



# Congo Briefing

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## The Congo Basin: Biodiversity Jewel and Carbon Sink

### Summary/Recommendations/Key Messages

The Congo Basin Forest is important both on a regional and global scale because of its variety of ecosystems. It harbours some endemic and rare flora and fauna species and one of the largest tropical peatlands (145500km<sup>2</sup>) making it both a biodiversity jewel and a global net carbon sink. However, this jewel and carbon sink faces challenges emanating from development needs and global economic pressures coupled with the inability of States to wade off these pressures. For over 30 years, WWF has been active in the Congo Basin supporting the preservation of these ecosystems, ensuring the provision of ecosystem goods and services for the benefit of humanity. WWF raises awareness, builds capacity and engages stakeholders in the management of natural resources. It supports small-scale farmers to carry out agriculture without converting or deforesting virgin forest. With the implementation of the Environmental and Social Safeguard Framework WWF is engaging communities to establish conflict resolution mechanisms that are being upscaled across the Congo Basin.

Our recommendations:

- Mainstream biodiversity in public and private policies
- Increase international financial flows for the preservation of forests
- Pursue economic prosperity while addressing climate change and promoting the green and blue economy
- Partner with all stakeholders to achieve ambitious goals.

### Congo Basin Overview

The Congo Basin covers 530 million hectares of the global area, including dense rainforest accounting for 6% of the world's forest area. According to CBFP, it covers 70% of Africa's forests cover, and 91% of its dense forests. Regarding SFM, 54 million ha are designated as production forests with only 25 million ha having approved management plans and 5.8 million having FSC. The OFAC (*Observatoire des forêts d'Afrique centrale*) lists 206 protected areas covering 14.8% of the land surface in Central Africa, aiming to reduce forest pressure, preserve ecosystems, and benefit forest communities.

Protected areas are now crucial for biodiversity conservation and sustainable management. Over the past 20 years, their number and surface area have increased by 50%. However, 55% are threatened by oil, gas and mining permits. Conversion to agricultural land and mining are two key threats to the Congo Basin Forests, including fuel wood and poaching. Wildlife crime remains a significant threat to wildlife species in the Congo Basin, negatively impacting its rich biodiversity<sup>1</sup>. And its position as both a source and transit area for wildlife products<sup>2</sup>. The region has over 11,000 tropical plant species with 30% unique to the region, 1,200 bird species, 450 mammal species, 700 fish species, and 280 reptile species<sup>3</sup>. Wildlife trafficking involves illegal trade, smuggling, poaching, capture, and collection of endangered species (*including animals or plants that are subject to harvest quotas and regulated by permits*). Weak law enforcement and high market demand of wildlife products are the key drivers of wildlife crime. Its transnational nature necessitates a regionalized response to address its cross-border characteristics.

In an effort to address these threats, the Congo Basin countries under the AF100, have committed to restoring degraded land, including 12.5 million hectares in Cameroon, 8 million hectares in DRC, 3.5 million hectares in Central African Republic, and 2 million hectares in Congo ROC.

## What WWF is doing

WWF in the Congo Basin is implementing an inclusive conservation approach using **four major strategies**.

**The first strategy focuses on sustainable agriculture** and supporting small-scale farmers with an integrated model that meets local and international market demand. This model uses appropriate planting material, without the need to extend farmland and aligns with the Accountability Framework guidelines for deforestation-free production chains... In Gabon, WWF collaborated with Brainforest to develop an under-shadowed cocoa production model, resulting in capacity-building for 22 farmers, the creation of the first cocoa farmers' cooperative, in the Haut-Ntem department and dialogue with the Caisse de Stabilisation et de Péréquation, local authorities and communities.

WWF through the “Mobilizing More for Climate (MoMo4C) project, financially supported the training of over 200 local farmers by a local organization CIFED, in natural crop treatment and pest control using organic products, reducing deforestation.

**The second strategy targets Anti-poaching and Wildlife Law Enforcement.** The Wildlife Crime Programme in 2018 evolved into the Central Africa Wildlife Crime Coordination Hub, focusing on anti-poaching and wildlife law enforcement, leveraging resources and partnerships, and supporting internal capacity building for the implementation of Wildlife Crime projects and programmes in the region. At the national level, it is managed by the five country offices and their affiliated stakeholders.

WWF operates in four landscapes in the sub-region. These are:

- The Lobeke National Park and Dzanga Sangha Protected Area (DSPA) of Cameroon and CAR in the Sangha Tri-National (TNS).
- Boumba Bek and Nki National Parks and the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve in TRIDOM Cameroon.
- Ntokou Pikounda National Park and ETIC in TRIDOM Congo;
- Salonga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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<sup>1</sup> The illegal wildlife trade, now the fourth largest illicit transnational activity in the world, is the fuel that drives the wildlife crime fires (TRAFFIC, 2023)

<sup>2</sup> [CAFF ENG 26 Illegal Wildlife Trading.pdf \(centrafricanforests.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [CAFF ENG 4 Megabiodiversity.pdf \(centrafricanforests.org\)](#)

The Congo Basin's landscapes offer significant conservation and human wellbeing opportunities due to their biodiversity and carbon stocks. The TRIDOM Strategy focuses on five pillars including support to communities, upholding indigenous rights, sustainable food production, climate action, and conserving biodiversity, requiring collaboration between government, CSOs, and communities.

**The third strategy focuses on forests.** WWF's contribution to forest governance focuses on improving international trade in tropical forest products, state tax revenues, and local subsistence economies. Good governance is crucial for natural resource management in the Congo Basin. WWF has strengthened inclusiveness and transparency in forest policy development, supporting countries in engagement with FLEGT VPAs, strengthening the capacities of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and integrating IP&LC in forest conservation. This is portrayed in the MINFOF-ASBABUK (Baka) MoU and the law on IPs in Congo. WWF has established an early warning system to prevent deforestation in Gabon. WWF is actively supporting forest restoration in Congo Basin countries. It is committed to restoring 25.5 million hectares, supporting the AFR 100 initiative at African and Congo Basin levels, and providing technical and financial support to ensure countries fulfil their forest restoration promises.

**The fourth strategy focuses on ecological impact monitoring.** WWF is implementing a cross-cutting programme in six landscapes, and more than 10 high-priority sites with 10 million hectares targeted for data collection. The program involves monitoring and evaluation experts, defining measurable indicators for conservation activities, and strengthening stakeholder capacities through regular training and harmonization of tools. The data collected will be used to influence decision-making at all levels, including local or national management, political advocacy, and fundraising. The programme also ensures proper data protection and sharing and provides biodiversity data to update national and international databases.

WWF is aiming to increase the International Finance Flow to sustain the Congo Basin's forests, as the current climate and forest finance do not meet its needs. In partnership with Climate Focus, WWF advocates for the integration of sustainable development and conservation. International public finance is essential for the region's fragile nature but requires revision. International public finance provides affordable longer-term financing to developing countries, which is crucial to addressing structural challenges. WWF supports public policies to de-risk private investment and mobilize additional finance through the environmental market. WWF is advocating for new approaches to upscale finance in the Congo Basin through the following means:

1. International public finance to enhance financial accessibility for countries implementing conservation measures, revise debt frameworks, and alleviate or restructure debt.
2. Blended finance – using public and philanthropic finance, guarantees or bonds to de-risk private investment.
3. Accessing environmental markets – mobilizing finance from high-integrity carbon markets, jurisdictional REDD+, and emerging market mechanisms.

## **Regional asks**

WWF prioritizes development and sustainability in the Congo Basin. The three priorities used by WWF to ensure eco-friendly development are (i) Biodiversity preservation through land use planning, (ii) transforming institutions and the economy while addressing governance issues, and (iii) combating climate change.

These three priorities will focus on the following outcomes:

1. Promoting green growth: The development of a deforestation-and conversion-free supply chain for palm oil and cocoa, utilizing the Accountability Framework Initiative and the WWF Integrated Agrobusiness-Conservation Model, is being promoted for green growth. Making forest carbon profitable: The voluntary carbon market does not adequately reward conservation efforts, necessitating the exploration of alternative, more remunerative options for forest conservation.

2. Promoting the blue economy. The Congo Basin, spanning from Cameroon to the DRC, boasts freshwater resources along the Atlantic coastline, offering significant potential for the blue economy. Strengthen payment of ecosystem services. Seize the opportunity to make these services available through promoting conservation efforts to combat poaching and deforestation.
3. Forest-dwelling species are vital for forest health and carbon storage, but declines are widespread in the region. WWF collaborates with states to improve intervention in key landscapes like TRIDOM, Salonga, Virunga, and TNS in the landscape approach, integrating competitive land use with stakeholder participation.
4. Community access to natural resources. Conservation requires community access to resources, which are economic assets that benefit communities and enhance their standard of living.

### For more information

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