

Illegal logging in Cameroon

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Cameroon is the number one tropical timber exporter in Africa and ranks among the world's top five tropical log exporters [e.g. '96-'97: 2.8 million cubic metres timber exported (Rwe)]. The forest sector is heavily dominated by foreign companies. A small number of foreign companies control over 60 per cent of all the logging and timber processing and 3/4 of all timber exports.

Four timber species represent over 60 per cent of total timber exports (SGS - 1995):

Ayous (30%) - Sapelli (16.4 %) - Azobé (8.1 %) - Tali (6.2 %)

In recent years, the trade is diversifying a bit, with Asian markets being less selective, and with the devaluation of the French francs making it more economically interesting to log other timber species.

European logging companies traditionally dominate the Cameroon forestry sector with French and Italian consortia being particularly dominant. The French companies Thanry; Bolloré, Coron & Rougier and the Italian groups Alpi-Spa and Vasto Legne all rank among the biggest Cameroonian loggers. European loggers tend to get access to the most pristine, unlogged forests (the frontier forests in East province). Three parent groups, partially or wholly financed by French interests, retain almost a third of Cameroon's logging concessions. (GFW p.7)

Southern Europe (Italy, France, Portugal, Spain) are traditionally important markets for Cameroon timber, but it's relative importance is declining with emerging exports to South East Asia (China, Philippines, Japan, Thailand).

Less than 20 per cent of Cameroon's unprotected forests remain free from logging development. Almost all logging in Cameroon is carried out in a very destructive way and illegal logging is a major issue. The extremely high level of corruption in Cameroon and the dramatic lack of capacity (staff and equipment) in the forestry departments are serious constraints for enforcement of the forestry legislation. In the East province, home to the majority of the concession area, one forestry-official is responsible for an average of almost 21,000 hectares of concession.

Forestry reform in Cameroon

In an attempt to reduce the environmental impact of the logging industry and increase economic returns for Cameroon, the World Bank pushed for new forestry legislation (the new 1994 forestry law) and a reform of the forest industry. French politicians and decision makers used all their influence to weaken the new proposed forest legislation and defend specific interests of the French logging companies. (Ekoko 1997, p.22-23)

Important elements of the new forest law are:

- A log export ban to come into effect by 1999 and reach the objective of 70 per cent domestic wood processing by 1999.
- Establish a public auction process of concession allocation to the highest bidder and limit the concession size of a company to 200,000 hectares.

Unfortunately, the new legislation has often been openly violated by concessionaires enjoying protection from high ranking authorities in Cameroon. A recent survey carried out by Cameroon Environmental Watch indicated significant and widespread irregularities, both in the status of concession allocation and in the enforcement of existing legislation:

- The log export ban has not been implemented, ITTO export figures for 1998 indicate that logs still made up more than 70 per cent of exports. (In June 1999, an administrative order essentially loosened these

restrictions. Under this revision, the log export ban was lifted for two dominant species: Ayous and Sapelli). These exceptions allowed for much of Cameroon's current logging trade to continue because these two species represented more than a third of all logs exported in 1997. However in August 1999, the government issued another set of guidelines that banned Sapelli exports while allowing for continued exports of Ayous and opening possibilities for the promotion of other currently "under-utilised" species.

- Three subsidiary companies, all French owned hold more than 200,000 hectares of concessions - in violation of the law. The companies are Sibaf-Bolloré, CFC-Thany and Coron.
- Seven concessions (Thany and Coron subsidiaries) were allocated through a discretionary process in 1996, violating the new legislation that called for a competitive and public allocation process.
- At least 21 of the 31 allocated concessions (UFA's) did not go to the highest bidder. The Cameroonian government lost millions of dollars by not allocating concessions to the highest bidder.
- According to government records, during 1997-1998, 29 of 52 active licenses (56 per cent) continued to operate even though the duration of their logging rights had expired.

One of those licenses belonging to the French group Bolloré (La Forestière de Campo) is located within the boundaries of the Campo reserve, Cameroon's second largest protected area.

- Less than a third of UFA concessions allocated to date fully comply with the guidelines set out in the new forestry legislation. (GFW - Cameroon, p.7)
- One out of five violation reports was completely dropped after the intervention of an influential person in the east and central province (CEW 1999).
- Ninety-six per cent of violations reported in 1992-93 were followed by incomplete judicial procedures.

A number of active concessions fall within the boundaries of several forest reserves and the legal status of these concessions appear to be questionable (GFW-Cameroon, p.20), for example the French group Pallisco has operations in the buffer zone of the Dja-reserve, a World Heritage listed protected area. Under this revision, the log export ban was lifted for two dominant species: Ayous and Sapelli. These exceptions allowed for much of Cameroon's current logging trade to continue because these two species represented more than a third of all logs exported in 1997. However in August 1999, the government issued another set of guidelines that banned Sapelli exports while allowing for continued exports of Ayous and opening possibilities for the promotion of other currently "under-utilised" species.

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