

Forests of the Congo Basin: The context of Equatorial Guinea

1. Introduction

The forests of Central Africa play a global role as a fundamental regulator of the climate. As little disturbed as they are, these forests have become the first tropical forest massif in carbon sequestration. Likewise, due to its heritage and the endemism that characterizes its forestal ecosystems, Central Africa is a priority conservation area. Its forests, a common good of humanity, benefit current generations and could do the same for future ones if appropriate measures are taken. Therefore, it deserves a global effort for its conservation and sustainable management. COP 28 in Dubai should consider as a priority the financing of mechanisms that guarantee the conservation and sustainable management of Central African forests.



Photo 1: Dense forest of the Congo Basin, the world's main green lung.

The Congo Basin forest in Central Africa constitutes the second largest tropical forest after the Amazon rainforest. It is distributed among six countries: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea .



Photo 2: Geographic context of the Congo Basin

In 2020, the area of Central African forests (22% of the world's tropical forests) was estimated at almost 200 million hectares, of which 184.7 million hectares showed no visible signs of disturbance (Vancutem et al. 2020). However, the trend of recent years reveals an increase in the annual rate of disturbance in the humid forests of Central Africa and, according to Chouaïbou Nchoutpouen, "27% of the undisturbed rainforests of the Congo Basin could disappear by 2050 , if the pace of deforestation continues." But certain institutional and legal measures have been incorporated into the forestry policies of the six countries to reduce the pace of deforestation, with the COMIFAC convergence plan being the reference.

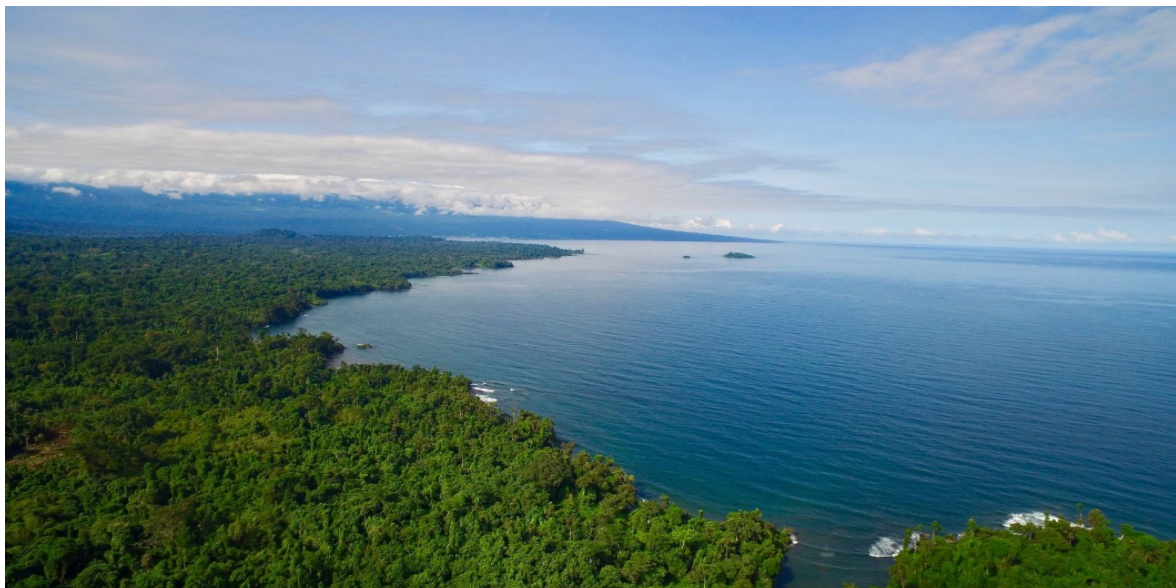


Photo 3: Muni estuary, Cogo city. Equatorial Guinea

Of that area of dense and humid tropical forests, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea has a National Forest Reserve of 1,336,411 hectares, of which the production forest has 820,527 hectares while the conservation forest covers 515,884 hectares . Newly established measures

such as the reform of Law 4/2000 dated May 22 on Protected Areas, provide for a significant increase in spaces dedicated to conservation. This new law proposes, among other things, the creation of the AAUCA National University Park located in the new city of La Paz with 100,000 hectares, and the status of the Rio Campo Natural Reserve is upgraded to become a National Park that includes 17,200 hectares of offshore space. With this measure, the Government of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea would increase the area dedicated to conservation from 18% to 30%.

2. Importance of forests and management policies

The forests of the Congo Basin provide numerous ecosystem goods and services that contribute to the regulation of the climate system, the conservation of biodiversity and the improvement of the living conditions of populations. These forests contribute to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as those of the African Union's Agenda 2063, and have a political and technical forest management framework as a reference, the COMIFAC convergence plan. A framework that guides interventions in the forestry-environmental sector. And it serves to help Central African countries better integrate the SDGs and Agenda 2063 into sustainable forest management.

The Congo basin, despite having a smaller surface area than the Amazon, has today become the first green lung in the world, with a net carbon footprint of 610 million tons of CO₂. It is the largest carbon dioxide (CO₂) storage site in the world, as stated by Chouaïbou Nchoutpouen, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Central African Forestry Commission (COMIFAC) during the second edition of the Three Basin Summit.



Photo 4: an elephant in the middle of a dense forest. The elephant is a regenerator of the forest.

Precisely, these forests constitute one of the last biodiversity reserves where primary forests are interconnected and allow unaltered biological mechanisms. They are home to more than 10,000 species of plants, a thousand birds, 700 species of fish and 400 species of mammals

and many of these species are new to science. In the Monte Alen National Park in Equatorial Guinea of about 200,000 hectares alone, from 1997 to 2010 more than 200 species of flora new to science have been described, including *heterotis obameae* .

3. Equatorial Guinea and its new look at its forests

In the interest of improving knowledge of the natural context of the Congo Basin and its importance, it has been deemed appropriate to dedicate a space to each country, starting with the Republic of Equatorial Guinea. A country that has set its vision towards the sustainability of natural resources, and where environmental preservation and its sustainable management are, in addition to an objective, a means to fight poverty and climate change.



Photo 5: Geographical situation of Equatorial Guinea.

Despite the small size of the country and due to its diverse landscape, Equatorial Guinea is one of the areas with the greatest biodiversity in Africa. There we can find everything from the classic beaches with black volcanic sand to incredibly lush forests or alpine lands at 3,000 meters above sea level. Its biodiversity also includes tropical rainforests, mangrove groves and wetlands that are home to a wide variety of plant and animal species. In the country, we find some examples of large mammals such as the jungle elephant, the hippopotamus, the bushpig or the manatee, gorillas, chimpanzees and monkeys.

Likewise, species of reptiles and amphibians are visible, notably four species of sea turtles that frequent the coastline. The rich inventory of Equatoguinean birds includes more than three hundred known species, aquatic fauna, with more than 167 species of fish recorded. Meanwhile, in the world of insects, an extraordinary diversity stands out, which has yet to be inventoried.



Photo 6: Monte Alen National Park

It should be noted that the only albino gorilla recorded in the world and brought to the Barcelona Zoo, Snowflake, now deceased, came from the forests of Equatorial Guinea.



Photo 7: Gorrilla in the low areas of the continent . Photo 8: Snowflake

The country's culture is equally impressive, diverse and rich. Its main ethnic groups (Fang, Bubis, Ndowes and Annobonés), who live in harmony, share dances, rituals and typical dishes. Heritage that must be valued, protected and promoted.



Photo 9: a child in the middle of traditional fishing

On a crossroads today: after years of exponential economic growth linked to the exploitation of oil and gas, the country plans to reorient its development model to diversify and relaunch its economy. This is reflected in the new National Sustainable Development Plan 2035 (PNDS 2035), which constitutes the current framework for new investments.



Photo 10: a bird from the secondary forest. Indicator of a good natural environment.

Equatorial Guinea is one of the few countries in the world whose forest area occupies more than 90% of its territory, a natural wealth managed through sustainable productive activities. Since 2008, the country is committed to reducing deforestation and forest degradation (known as REDD+) and has joined the global fight against climate change. It has made important progress ever since, the most recent milestone being the presentation of the National REDD+ Investment Plan (PNI-REDD+), prepared with the support of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI) . A

National REDD+ Investment Plan has been adopted, with a total cost of 185 million dollars, but since its inception 4 years ago, neither an international organization nor a State has contributed to it.



Photo 11: Equatorial Guinea beach

It is noted that the national REDD+ process has substantially changed the way in which the country looks at its forests. The new national development plan includes for the first time environmental sustainability and territorial development among its priority axes. A new look at the durability of its natural resources and a new political, social and environmental commitment in a complex context. That requires transforming the country's development model, through the application of the law, the mobilization of international financing and the consideration of the role of all actors and sectors. In addition, the plan addresses the challenges linked to the use of territory, both at the national and local levels, paying special attention to improving data collection to making better decisions, as well as reinforcing transparency, community participation, empowerment and mobilization of the rural population and gender equality.



Photo 12: specimen of the endemic monkey species of Bioko Island.

It is believed that the international community has the moral duty to support this transformative movement in the country, encouraging the number of defenders of nature and forests in all sectors and social groups in Equatorial Guinea. And strengthening international alliances and support to win the battle for forests and the climate, in a context of multiple economic interests, market forces and challenges, such as poverty and food security. And very importantly, the roadmap established by the PNI-REDD+ reconciles economic development and the conservation of natural resources.

It must be recognized that the projection of new approach towards sustainability is not certified only by the country; many witnesses confirm this process, such as Preferred by Nature (formerly NEPCon), an international non-profit organization that works to support better land use management and business practices that benefit people, nature and the climate.



Photo 13: Dense forest crossed by the Wele River.

Other witnesses of Equatorial Guinea's new look towards sustainability are the United States Forest Service, which has carried out two missions to Equatorial Guinea, one mission to verify forest exploitation in 2008 and another at the invitation of the Equatorial Guinean Government, to carry out an exhaustive study on protected areas in the country and support the Government's efforts in terms of conservation and protection of Equatoguinean biodiversity. A future cooperation that seeks to work on mitigating the effects of climate change and offering development opportunities for young professionals. Other witnesses on the exploitation and conservation of forests in Equatorial Guinea exists, such as the American CARPE program, financed by USAID, the American NGO Conservation International (CI), as well as scientific institutions such as Drexel University among others.

4. Financing

Despite their importance and the organization established for their management, conservation and sustainable exploitation, the forests of Central Africa continue to struggle, failing to attract the same level of financing as other tropical forest areas in South America and Asia. During the ten years between 2008 to 2017, the forestry and environmental sector in Central Africa only captured 11.5% of the funds released for the conservation and sustainable management of tropical forests.

Financial flows are mainly made up of public development assistance, while contributions from the private sector and from foundations and philanthropic organizations remain very low and fundamentally insufficient to ensure the sustainable management of Central Africa's forests. Now hopes are focused on COP28, which could give new impetus to the appreciation of Central African forests as the main climate regulator.

Furthermore, the importance of intensifying diplomatic efforts to give greater visibility and enhance communication in favor of the forests of Central Africa is recognized as a way to open the way and clear lands on the international political agenda, acknowledging their vital role in regulating the climate of the planet.

During COP26 a collective statement from 12 of the richest countries, including the Bezos Earth Fund, pledged to mobilize at least \$1.5 billion for the protection and sustainable management of forests in the Congo Basin. This money seems to be sailing in the clouds without landing in the sub-region, a paradigm that COP 28 should change to gain confidence and ensure financing for forestry and environmental programs in the Congo Basin.

Equatorial Guinea has developed a National REDD+ Investment Plan, which costs 185 million dollars for 4 years, but no international organization or State has financed a single dollar. Therefore, the international community is called upon to commit to climate action, the fight against poverty and the preservation of forest ecosystems.

Equatorial Guinea has zero emissions compared to the absorption capacity of its forests, which need to be protected and managed sustainably in order to continue offering the vital service of climate regulator.

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