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The sustainable valuation of the Congo Basin forests: A real possibility?

A major global heritage

Spanning some 268 million hectares across Cameroon, Gabon, the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea, the forests of the Congo Basin make up the second-largest rainforest expanse in the world after the Amazon. In addition to serving as a crucial carbon sink, the Congo Basin is also one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet. It is home to a staggering variety of plants and trees, including many species of precious woods found nowhere else on Earth. The region also abounds with all manner of birds, reptiles, mammals, and invertebrates. Its wetlands—such as the peatlands of the *Cuvette Centrale* ("Central Basin")—are not only major carbon reservoirs but also vital habitats for these often-threatened species.

These forests support the livelihoods of around sixty million people and supply nearby urban areas, whose population totals nearly forty million. They provide a wide variety of goods (such as timber and food) and vital ecological services, including climate and water regulation.

Looming threats and growing vulnerability

Central African forests are under increasing threat—particularly in Cameroon and the DRC. While the other Congo Basin countries have maintained lower deforestation rates, those rates have nonetheless increased over the past decade—rising two to sevenfold depending on the country. Slash-and-burn agriculture remains a major source of forest loss, even though firewood extraction is also a significant driver, typically concentrated around large urban centers—especially in the DRC. Uncontrolled logging and mining activities further threaten these rainforests.

The need to reconcile biodiversity conservation with economic development poses another major challenge to Congo Basin states. To date, the scales have most often tipped in favor of extractive activities, which represent a far larger share of their revenues.

A 2021 report indicates that over a quarter of the Congo Basin's tropical rainforests could disappear by 2050 if current trends continue unchecked (Eba'a Atyi *et al.*, 2021).

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Country	% Forest area*	Annual deforestation rate*	% GDP (forest/oil-mining)
Cameroon	46 %	1.20 %	4 % / 32 %
Democratic Republic of Congo	64 %	0.70 %	1 % / 14 %
Equatorial Guinea	93 %	0.20 %	0.2 % / 90 %
Republic of the Congo	70 %	0.06 %	5.6 % / 23 %
Central African Republic	43 %	0.06 %	10 % / 30 %
Gabon	88 %	0.05 %	6 % / 46 %

** Global Forest Watch, 2025*

In order to safeguard long-term forest use, three types of land use are currently in place: industrial forest concessions, protected areas, and community forests.

Despite being subject to laws promoting sustainable management, selective industrial logging often causes indirect impacts, including the construction of roads, the arrival of settlers, and increased pressure on local wildlife. These impacts lead to ecological degradation, which is at times worsened by disputes between industrial actors and local communities. Furthermore, forestry legislation is only partially enforced due to a lack of political will, insufficient resources, and conflicts with other laws—such as those governing mining or infrastructure. Full implementation of these laws would require robust institutions and consistent political leadership (Karsenty, 2020).

Within protected areas, often located in inhabited territories, efforts are also underway to reconcile conservation with local development. Difficulties persist, however, owing to land tenure conflicts and, at times, weak governance. Although initiatives to improve recognition of community rights have been set in motion, the results so far remain limited.

While community forestry holds significant potential for local development, it is ultimately hampered by conflicting interests, high implementation costs, and a lack of concerted action. This situation has opened the door to appropriation by local elites, leading to an unequal distribution of benefits and fanning tensions within communities.

An integrated approach to the landscape

Profits from logging and the creation of protected areas or community forests are therefore not enough to conserve these zones. Ensuring the long-term preservation of these forests requires an integrated, landscape-level approach—one that extends beyond the administrative boundaries of concessions and protected areas. Such an approach must account for conservation, economic development, and local uses alike, in order to address the social and ecological challenges at stake in all their complexity. It must also be rooted in coherent legal frameworks and responsible governance, with the active participation of local communities.

Valuing the services provided by forests

Besides their direct economic value (from timber, non-timber products, tourism, etc.), these rainforests also provide vital ecological functions: carbon storage, water regulation, and habitat preservation. These often-invisible “ecosystem services” must be recognized and properly valued in order to incentivize their protection. Today, the economic valuation of forest ecosystem services hinges primarily on carbon credits, which are based on the amount of carbon stored by forest ecosystems and generated through reforestation or avoided deforestation strategies or projects. However, neither the REDD+ mechanism—which provides payments for avoided deforestation under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate

Change—nor voluntary carbon markets have lived up to the expectations of forest-rich countries or project developers in terms of the financial flows they generate.

Under REDD+, for instance, only the Republic of the Congo and the DRC have obtained formal funding commitments from the Green Climate Fund (USD 41.8 million and USD 55 million respectively), but no disbursements have occurred to date. More recently, biodiversity credits or certificates—defined as a measurable, traceable unit that can be purchased on a market for positive contributions to biodiversity (and achieved through conservation or restoration activities), have come to the fore in discussions seeking to take greater account of other forest services.

However, whether the focus is on carbon or biodiversity, calculating impacts necessarily involves comparing the results obtained against a baseline defined at the outset of the project—that is, the "reference situation" or reference level. If carbon credits or the biodiversity certificates generated are to be reliable and credible, they must be based upon clear, shared, and easily replicable criteria. For instance, consensus must be reached on the definition of a "forest"; the quantity of carbon stored must be precisely measured; and transparent, shared methods must be used to objectively characterize the level of biodiversity. At present, particularly in the Congo Basin, the methodologies for establishing these "reference situations" are complex or, in the case of biodiversity certificates, still to be defined.

Funding also remains unequally distributed: between 2008 and 2017, the Congo Basin received only 11.5 % of the funding set aside for global forest conservation, with the Amazon receiving 34 % and Southeast Asia 54.5 % (Ferrat *et al.*, 2022).

Toward an innovative mechanism: The valuation of existing natural capital

Each hectare of forest lost in the Congo Basin triggers major climate, environmental, and social consequences. These impacts will take decades to offset, even if replanting efforts are made in earnest.

In this context, compensation for standing forests in the Congo Basin (effective immediately) could help ensure their preservation.

Unless clear incentive mechanisms are put in place to secure the value of standing forests and their natural capital—and unless financial support is made available—forest-rich countries risk losing their remaining stock to unsustainable practices and to uncontrolled agricultural, mining, and oil extraction activities within forest areas offering short-term economic gains.

Depending on the country in question, the outlook varies greatly: In Gabon, the Central African Republic, and the Republic of Congo, vast swathes of forest remain intact, and pressures are therefore limited; the DRC boasts the largest forest area but faces rapid deforestation, with more than 500,000 hectares lost each year; Cameroon, meanwhile, has already seen its forest cover shrink significantly (by nearly 5 % in ten years) (Global Forest Watch, 2024). The efforts required therefore differ for each country, and an "innovative" valuation system will need to factor in these disparities and build an approach that is fair and just for each, based on the risks involved and the national (or even local) context. This system will need to ensure that virtuous practices—whether carried out by economic actors, local communities involved in sustainable forest management activities, or the states themselves—are duly remunerated.

This valuation of standing forests could help fund the trade-offs demanded by national land-use strategies. These strategies must set clear objectives to balance forest conservation with economic and social development in land allocation. In an ideal scenario, the new valuation system would allow forest cover to be preserved without this sacrificing economic opportunities for states or local populations. For it to be successful, the new model must transcend both market pressures and short-term political decision-making, which are often misaligned with long-term climate and environmental objectives.

The implementation of this new mechanism should be supported by a simple, clear, and universally applicable measurement tool that can best reflect the overall value of a given forest. After all, not every hectare of forest provides the same value in terms of ecosystem services.

Using forest cover area—in line with the definition of "forest" given by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2023)—at a given point in time as a reference situation could provide a simple and pragmatic basis for initiating this system of valuing existing natural capital.

Such a mechanism would ensure a predictable and readily accessible minimum level of financial resources linked to forest conservation efforts, without excluding a combination of other existing mechanisms. This baseline value could then be adjusted accounting for local contexts—*via* carbon credits, biodiversity certificates, or other payments for ecosystem services. The mechanism's design must also ensure implementation of a kind of "transmission belt" to convert mobilized funding into tangible forest protection. Equally, clear rules must be set out for allocating these resources among forest-dependent communities, local authorities, and the central government.

An ongoing implementation: The importance of the various stakeholders

The sustainable valuation of forest ecosystems in the Congo Basin is therefore very much a possibility. It could allow for a monetary expression of forest existence value, complementing efforts in forest restoration and in reducing deforestation and degradation. For this valuation to be possible, innovations are needed in terms of both measuring and financing tools, as well as in terms of coordination between forest policy and economic development strategies. It will also hinge upon firm commitment from financial actors, strengthened local governance, and the involvement of local communities. Indeed, establishing such a mechanism calls for concerted and proactive action from key stakeholders:

- **Central African states** can lay the groundwork for such investments by building on their ongoing efforts to protect standing forests through more committed governance, stronger alignment between sectoral and regional policies, and active involvement from local authorities.
- **Public and private funders and investors** have the opportunity to explore innovative financial approaches to mobilize new resources aimed at preserving standing forests.
- **Scientists play a key role**, as their contributions should enable an increasingly robust quantification of the value of natural ecosystems, thereby facilitating their monetization, while continuing efforts to characterize the conservation status of forests through efficient and easily replicable techniques.
- Growing engagement from **local communities and Indigenous populations** is essential to demonstrate the relevance of a regional, bottom-up approach to preserving existing forests.

By reconciling the respective needs and expectations of each of these stakeholders, this innovative natural capital valuation mechanism offers a promising avenue toward sustainably financing the conservation of natural forests.

This article involved the collective contribution (unprecedented in this context) of French actors deeply committed to the Congo Basin forests. Their expertise was pooled during a hybrid co-construction workshop held in March 2025.

Caroline Merle and Grégoire Lejonc from the Agriculture, Rural Development and Biodiversity Division of AFD also made significant contributions to the drafting of this document.

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