



Photo: Rainforest Foundation UK

Congo Basin

Why the Congo Basin?

The Congo Basin is home to Earth's second-largest rainforest and to Africa's second-longest river. Spanning the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and parts of the Republic of Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea, it is one of only five landscapes on the planet defined as High Biodiversity Wilderness Areas. It is a priority region, globally, for forest and freshwater conservation.

This vast river basin is incredibly rich in wildlife, home to some of the world's best-loved species including elephants, gorillas, hippos and chimpanzees. The

have recently been discovered, with estimates showing that they make up almost 30% of the world's tropical peatland carbon. (source: Nature via the Guardian)

Aside from its biological diversity, the Congo Basin is also an area of rich cultural diversity. It directly supports the livelihoods of around 40 million people including an estimated 500,000 indigenous forest peoples whose lives and cultures in many cases are deeply entwined with the ecosystems around them.

Challenges: poverty, political instability, securing land rights

Our research has led us to identify the Congo Basin as a priority region for forest and freshwater conservation. Despite their value and diversity, philanthropic funding for mainland African forests is much lower than it is for forest protection in Latin America and Southeast Asia; the current funding response has been

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insufficient to address needs. At the same time, the region is home to some of the most economically poor and politically unstable countries in the world.¹ In some areas, conflict and displacement has had a significant impact. With poverty come high infant mortality rates, poor access to health services and limited reproductive rights (and rights for women generally).

Evidence shows a correlation between secure land tenure and forest conservation², but policies and programmes to protect forests peoples' rights are patchy across the region.



Photo: Rainforest Foundation UK

diversity of known species it boasts is astonishing: over 450 mammal species, 1,300 bird species, 336 amphibian species and 400 reptile species. It also has over 20,000 plants species (70 per cent of those found in Africa) 8,000 of which occur only in the Congo Basin.

The region is of vital importance globally: it holds a relatively large percentage of the world's forest-based carbon (the DRC alone holds eight per cent) and it generates between 75 and 95 per cent of the region's rainfall. Huge areas of carbon-rich peatland

A recent study³ shows that indigenous peoples and local communities officially own less than one per cent of land in any given Congo Basin country. This lack of tenure makes it possible for companies (and governments) to claim that land is 'available' for development and makes large swathes of intact forests, rivers, wetlands and lakes – and their inhabitants – vulnerable to destructive activity.

As governments in the Congo Basin set ambitious development targets, international companies, development banks and nation-states seek out investment opportunities in these resource-rich countries.

Yet this current model of 'development', combined with weak resource governance and high levels of corruption, drives deforestation and degradation through destructive activities such as logging, hydropower, mining and agribusiness which are putting these important places in increasing danger. Around two-thirds of the region has suitable conditions for growing palm oil – the road developments accompanying this type of development also open up previously inaccessible tracts of forest to agriculture, logging, mining and hunting. Huge areas have already been allocated to logging concessions. Instead of addressing issues of inequality; food insecurity and energy poverty, these 'developments' often exacerbate poverty, inciting land disputes, making people landless, pushing them into low paid jobs with poor working conditions and displacing farming and other activities deeper into the forest.

As extractive and agribusiness companies and their staff move into new forest areas, social norms, such as taboos against hunting of particular species, can be degraded and existing hunting pressures (and demand for other forest products such as charcoal) exacerbated. Additionally, conflict and displacement compound hunting pressures in some areas. Trade is likely to become a greater threat as species populations are diminished in Asia (e.g. for pangolins) and suppliers look to Africa to meet demand. A BBC investigation⁴ exposed highly organised trafficking of baby chimpanzees from West African and Congo Basin forests to parts of Asia; an issue which has received relatively little attention compared to efforts to tackle poaching for ivory in other parts of Africa.

While there is a clear need for well-orchestrated conservation in the region, there is a real risk that poorly envisaged initiatives will become the norm, particularly with increasingly high levels of international forest financing (especially in the DRC). There are fears that these funds will not be directed towards the on-the ground groups who understand their operating contexts and can make a positive difference with lasting community engagement, and will instead go to proponents of fortress-style models of conservation and top-down land use planning which often fail to offer the best approach for protecting forests and biodiversity.



Photo: Rainforest Foundation UK

Knowledge into Action

Synchronicity Earth is developing the **Congo Basin Programme**, a long-term, collaborative philanthropic approach to protecting ecosystems in the Congo Basin. Our experience funding several key partners in the DRC since 2012 has shown us the need for a coordinated and agile donor response to ensure that they – and other similar organisations – can access flexible long-term funding and be linked into the right networks to increase their impact. Our aim is to bring funders together to support a constellation of groups and interventions at different scales.

The validity of this approach is beginning to garner support from a diverse range of funders. This is helping us to continue and increase support for some of the most effective groups working in the region – those with which we have developed a strong relationship over the past 5 years – and to identify other key partners to prioritise funding for as we help to develop a network from the grassroots up.

To support work on the ground, we:

- Work with and connect the best partners in the region.
- Provide assistance to effective groups to challenge

industrial-scale developments. For the longer-term, work is needed to secure land rights of forest peoples, a key priority in helping to secure the long-term protection of the Congo Basin. At the same time, groups need support to build their capacity to tackle threats, to learn and build from the experience of others and to coordinate and collaborate to build a stronger conservation movement in the region.

- Nurture an evolving network of local and international NGOs, funders, institutional bodies and stakeholders, enabling better communication and sharing of knowledge and practice between them.

We bring together funding partners:

- Pooling funding means less time spent fundraising and completing paperwork.
- By sharing information and experience about a region which has been historically difficult to access and hard to evaluate in terms of funding risk, we are able to identify good partners and construct a funding and support network that is able to share information, practice and skills.

We aim to:

- Provide reactive assistance to tackle new concessions and developments as they occur
- Empower forest peoples, particularly women, to protect their forests
- Strengthen civil society capacity
- Ensure that economic growth does not harm people and ecosystems and help to integrate biodiversity and conservation thinking into dialogue around development and make this the norm.
- Contribute to a more holistic approach to conservation and development in a region of extremely high biological and cultural diversity.

Vision

Our vision is one where the second largest rainforest in the world is protected from ill-conceived, short-term development that tramples the rights of local people and nature, and where people and wildlife can coexist to the benefit of all.

Positive Change

The Congo Basin region is of exceptional importance, globally. There are some signs that this is beginning to be recognised:

1. In 2016, the DRC government finalised a legal framework for community forestry. Done properly community forests can provide a real livelihood alternative to destructive logging and mining practices and help communities to take responsibility for the conservation and management of their forests.
2. The UK government Department for International Development recently launched a fund to support community forestry throughout the Congo Basin. In the DRC, SE partner Rainforest Foundation UK is the lead organisation responsible for collaborating with other groups to trial community forestry projects.
3. We have found amazing, innovative partners working on the ground bringing about huge changes despite a lack of funding and difficult political contexts. We are inspired daily by our partners, some of whom have won awards for their work: The Dynamique des Groupes des Peuples Autochtones (DGPA) won the Equator Prize in 2015, awarded to outstanding organisations and initiatives that are advancing innovative solutions for people, nature and resilient communities with a particular emphasis on indigenous peoples.
4. In 2014, our partner Réseau CREF worked together with Virunga National Park and international NGOs to stop oil exploration in Africa's oldest and most biodiverse national park.
5. Whilst women are often marginalised in conservation roles in the region; we are working across our portfolio to see how we can empower women to lead conservation efforts. We have recently been inspired by the story of Congolese ranger Ewing Lopongo. (<https://news.mongabay.com/2017/03/the-people-of-drcs-forests>)

References

1. See CIA fact books for individual countries: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>
2. Seymour, F., T. La Vina and K. Hite (2014) Evidence linking community level tenure and forest condition: An annotated bibliography. US: Climate and Land Use Alliance
3. Rights and Resources Initiative (2015) Who Owns the Land in Africa? Formal recognition of community-based land right in Sub-Saharan Africa. US: Rights and Resources Initiative
4. BBC (2017) The Secret Trade in Baby Chimps [online] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1dt-5e8c4bac-c236-4cd9-bacdb96d733f6cf>

Insight Series: Bringing Conservation to Life

This series describes in simple terms the species, ecosystems and regions that we believe to be the most urgent conservation priorities, globally. We look at key challenges and potential solutions and describe how Synchronicity Earth, along with our partners, is helping facilitate the journey from robust science to effective conservation action.