



December 10th, 2019

POSITION PAPER OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS ON CONGO BASIN PEATLANDS

The Congo Basin peatlands

In 2017, researchers from the University of Leeds and University of Kisangani found that the Congo Basin (CB) peatlands cover an area five times what had previously been reported in the scientific literature. That makes the 145,000 square kilometer CB peatlands [1] in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Congo - an area larger than the size of England - the largest tropical peatland complex in the world [1].

Peat is composed when plant or other organic material only partially decompose due to high water saturation conditions over a long period. It is essential to keep the peatlands wet to ensure the carbon accumulated over thousands of years remains locked in the soil.

The CB peatlands are estimated to store up to 30.6 billion tons of carbon, the equivalent of nearly 20 years of fossil fuel emissions of the United States [1]. The recent confirmation of the extent of the peatland complex makes the Congo Basin peat swamp forests amongst the most carbon-dense ecosystems on earth. With the peatlands, the Congo Basin

forest is estimated to store up to 70 billion tonnes of carbon, making it critical for global climate stability. [1] [2]

Beyond storing carbon, the CB forests are home to many communities such as the Bantu and indigenous Aka, Mbenzele, Baka and Twa, who are relying on forest and peatland resources for their livelihoods. An estimated 60 million people live in rural areas in the region and are dependent on the ecosystem services that the Congo Basin peatlands and forest provide.

The CB forest is also home to 400 mammal species. Among them are several threatened species, such as lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*), forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) and chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*) [3]. In addition, the CB forests counts over 10,000 plant species, of which 3,000 are endemic, and more than a 1000 bird species [4]. And scientists say many species of fauna and flora in the region are still to be discovered [3].

Threats

The CB peatlands have up until now been left relatively undisturbed by anthropogenic pressures. [3] An absence of infrastructure, oil exploration, large-scale agriculture, and limited logging, have protected the wetlands and surrounding ecosystems from deterioration.

This may be about to change. As large parts of the peatlands are covered by existing concessions or oil blocks and logging, a growing pressure of economic activities linked to large scale exploitation of natural resources and recent political developments, are threatening the vulnerable peatland ecosystem.

About 75 percent of the peatland is currently covered by RoC and DRC's **hydrocarbon blocks**.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Salonga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Cuvette Centrale near the CB peatlands was subject to a degazetting procedure by the Congolese government. [11]

In the RoC, four blocks have been licensed for oil exploration, while the status of a fifth block remains unclear. Another three peatland oil blocks were included in the RoC's 2018-2019 licensing round, which closed on 23 July 2019. In 2019, the RoC Government announced the discovery of an oil deposit in one of the peatland blocks, which it claimed could quadruple the country's output [5].

Oil production, and the infrastructure projects that come with it, would expose the CB peatlands and forests to intolerable anthropogenic pressures, including risk of peatland drainage and oil spills. Drilling for oil in one of the planet's most carbon dense ecosystem is furthermore incompatible with the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global temperature increase to 1.5° above pre-industrial levels.

Industrial logging concessions in both the RoC and the DRC cover 18 percent of the total peatland area. Logging degrades the forest cover due to selective cuts and deteriorates the overall resilience of the ecosystems surrounding the peatlands. In addition, the construction of logging roads has a serious impact on the waterflow network [3] and gives access to remote areas which are currently not exposed to anthropic pressure.

In Indonesia, palm oil plantation caused large-scale drainage of peatlands [6]. More than just clearing the peat swamp forests, the development of **industrial agriculture** on peatland requires the disruption of the waterflow to drain the soil. The drained peatland is then often burned to finish the clearance. The drainage and fires release huge amount of carbon in

the atmosphere. Drained peat fire is particularly difficult to put out due to the high carbon level that fuels the fires and causes very high temperatures.

Infrastructure such as ports and roads, raise anthropic pressure on forests and have the various impacts mentioned above. Ambitious **hydropower** projects could have a major impact on the Cuvette Central water network. The Grand Inga hydropower project was initiated by the DRC government and aims to construct a series of large hydroelectric dams on the Congo River. The *Transaqua* project was proposed in 2002 by the Lake Chad Basin International Commission and aims to divert water from the Congo river watershed toward Lake Chad and hydroelectric dams.

Climate change is likely to alter long-established rain patterns in the Congo Basin and is likely to affect the peatlands' access to water. Further deterioration of the surrounding ecosystems' resilience must therefore be avoided and the peatlands' health should be monitored to avoid a negative feedback loop where the effects of climate change leads to peat decomposition, which in turn aggravates the climate crisis.

It is also important to consider that the above-mentioned threats to the peatlands will have **cumulative effects** that are difficult to predict accurately. For example, deforestation and forest degradation linked to industrial agriculture and forestry will have an impact on the precipitation volume as over 50 percent of the rainfall over the region comes from evapotranspiration [7]. As leading peatland scientists have pointed out, the Congo Basin peatlands depend largely on rainfall to maintain a positive water balance [1], the decrease in rainfall will have an important impact on the area [3].

Inadequate political response

In spite of its richness and the importance of the CB peatlands for the global climate, only 11 percent of them are currently included in national protected areas [3]. A *Transboundary Ramsar Site* covering 45 percent of the peatlands area [8] was declared in June 2017 [2]. However, the agreement has not been followed up with adequate management or policies by the governments of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Republic of the Congo (RoC), making the agreement a weak instrument to protect the peatlands. [3] [2].

On March 23rd 2018, the governments of DRC and ROC signed the "Brazzaville Declaration" expressing an intention to protect the CB peatlands. The declaration stipulates that they will "promote best management practices in peatlands areas covered by economic activities, so that they are managed in a sustainable and climate -smart way, that is in such a way that [they] are neither drained, nor degraded" [9]. Crucially, the agreement does not acknowledge the need to cancel existing logging concessions, industrial agriculture or oil blocks. Neither has the government of DRC or ROC taken any steps to address the threat that industrial activity poses to the peatlands and the surrounding ecosystem.

A recent Letter of Intent of CAFI, signed the 3rd of September by Presidents Denis Sassou-Nguesso and Emmanuel Macron in Paris, makes 65 million US dollars available for the preservation of the rainforest in the Republic of Congo. [10]. However, the agreement between CAFI and RoC does not exclude further development of agriculture, logging and oil blocks overlapping with the peatlands. Indeed, the agreement allows for the clearing of high carbon and high conservation value forests where this is deemed to be of "vital interest to the national economy" and calls merely for the "minimization of direct and indirect impacts" of oil and mining activities there. This is in effect a greenlighting of possibly the most destructive activities in the Congo Basin for climate, forest people and biodiversity.

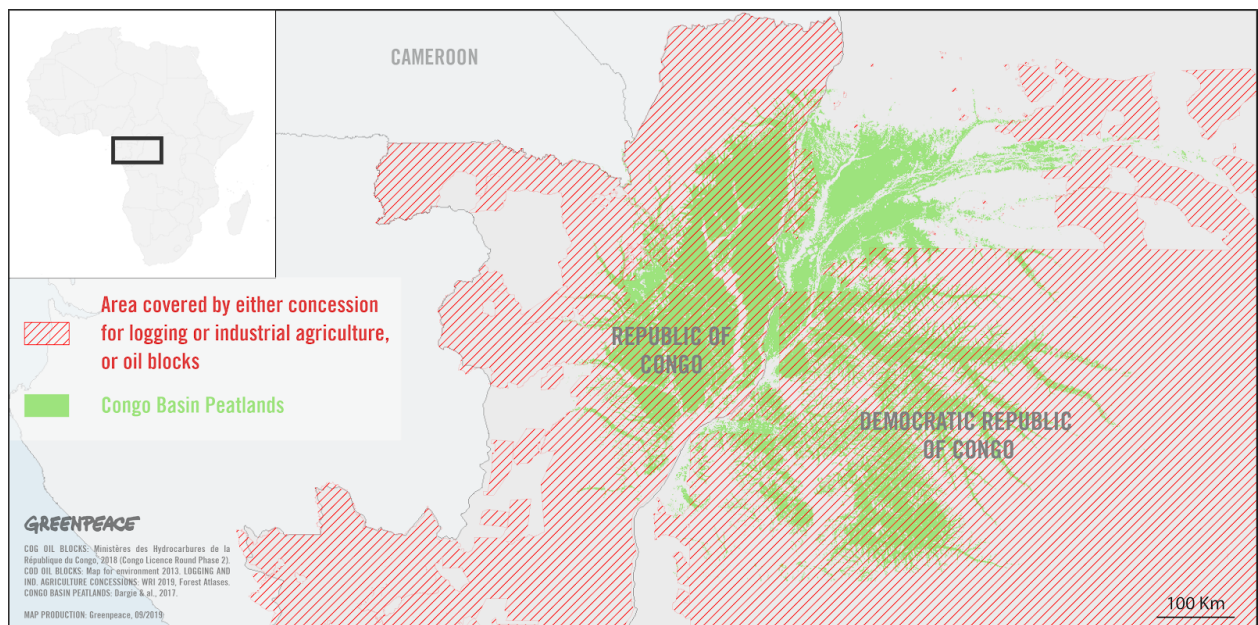
Our position: no industrial exploitation in the peatlands

The intactness of the Congo Basin peatland complex and surrounding ecosystem must be ensured and the rights of its forest peoples must be guaranteed.

Failing to do so will have devastating consequences for global climate stability and threaten the livelihoods of forest communities in the area, who act as guardians of the forest.

The relative intact state of the peatland complex today represents an opportunity to *get protection right* this time and avoid its further exposure to anthropic pressures.

However, 80 percent of the peatland complex is under either concession for logging or industrial agriculture, or oil blocks (see map below). This brings an unacceptable uncertainty about the fate of Congo Basin peatlands and the crucial role they play for climate stability.



The overlapping concessions and oil blocks are serious obstacles to advance credible and long-term peatland protection and thus must be cancelled. Upon their cancellation, protection plans that truly integrate the knowledge, expertise and rights of the forest communities can and must be developed.

The governments of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Republic of Congo must

- Cancel logging, agriculture, and mining concessions and oil blocks that overlap with the peatland complex or its surrounding protective ecosystem, and declare the areas as a no-go-zone for industrial development in binding legislation
- Respect national, regional and global commitments (Brazzaville Declaration and Paris Agreement) for the protection of peatlands and CB forests.
- Develop a rights-based peatland protection plan in a participative and transparent way and insure that representatives of forest inhabitants play a key role in the elaboration and implementation of this plan

The governments of the two Congos and the international community should

- Support the development of develop a rights-based peatland protection plan and insure that representatives of forest inhabitants play a key role in the elaboration and implementation of this plan

International donors must

- Set the cancellation of the overlapping concessions and oil blocks as a condition for further financial support for peatland protection or approval of any donor-funded program. Explicit mention of peatland protection in any commitment must be made.
- Support local and indigenous communities' development projects to prevent their manipulation by company representatives or other ill-intentioned actors
- Evaluate the implementation of forest and climate commitments made by the Republic of Congo and the DRC.
- Insure high level political commitment from the Republic of Congo and the DRC regarding the rule of law, transparency and civil society participation in forest and peatland protection.

Investors must

- Not invest in projects exploiting resources in or around the peatlands and stop existing investments in such projects.

Multinationals must

- Not exploit natural resources in or around peatlands including "reduced impact" exploitation.

References

1. [Greta C. Dargie et al., 'Age, Extent and Carbon Storage of the Central Congo Basin Peatland Complex', Nature, 542, 7639 \(2017\), 86.](#)
2. [Ramsar, 21 November 2017, 'Largest Transboundary Ramsar Site in the world established in the Congo River Basin'](#)
3. [Greta C. Dargie et al., 'Congo Basin Peatlands: Threats and Conservation Priorities', Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies for Global Change \(2018\), accessed 29 January 2018.](#)
4. ['Bassin du Congo, Retour à l'état de nature', WWF webpage, update : 2019](#)
5. [RFI, 'Congo-Brazzaville: découverte du premier gisement onshore de pétrole', 12 August 2019.](#)
6. [Miettinen J. & al \(2017\), 9 February 2017, 'From carbon sink to carbon source: extensive peat oxidation in insular Southeast Asia since 1990', Environmental Research Letters, 12 \(2017\) 024014.](#)
7. [Devers D. and Vande weghe J.-P., 'The Forests of the Congo Basin : State of the Forest 2006', CBFP, 2006.](#)
8. [Miles L. & al., 'Carbon, biodiversity and land-use in the Central Congo Basin Peatlands', UN Environment, WCMC, accessed 28 January 2018.](#)
9. [Brazzaville Declaration](#)
10. [CAFI, "Letter of Intent on the establishment of a long-term partnership to implement the Investment Plan of the National REDD+ Strategy", 3d of September 2019.](#)
11. <https://afrique.lalibre.be/18973/rdcenvironnement-tolle-de-la-societe-civile-face-au-declassement-du-parc-des-virunga/>