAP, thus undermining the whole idea underlying the TFAP framework — of which the World Bank is one of the co-founders — which emphasized the need for international coordination of projects affecting tropical forests.

The Bank's planned \$30 million forestry loan for Cameroon would support logging operations in some areas and promote parks and wildlife reserves in others. No socio-economic surveys were undertaken to find out how many people live in the areas that will be opened to logging and little attention is being paid to the fact that the Government of Cameroon has a policy of expelling people from parks and reserves. Also, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, the Bank is still firmly anchored in the belief that commercial timber exploita-

tion in primary tropical forests can occur on a sustainable basis. Increased timber exports are presented as a way to benefit economic development. Having learned "green language", the Bank puts this loan under the heading "Forestry and Environment" and classifies it as a category D project, meaning that no environmental impact assessment will be required for it, in spite of the fact that production forestry will be the main component of the project.²⁸

During its pre-appraisal missions, the Bank found it very difficult to get the Government of Cameroon to agree on the conservation aspects of this loan. The Government has made it clear that it is not in a position to accept loan money at 9 or 10 per cent interest for conservation purposes. The Bank is also keenly aware that environmental organizations are sceptical of its plans for Cameroon's tropical forests and it would like to avoid blemishes on the "green image" it is trying to create for itself. This has led to the recent Bank proposal to give the Government of Cameroon a grant of \$25 million for the protection of biodiversity out of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), a funding mechanism to be created this year within the World Bank.²⁹

While it may be a good idea to make grant money available for the conservation of tropical forests, there are serious concerns about the GEF's ability to effectively address the problem. Being located at the World Bank, the GEF will in all likelihood be subject to the Bank's rules, regulations and practice: no public access to relevant documentation and little or no consultation of communities affected by projects.

The Bank's record, combined with the

Cameroonian government's overall lack of accountability to its people, its policies on indigenous peoples and lack of concern for the devastation of the country's forests, do not bode well for a successful GEF grant. Only a more open, democratic and people-orientated process would have a chance for success. Substantial reforms would be required if the grant is to be anything but temporary balance-of-payments relief to pay off old loans and benefit the national élite.

The African Development Bank

The African Development Bank plans to finance a \$65 million forestry project in Cameroon that is being developed by FAO and probably will come straight from the list of projects that FAO put together for TFAP. The AfDB considers that "logging offers considerable possibilities since it has almost not been exploited".³⁰ In addition, the AfDB plans to spend \$130 million on road build-



Bakola hunter. The indigenous Bakola have suffered heavily from commercial activities in the forests in south-west Cameroon. Alcohol consumption and prostitution is rife among the Bakola who have settled in the logging towns and become wage labourers for the logging companies.

ing and maintenance in the country. Several of these activities will take place in the southern forests, although no concrete projects have been made public. The AfDB does not routinely conduct environmental impact assessments and has gained a repu-

Tropical Forestry Action Plan Campaign Resources

The Ecologist and the World Rainforest Movement have compiled a comprehensive 124 page dossier for activists campaigning against TFAP.

The dossier includes:

- ◆ Critical reviews of key TFAP documents and a bibliography of TFAP literature;
- ◆ Reprints of articles from *The Ecologist* and other journals on the tropical timber industry and the adverse effects of plantations;
- ◆ A paper from a World Bank consultant questioning the very notion of sustainable logging;
- ◆ An open letter to the World Bank calling for a halt to funding for projects that would entail logging of tropical forest.

The *TFAP Dossier* costs £4.50/\$9 to activists and £9/\$18 to institutions.

The second edition of the influential report, *The Tropical Forestry Action Plan: What Progress?* by Marcus Colchester and Larry Lohmann is available for £5/\$10 to activists and £10/\$20 to institutions.

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tation for financing projects that other institutions consider too controversial.

Aside from multilateral institutions, bilateral aid agencies are also leaving their imprint on Cameroon's rainforest. Particularly notorious is the German Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, which is financing major road projects in the southwestern forest areas. What appears to be a four lane highway is being built on the 115km coastal stretch between Edea and Kribi. This road passes along the immediate vicinity of two wildlife reserves which, already threatened now, will hardly be able to survive the onslaught of settlers pouring into the area once construction is completed. Ironically, these wildlife reserves represent part of the environmental component of the World Bank's planned forestry sector loan and of the GEF project for Cameroon.

The Politics of Conservation

The Cameroon example illustrates vividly what is wrong with the current approach to rainforest conservation. The principal failure consists in ignoring the reality that *conservation is a political issue for indigenous peoples and rural society in general*. Despite the constant lip service being paid to "people participation", the "natural resource management projects" in which the same old logging concessions

are re-baptized as "management concessions" are not based on the consent and active participation of the communities being affected.

In spite of all the green rhetoric, the conservation strategies of the development institutions still regard natural resource assets as commodities to be turned into cash. They count on the benevolence of private timber companies to carry out

It is surprising that the aid institutions' hard-nosed economists do not understand that the goal of timber companies is not conservation, but profit-making

logging operations in a sustainable manner, although timber exploitation in primary tropical forests has not proven to be sustainable. And this refers to sustainability in its narrowest sense, which only considers sustained timber yields as opposed to the sustainability of the ecosystem. It is rather surprising that the otherwise hard-nosed economists at multilateral development institutions do not understand that the goal of timber companies in Cameroon and elsewhere is not conservation, but profit-

making, and that their shareholders thousands of miles away from the scenes of destruction always keep an eye on the bottom line rather than on the rights of forest-dwelling peoples or the protection of biodiversity.

In Cameroon and increasingly in other rainforest countries, multilateral institutions attach environmental components to their "resource management projects" in the form of wildlife parks or nature reserves. For Cameroon's forest-dependent peoples this means their expulsion from areas deemed worthy of wildlife habitat protection, which, like forest, are seen as sources of foreign exchange earnings because of their potential to attract eco-tourists from wealthier parts of the globe.

The not-so-hidden agenda of multilateral development institutions clearly focuses on funding projects that will generate export earnings to enable countries to stay current on foreign debt obligations, including the repayment of loans from these same institutions. Conservation projects that ignore customary land rights and fail to involve local communities in the decision-making process have little chance of success. Development projects without conservation are ultimately futile and conservation can only be successful if it is understood as a central political issue in the life of affected local communities. It involves the very basis of their subsistence, their right to land.

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