

The Fight Against Illegal Wildlife Exploitation in the Congo Basin: A Lost Effort?



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Abstract

The richness of the biodiversity of the Congo Basin and its importance on a global, sub-regional and local scale no longer needs to be demonstrated. Wildlife occupies a strategic place in this biological diversity. This fauna is unfortunately subject to continuous erosion which has increased over the past two decades due to the combination of several factors including illegal wildlife exploitation and trafficking. This paper is a reflection on the viability of efforts to combat poaching in the Congo Basin. Based on more than twenty years of observations, exploitation of second-hand data and interviews with resource people, this paper identifies the factors which justify the permanence and amplification of illegal hunting. These include gaps in the legislative and regulatory framework, the involvement of authorities, state agent and local leaders in poaching, the increase in the presence of the Chinese, the improvement of accessibility, rivalries between actors and the living conditions of forest populations. The paper ends with the observation that the situation is in the trajectory of the "Empty Forest" as stated by Redford [1].

Keywords: Poaching; Wildlife trafficking; Illegal wildlife exploitation; Congo basin

Introduction

The Congo Basin, which is the second largest tropical forest area on the planet, is home to around 10,000 species of plants, more than 400 species of mammals, 1,000 species of birds and 700 species of fish [2].

The importance of this forest for global biodiversity, for the planet's climate system, for the rural and urban populations of this area and for the economies of the concerned Countries no longer needs to be demonstrated. For several decades, this rich heritage has suffered the harmful impacts of several combined factors of degradation as illustrated by the different editions of "Les forêts du bassin du Congo: état des forêts" published since 2006. These include in particular the combined effects of industrial logging, agro-industries, mining industries, infrastructure, wood energy exploitation, commercial food agriculture and illegal commercial hunting. Of these factors, poaching is particularly significant due to the diversity of the actors involved and especially its diffuse character and its omnipresence in almost every nook and cranny of the landscapes of this forest basin (Figure 1).

Since the mid-2000s, poaching has taken on unprecedented proportions in the countries of the sub-region and despite efforts made mainly by Governments and certain international NGOs, the bleeding of wildlife resources has continued intensely over years.

The scale and persistence of the phenomenon raises the question of whether this struggle is not simply a hopeless effort.

On the basis of twenty years of observations made by the author who worked in the most remote areas of the sub-region, exploitation of second-hand data and interviews with resource people, this paper provides an overview of the phenomenon, identifies the factors of its permanence in order to attempt to provide an answer to the question implicitly posed above. As the situation varies very little from one country to another, it is relatively easy to work from the illustrative cases of one country to generalize without risk of making a mistake. The illustrative cases are drawn almost exclusively from Cameroon.

The Extent of Illegal Exploitation of Wildlife in the Congo Basin

Interviews with officials of forest and wildlife administrations and NGOs for years in various circumstances clearly indicate that almost everywhere in the Congo Basin, illegal exploitation of wildlife has taken on immense proportions since the middle of the 2000s and has a generally upward trend in an almost continuous manner. For example, according to WWF (WWF, 2017), hunting pressure in Lobéké National Park (South-East Cameroon) increased by more than 100% between 2002 and 2015. This

pressure increased by 70% between 2011 and 2016 in the Dzanga Sangha Protected Areas (Southwest of Central African Republic-CAR). Hunting pressure resulted in an almost generalized decrease in the population of various species in the sub-region. For example, according to the source cited above in Lobéké National Park, the population of great apes decreased from 6,360 to 2,658 individuals between 2002 and 2015; that of elephants from 2091 to 1021 during the same period; in the Dzanga Sangha Protected Areas, great apes' population goes from 2310 to 2059 between

2012 and 2016, elephants decreased from 869 to 711 individuals between 2004 and 2016. In Messok-Dja forest block (northern Congo), great apes increased from 2190 to 2938 between 2013 and 2016, elephants' population went from 355 to 260 during the same period. In the humid forest zone in Cameroon, Northern Congo, and South-Eastern CAR where WWF has regularly carried out wildlife inventories, elephant population decreased by 66% between 2008 and 2016 (WWF, 2017).

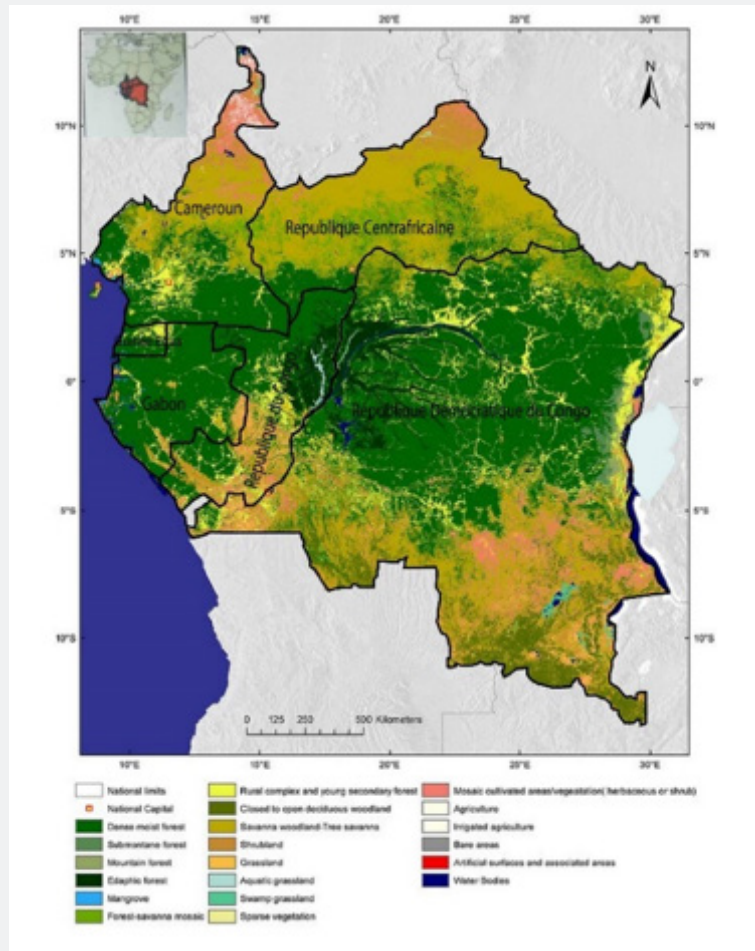


Figure 1: Core area of Congo Basin.

The figures presented above mainly concern protected areas which constitute priority sites for surveillance and anti-poaching operations. This means that in other types of management units (forest concessions, communal forests, non-permanent forest estates) which do not benefit from the same level of protection as protected areas, the phenomenon of illegal exploitation of wildlife and consequent degradation of wildlife resources is necessarily very alarming. According to WWF (2017), hunting pressure in other management units is 50% higher than that in protected areas.

The Response of Governments and their Partners to Massive Poaching

Faced with this continued bleeding of wildlife, the governments of the sub-region are trying to organize the response with the support of their partners, mainly international organizations. This response takes several forms, including the adoption of regulatory texts, the creation or revitalization of specialized wildlife protection agencies (example: National Agency for National Parks

of Gabon, Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature, Congolese Agency for Wildlife and Protected Areas), the establishment of anti-poaching committees, the recruitment, training and deployment of larger numbers of eco-guards and the granting of more technical and logistical means to the latter to surveillance operations, the multiplication of anti-poaching patrols, greater intervention of other state agents in the fight against poaching (armies, customs officers, prosecutors, etc.), the development of cross-border collaboration mechanisms for the fight against poaching as for example within the framework of the Tri-National de la Sangha (TNS) and the Tri National Dja-Odzala-Minkébé (Tridom), attempts to mobilize local and indigenous communities and the development of alternative activities to poaching. Most of these actions are carried out essentially with the support of international technical partners. The most important of such partners in the sub-region are the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), African Parks, African Wildlife Foundation, Zoological Society of London (ZSL), TRAFFIC, Last Great Apes (LAGA) and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This fight also mobilizes, to a certain extent, forest concessionaires and certain local civil society organizations.

Factors Inhibiting Efforts to Counter Illegal Wildlife Exploitation

When we examine a certain number of elements and practices surrounding the protection of wildlife or the fight against poaching, we are entitled to ask ourselves whether the fight against the illicit exploitation of wildlife resources in the Congo Basin is not a lost battle or a wasted effort. These elements range from gaps in the legislative and regulatory framework to the situation of the populations living near these resources, including the involvement of the authorities in poaching, the increase in the presence of the Chinese, the improvement of accessibility and the rivalries between actors.

Weaknesses in the texts and practices of wildlife administration

Experts agree that in almost all countries in the sub-region, the legislative and regulatory frameworks governing wildlife still have significant gaps despite successive waves of revision. For example, as far as Cameroon is concerned, the right of use has never been subject to any framing as provided for by article 8 of the forestry law (Law N094/01 of January 20, 1994); the possibility of the transaction is an open door to illegality and the penalties provided for are really not dissuasive. For example, according to Cameroon's forestry law, a person found in possession of a protected animal (Class A or B) only incurs a fine of 50,00 to 200,00 CFA francs (approximately USD 80 to 330) and imprisonment of twenty days to two months or only one of these penalties (articles 101 and 155). Furthermore, certain wildlife administration practices contribute to fueling poaching. This is the case, for example, with the granting of permits to collect for profit the skins and remains

of wild animals even for areas where there is really no opportunity to have such skins and remains legally.

The involvement of public officials, political authorities, and religious leaders in poaching and wildlife trafficking

It is not a secret that the countries of the sub-region are among the most corrupt states on the planet. In the field of the fight against the illegal exploitation of wildlife, this defect manifests itself in the payment of bribes to public agents involved in the chain of control and repression of offenses (wildlife administration, police force and gendarmerie, customs agents, prosecutor, judge, prison governor) by poachers and traffickers. Beyond this involvement, which could be described as indirect, over the last two decades, we have noted a very active involvement of public officials in the exploitation and illicit trafficking of wildlife products. For illustration, we can cite a few examples in Cameroon:

- a) On July 10, 2006, the District Chief of Salapoumbé (local administrative authority) was surprised during a hunting trip on the Koumela-Libongo road;
- b) On March 18, 2014, in an interview, the conservator of Nki National Park recognized a strong involvement of administrative, military and clergy authorities in poaching (Mutations, Edition of March 18, 2014);
- c) On September 1, 2014, 187 ivory tusks were seized from a military car near Nsimalen airport in Yaounde (Cameroon Radio Television, September 1, 2014);
- d) On April 26, 2016, 3 ecoguards from the Nki National Park were arrested by the Djoum Gendarmerie brigade in possession of 30 ivory points hidden in travel bags;
- e) On March 1, 2016, two clerks serving at the Yokadouma high court were sentenced to three years in prison for poaching [3];
- f) On May 17, 2016, the Gendarmerie brigade commander of Libongo was arrested for poaching (Cameroon-Info.net of June 15, 2016, based on a press release from WWF Cameroon);
- g) On December 12, 2017, 256 elephant tusks were seized from a car belonging to an army colonel in Djoum;
- h) On June 7, 2020, two soldiers were arrested in Yaoundé in possession of nearly 400kg of pangolin scales [4].

Between the mid-2000s and 2017, being in service in the regions of Eastern and Southern Cameroon, we witnessed numerous cases of denunciation of the involvement of religious leaders, mayors, parliamentarians, sub-divisional Officers, magistrates, and heads of health establishments in acts of illegal hunting or trafficking of protected wildlife species. The common trait of all these personalities is that their social rank gives them a certain "immunity" in the face of forest control and hunting roadblocks. Furthermore, most of these same personalities exhibit in public

without any embarrassment of the fact that they consume protected wildlife species. For example, whenever an authority receives distinguished guests, the menu almost always includes meat from protected species such as pangolin, viper, crocodile, even elephant or great apes. When attending mass in these areas, it is common to see worshippers giving bushmeat, including protected species, to priests or pastors as an “offering.” These acts perpetrated by the authorities, state agents and personalities are not largely harmful only in themselves, but also and above all because they are the work of people who, in principle, are part of the chain of fight against poaching or have a certain moral authority or are supposed to be examples of probity in matters of respect for the laws and regulations of the republic. For this reason, their involvement delegitimizes or trivializes any speech or effort to protect wildlife in the eyes of the populations that these personalities or public agents are supposed to guide or supervise.

All this is happening in an environment of near-generalized corruption and impunity. For example, in Yokadouma on February 21, 2014, a bailiff noted that two renowned cross-border poachers (Cameroon, Congo and Central African Republic) who were sentenced for the first to three years in prison and 21 million CFA francs for damages on September 20, 2013 and for the second on October 25, 2013 to six months’ imprisonment and 27 million CFA francs for damages had simply been released from prison without having fully served their sentence and paid the damages. This is also happening in a system where the weak management and control capabilities of wildlife by the State has resulted in a de facto open access regime and where the situation of over exploitation in accordance with scenario of the tragedy of the commons [5] is taking place.

The Chinese factor

The massive presence of the Chinese, particularly through their investments in the forestry sector in the Congo Basin, dates from the mid-2000s, even if it is true that the entry of citizens of the Middle Kingdom into Central Africa is older [6]. This massive presence of Chinese (sometimes meaning nationals of South-East Asia) unfortunately coincides with the boom in elephant and pangolin poaching in the sub-region. This coincidence and the multiplication of facts linked to poaching in relation to China, Vietnam and Thailand clearly show that the involvement of the Chinese has been a powerful driver of amplification of poaching in the sub-region. Among these facts, we can cite as examples:

- a) China, Thailand, and Vietnam are the main destinations for ivory points and pangolin scales illegally exploited in Africa. On January 6, 2014, in Guangdong, China destroyed 6.15 tons of ivory and on May 15, 2014, 28 tons of ivory were destroyed in Hong Kong [7-9];
- b) On August 16, 2013, traffickers including a Chinese were arrested in Méfou and Afamba Division for illegal possession of 70 gray parrots with red tails [10];

- c) On January 20, 2017, two Chinese people were arrested with five tons of pangolin scales in Douala (Cameroon-Info.Net, [11]);

- d) In March 2021, four tonnes of pangolin scales collected across Cameroon and destined for China through Nigeria were seized in Gaschiga (Cameroon Radio Television, March 28, 2021).

Apart from the trafficking of elephant tusks and pangolin scales, it is commonly knowledge that the Chinese in the bushes “catch and eat everything they find”. When we know that the Chinese expansion policy in Africa continues and that the presence of Chinese in the nooks and crannies of the Congo Basin (for mining, timber, agricultural land, infrastructure projects) is growing, there is need to worry about wildlife.

The intervention of the Chinese factor in the acceleration and perpetuation of poaching in the Congo Basin also involves improving accessibility. Indeed, before the massive entry of motorcycles of Chinese origin into the region, access to many sectors of the forest blocks was difficult or even impossible due to the scarcity of vehicles and the quality of the roads and tracks. The motorcycles of Japanese and European origin that were then circulating in the sub-region were too expensive and therefore out of reach for the poor social classes. Because of the price (USD 2000 to 3000), very few people had motorcycles. Towards the mid-2000s, motorcycles of Chinese origin flooded the markets of the sub-region because of their low price (around USD 800) and the wide opening of these markets to Chinese products of all kinds. Since then, accessing the nooks and crannies of the forests has become easier for poachers and traffickers and so out of 10 poaching suspects arrested, at least 6 use Chinese brand motorcycles to enter into forest and to move from villages to markets. The same phenomenon was observed for the steel cables used to make traps. Travel by motorbike has become very easy for poachers and other traffickers as the expansion of logging in the countries concerned (especially with the exponential rise in the direct or indirect acquisition of logging concessions by Chinese companies) has led to the multiplication of access routes. If for a car, the obstruction of access roads after the closure of an annual logging site is an obstacle, for a motorcycle, this really does not constitute a difficulty. Taking into consideration the international context, the breakthrough of the Chinese presence in Central Africa is far from fading and on this basis, it is obvious that their direct or indirect interventions in the illegal exploitation of wildlife are likely to continue.

Rivalries between international NGOs

As indicated above, in the sub-region, international NGOs provide technical, logistical, and financial support to States in the framework of wildlife management and the fight against poaching. WWF is one of the international NGOs on the front line in this area. His commitment to governments, particularly in Cameroon, Gabon, Congo and the Central African Republic, provoked against him severe criticism from the mid-2000s from international activ-

ist NGOs claiming to defend the rights of indigenous populations. These are Forest People Program (FPP), Rainforest Foundation UK and Survival International supported by their allies within local NGOs [12-14]. We say “claiming” because given the importance of the forest and bushmeat for the local and indigenous populations of the Congo Basin [15], it is not possible to defend the rights of these populations without investing very actively in the protection of forests and the fight against illegal exploitation of wildlife. In reality, our experience in the field allows us to say that it was much more about positioning attacks in relation to certain funding and the quest for legitimacy. The attacks by these activist NGOs have led several NGO partners of States in the fight against poaching to review their positioning and commitments with the latter. This has unfortunately led to an obvious relaxation of the fight against illegal exploitation of wildlife and an expansion in the activities of poachers and traffickers in the sub-region, as evidenced, for example, by the unprecedented decline in the population of elephants and great apes in recent years.

Poverty and precarious living conditions of populations

Forests Communities in the sub-region generally live in extreme poverty and precariousness. For example, studies carried out in the Ngoyla Mintom forest block (in Southeast Cameroon, near the border with Congo and Gabon) in 2015 showed that the populations only had one drinking water point for 376 people; 56% of house roofs were made of plant material and only 3.7% of households had fitted toilets. The daily monetary income per person was 111 CFA Frs, or approximately 0.22 USD [16]. Faced with such a situation, it is difficult for a young person to refrain from poaching or being recruited as a poacher when we know that the price of a kilogram of ivory in the area is generally high compared to the standard of living in these localities. This price increased from 25,000 CFA Frs (USD 50) in 2007 to 150,000 CFA Frs (USD 300) in 2012 and more than 250,000 CFA Frs (USD 500) in 2020.

The precarious situation thus presented is more serious for certain localities that are very isolated or remote and have very few opportunities to have other sources of income. This is for example the case of localities enclaved in the forest and linked to other villages only by pedestrian paths such as Rapha in the Forestry Management Unit (FMU) 10 052 and Messikbonda in the FMU 10 023 in Cameroon. These localities have dozens of households who essentially only make a living from poaching. Since such localities do not have school, their children are introduced to poaching very early and make it their main activity when they become adults. Illegal hunting is thus perpetuated over generations. Talking about the perpetuation of poaching, even in certain localities where children go to school, certain teachers choose, within the framework of manual work, to teach children the techniques of trapping with steel cables even though they are prohibited by the regulations in force. This is how social reproduction takes place and at the same time the perpetuation of illicit practice.

Is the fight against the illegal exploitation of wildlife in the Congo Basin a losing battle? After presenting the elements above,

we are tempted to answer this question in the affirmative. We have the impression that in the current context, whatever the efforts to be made, we could only delay and not avoid the complete erosion of many flagship species of the forests of the sub-region. Most of the factors (explicitly or implicitly mentioned) which led to skepticism are of a structural nature or are of such a damaging scope (poverty, out-of-school children, new postures of support NGOs, the Chinese presence, widespread corruption, and impunity) that it would be difficult to imagine seeing them disappear quickly, at least faster than the rate of degradation of the fauna. Combined with other drivers of illegal exploitation or overexploitation of wildlife in the Congo Basin (Lack of alternative to bushmeat in certain forestry sites, human-wildlife conflicts, illegal trafficking of weapons and hunting cartridges, massive immigration in certain localities due to conflicts, logging, or artisanal gold panning, etc.) these factors inevitably give rise to an accelerated erosion of fauna. Taking into consideration all this, it seems rational to say that we are resolutely in the trajectory of the “Empty Forest” stated by Redford [1].

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