



Nuru series : Natural resources, environment and sustainable development

The Congo Basin : World's lung

What if the protection of the Congo Basin forest, the lung of Africa, was a source of revenue for the central African countries that preserve it ?

Course and drainage basin of the Congo River wikipedia



The Congo Basin, green area around the **Congo river** (third longest world river), covering **3,730,500 km²** across nine countries : **Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gabon, Rwanda and Tanzania** ; is home to one of the world's richest rainforests. This vast ecosystem, containing approximately **10%** of the **planet's biodiversity**, hosts unique species and peatlands as large as Great Britain. These forests are crucial for global carbon absorption and oxygen production, earning them the title "**lungs of Africa**." Recently, the Congo Basin has even surpassed the Amazon as the **world's largest natural carbon sink**, absorbing vast quantities of carbon and helping regulate Earth's climate.

Despite its ecological importance, the Congo Basin faces a complex challenge: how can these nine countries balance the need for environmental protection with the development needs of their populations? Must they choose between preserving this essential ecosystem and alleviating poverty? These questions are urgent as the climate crisis escalates.

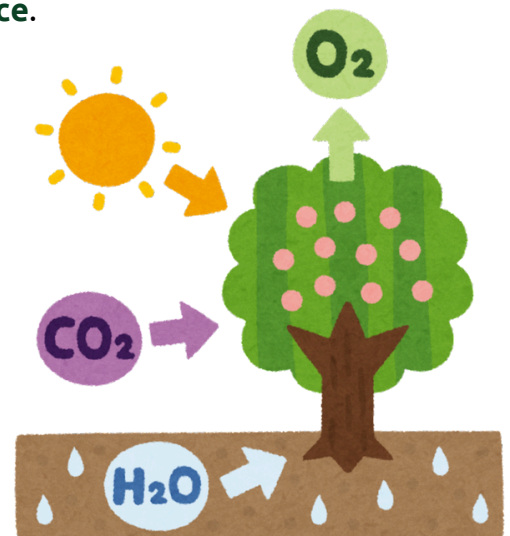
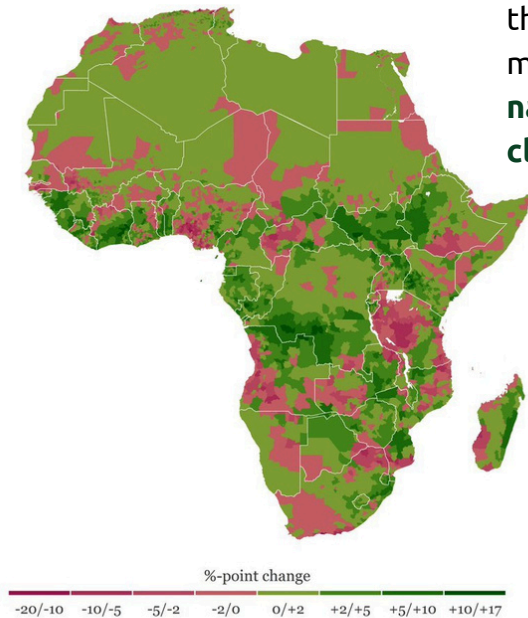
Carbon sink



The Congo Basin's **150 million trees** store around **40 billion tons of carbon**, significantly reducing **atmospheric greenhouse gases**. Through **photosynthesis**, these trees **absorb carbon dioxide** and **release oxygen**, supplying **20% of the world's breathable air**. The region's peatlands, especially in the DRC, further contribute to carbon storage, helping to stabilize the global climate. This ecological function makes the Congo Basin an **indispensable natural resource** for maintaining the **Earth's climate balance**.

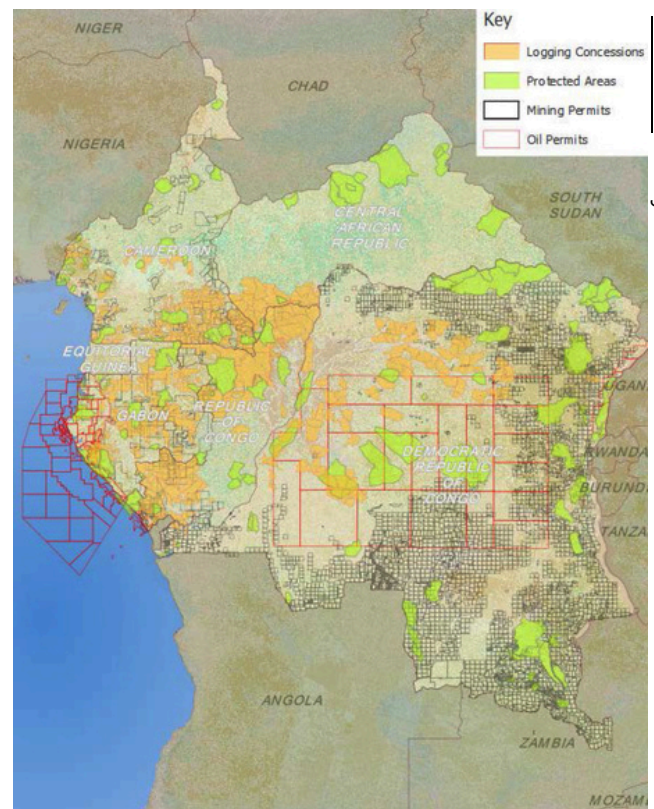
Tree cover density change
between 2015 & 2019

©2021 Miles Popovic <https://milosp.info>
Source: Buchhorn, M.; Smets, B.;
Bertels, L.; Lesiv, M.; Tsendbazar, N.-E.; Maslinius, D.; Linlin, L.; Herold, M.;
Fritz, S. (2020). Copernicus Global Land Service: Land Cover 100m: Collection 3: epoch
<YEAR>; Globe (Version V3.0.1) [Data set]. Zenodo. DOI: <DOI>



Threats to the Congo Basin

Human activity poses a significant threat to the Congo Basin. Between 2002 and 2008, around 15 million hectares of forest were lost to deforestation, which continues due to logging, mining, and agriculture. **The DRC loses more than 1 million ha per year since 2014**. Rich in **minerals** like coltan, gold, and diamonds, the Basin **attracts resource exploitation** that drives both **deforestation** and **local pollution**. Additionally, **urbanization**, **agricultural expansion**, and local needs for wood for building and heating put additional pressure on the ecosystem. **Wildlife trafficking** and poaching also endanger species unique to the region, including elephants, rhinoceroses, hippopotamuses, giraffes, and gorillas. If these practices go unchecked, the Basin's biodiversity and **climate-stabilizing capacity could be irreversibly damaged**.



Protected Areas in the Congo Basin: Failing both people and biodiversity WRM
Bulletin 224 13 July 2016

The North-South dilemma in environmental protection

The Congo Basin exemplifies the **North-South dilemma** in environmental policy. Protecting the Basin is crucial for its global ecological contributions, **but local populations also require resources for development**. Solutions that impose restrictions on resource use can stymie economic growth, causing **tension between conservation** efforts and the **rights of these countries to pursue their own development**.

The Congo Basin countries are not all aligned on a unified conservation policy.



Logging concessions and protected areas 2006 [Vital Forest Graphics](#)
Philippe Rekacewicz

For example, **the Republic of Congo** (Congo-Brazzaville) has a **40-year history** of conservation policies, which it continues to strengthen. Under the leadership of Arlette Soudan-Nonault, Minister of Environment, Sustainable Development, and the Congo Basin, the government is advancing ambitious initiatives to protect its natural resources. One flagship project is the creation of new protected areas, such as **Ntokou-Pikounda** National Park, which spans 4,572 km² and shelters a rich biodiversity, including lowland gorillas and forest elephants. These efforts have full support from President Denis Sassou Nguesso and his Special Advisor Françoise Joly, positioning Congo-Brazzaville as a leader in African environmental initiatives.

In contrast, **Gabon** has shown caution towards international forest restrictions following its recent coup d'état. New regulations allow the logging and processing of Kevazingo wood, but only from sustainably managed forestry concessions. The government also mandates

georeferencing systems for traceability and requires CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) permits for exporting finished products. Gabonese authorities believe this initiative will promote **local processing**, **stimulate economic development** in forest regions, and **create employment**.



It's important to note that the Central African forests are developing differently, a trend expected to continue in the future.

International intervention

Protecting the Congo Basin requires **coordinated international action**. In **2005**, the **Yaoundé Summit** led to **Africa's first regional conservation treaty**, supported by NGOs like WWF, establishing **4.5 million hectares of protected land** and promoting **sustainable logging**. This treaty also strengthened international collaboration for conservation in the region.



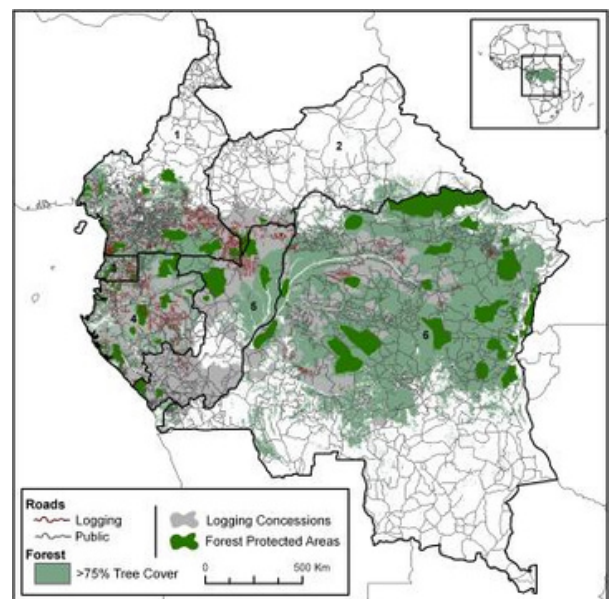
Another important initiative is the UN-supported **REDD+ project** (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), which promotes forest conservation by offering **economic incentives** (result-based payments) to **local communities** to adopt sustainable practices and reduce deforestation.

However, **Northern countries often frame Southern nations as incapable of addressing environmental issues**, despite the Global South's strong biodiversity preservation record. This perception justifies **international oversight and intervention**, even though the **Global North** is historically **responsible** for the majority of **greenhouse gas emissions**. This stance drives many development policies, creating a pattern of political and social interventionism from the North. In this context, "development" often means economic and industrial planning directed by Northern countries to "assist" the South. Such development aid has become a dominant tool for shaping the South's environmental and economic policies in line with Northern priorities.

Today, Central Africa has over **200 protected areas** that cover **800 000 square kilometers**. These areas include national parks, wildlife reserves, forest reserves, and hunting areas. The number and size of these areas have **doubled in the past 20 years**.



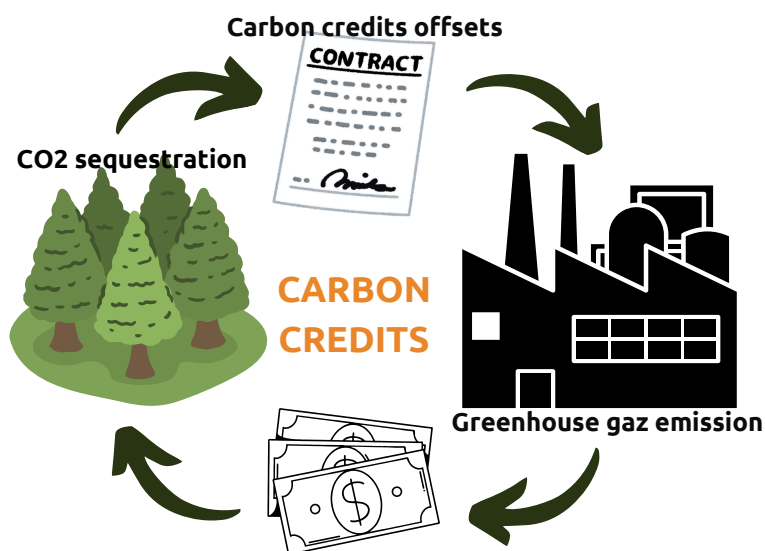
WWF Background: As **independence movements** gained momentum around the world, the International Union for Conservation of Nature realized the **need to engage nationalist leaders** that were **promising economic development** to their population. This led to the creation of **WWF** (World Wildlife Fund for Nature) in **1961**, aiming to convince newly independent countries, particularly in Africa, of the importance of preserving national parks and reserves. Efforts included summits with African leaders and sending ecologists to support local conservation. However, this approach was often viewed as **paternalistic**, implying doubt about the ability of these new nations to independently manage their natural resources.



JUN-2007 Woods Hole Research Center scientists study impacts of industrial logging in Central Africa WOODWELL CLIMATE RESEARCH CENTER

Carbon credits : a tool for conservation

The **carbon credit** system offers a promising approach to **funding conservation**. A **carbon credit represents one ton of carbon dioxide avoided or sequestered**, and these credits can be bought by companies, local governments, and individuals to offset emissions. While the price of carbon was \$10 per ton five years ago, it now trades between \$65 and \$80. To meet the **Paris COP21 goal** of keeping global warming below 2°C, experts argue the **price should reach \$100 per ton**, a target advocated by DRC President Félix Tshisekedi at the 2021 G20 summit. As the value of carbon credits rises, the **Congo Basin's forests could become an important economic resource**, providing funds for sustainable development and conservation.



However, several limitations can be attributed to this approach. Companies using these credits may claim carbon neutrality without actually changing their practices or adopting emission reduction solutions, which can amount to **greenwashing**. Additionally, the practice must be strengthened to ensure better **monitoring with full transparency**. This reinforcement must be undertaken **collectively** to hope for a noticeable effect.

A growing opportunity for investments

With the **rising interest in carbon offsets**, conservation in the Congo Basin could attract **substantial investment**. Regulated carbon credits offer an opportunity for the nine Congo Basin nations to profit from their forests without deforestation. In essence, the Basin's natural resources could become a cornerstone of a green economy, supporting both environmental protection and regional development.

This economic growth also involves job creation in forestry and ecosystem protection sectors.



Conclusion

The Congo Basin is an **ecological treasure** of global importance, sustaining biodiversity, climate stability, and oxygen production. Although resource exploitation and deforestation are serious threats, international cooperation, carbon markets, and conservation treaties provide hope for protecting this vital ecosystem. **With effective management**, this “**lung of the Earth**” could serve as both a source of **global climate balance and a driver of sustainable development in Africa**.

C. VALOT



NURU Intelligence Institute

EXPANDING HORIZONS OF AFRICAN GEOPOLITICS



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Main Characters on Wednesdays

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