



MENTOR-FOREST: Sustaining Forests

Building conservation capacity in the Congo Basin: a multi-disciplinary team training program to improve forest stewardship and wildlife conservation

Forest Management Challenges in the Congo Basin

Until this decade, the Congo Basin remained relatively intact as the second largest expanse of tropical forest on Earth. The Congo Basin forest is globally important as a reservoir for biodiversity and a sink for atmospheric carbon, but national development needs have led to growing resource exploitation by extractive industries. If uncontrolled exploitation of the Congo Basin's forests continues, resource extraction will be followed by widespread forest destruction: an avoidable catastrophe for millions of forest-dependent people and the countless plant and animals at risk of extinction. With only ~12% of these forests lying within protected areas, rampant degradation and deforestation of the remaining forest may be the costly consequence of the region's integration into international economies.



Map of Africa with the Congo Basin outlined in black.

Timber extraction is the most extensive industry in the region: timber concessions occupy 30-45% of all remaining tropical forests and over 70% in some countries. If poorly planned and managed, the regional expansion of the logging industry threatens to vastly modify these unique forest ecosystems by altering forest structure, composition, and faunal communities, and potentially driving the emergence and re-emergence of infectious diseases. Weak governance and limited knowledge compromise the ability of governments to promote sustainable logging practices. *The roots of the problem are: (1) lack of information for decision makers to act upon - only 4% of ecological studies on tropical forests have been conducted in the Congo Basin; (2) lack of innovative models that link development and conservation strategies - most pilot projects are launched in Asia and the Amazon and do not treat challenges unique to the Congo Basin (e.g. protection needs of endangered species like elephants and great apes); (3) low capacity to study and manage forests - universities are underfunded and understaffed, and researchers, managers and government officials often do not have access to the training and resources required to meet current forest management challenges; and (4) lack of multi-disciplinary partnerships and/or management tools to facilitate the implementation of effective forest stewardship.*

Solutions

To overcome these challenges, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and partners such as U.S. Forest Service are developing an innovative new program to build a multi-disciplinary team of ten Central African forest resource professionals. They will work together to improve upon the current forestry paradigm, identify

new logging strategies and methods to mitigate impacts to wildlife and provide information critical to the sustainable management of forests and wildlife. The MENTOR-FOREST program merges the USFWS MENTOR Fellowship Program with the FOREST (FOrest Research Ecology and Stewardship Training) concept developed by Dr. Connie Clark and Dr. John Poulsen. Under the coordination of Drs. Clark and Poulsen, ecologists with over 15 years of conservation experience in Africa, the MENTOR-FOREST Fellowship Program will examine the most pressing threats to the region's forests and offer strategies for resolving these challenges both within and beyond protected area boundaries, with an emphasis on forestry exploitation. This team training program will include a combination of formal coursework with international and national experts, personal guidance from mentors, field internships with conservation organizations, private businesses and national government collaborators, and year-long team projects directed toward the development and testing of alternative exploitation strategies for production forests. It will provide this team of emerging Central African leaders with an understanding of a range of topics including, but not limited to: (1) improving forest management in production forests through reduced impact logging (RIL), private-sector partnerships for conservation (PSPCs), and the design and implementation of innovative pilot forestry programs; (2) reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD +); (3) addressing emerging diseases and pathogens associated with logging; (4) understanding forest ecology and monitoring; and (5) project design and management.

MENTOR-FOREST will use the academic and field-based professional development and team-building approach developed through the FY08-09 USFWS MENTOR Fellowship Program that built the capacity of a team of Eastern African conservationists to address illegal bushmeat exploitation in Kenya, Southern Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda (www.fws.gov/international; www.mentorfellowshipprogram.org). The MENTOR (*Mentoring for ENvironmental Training in Outreach and Resource conservation*) Fellowship Program is a signature initiative of USFWS and selected partners to build the capacity of multidisciplinary teams of African conservationists who can work together to address complex conservation challenges. USFWS invests in capacity building, team training, mentoring, and career development of emerging conservation leaders who can lead efforts to solve problems at local, national and regional levels. USFWS also supports the formation of professional networks on emerging wildlife conservation issues.

Field projects, internships and coursework will serve as the foundation of MENTOR-FOREST. This holistic training model is intended to provide hands on field experience to Fellows while simultaneously addressing information gaps to inform national decision making processes. The MENTOR-FOREST program will work with the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP), government collaborators, non-governmental organizations, community-based forestry and the private sector to measure the impact of multiple forest use strategies (e.g. protected area management, reduced impact logging, and alternative, innovative forestry strategies) on: (1) forest biomass, structure, and function, (2) biodiversity and infectious diseases, (3) rural livelihoods, (4) the ability of various forestry strategies to generate a sustainable source of revenue for national governments in Gabon and the Republic of Congo, and (5) project design and management. To convert data into action, a communication and outreach strategy will also provide information to key decision makers from government, civil society, local communities and the private sector.

For more information, contact:

Connie J. Clark, Ph.D.
FOREST Director
WHRC Scientist
149 Woods Hole Road
Falmouth, MA 02540 USA
Tel: +1-508-444-1562
Email: cclark@whrc.org
www.whrc.org

Richard G. Ruggiero, Ph.D.
Chief--Branch of the Near East, South Asia and Africa
US Fish & Wildlife Service
Division of International Conservation
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 100H
Arlington, VA 22203-1622 USA
Tel: +1-703-358-2460, Fax: +1-703-358-2115
Email: Richard_Ruggiero@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/international

