



WWF

HIGHLIGHT

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CHINESE COMPANIES AND GABON'S FORESTS: FROM CONTROVERSY TO COOPERATION

A responsible forestry roundtable is improving forest management and legal compliance by Chinese companies in Gabon.

One of Africa's most prosperous countries, Gabon is blessed with natural resources, with dense tropical forest covering around 85 per cent of the country.

The government has put in place legislation to protect large swathes of forest and develop a responsible timber industry that benefits local people: forestry companies must have a sustainable management plan, and a ban on exports of logs in 2010 has helped nurture a national timber processing industry. Meanwhile, foreign investment is soaring, particularly from Chinese companies which now manage almost 6 million hectares – more than a third of Gabon's government-owned productive forests.

"Chinese investments contribute considerably to creating employment and fighting poverty, particularly in rural areas," says Emile Ngavoussa, the Gabon government's general director of forestry. "These companies also contribute to local development, for example by constructing and supplying schools and clinics."

BAD IMPRESSIONS

But the reality is not always so rosy. Illegal and unsustainable logging leave forests empty and with few resources for local people.

"Unfortunately, Chinese companies are notorious for being involved in illegal practices," says Protet Judicaël Essono Ondo from Brainforest, an NGO working on social and environmental issues in Gabon. "The people of Gabon have a bad impression of Chinese companies for many reasons, including disregard of the law, corruption and a lack of dialogue with local people."

Ngavoussa acknowledges that Chinese companies fall short of the standards expected: "sustainable forest management audits by the Ministry of Forestry reveal that none of the ten Chinese concessions audited achieved even 50 per cent compliance."

"Chinese companies have a significant influence in Gabon, so they have a responsibility to improve forest management practices, comply with forest

"The roundtable provides us with a platform for knowledge sharing and exchange.

It has helped us improve relationships with the forestry administration and NGOs, and to learn from other companies. We hope that our investment in Gabon's forests and people can make a contribution to sustainable development in the country."

Mr Xu
President of a Chinese
timber company

WWF TARGETS

The China-Gabon Sustainable Forestry Roundtable is an effective platform that delivers adequate support (scientific, technological, training...) to enhance Sino-Gabonese cooperation and to promote experience sharing, sustainable forest management and rational exploitation of forest resources.

At least 1,000,000 hectares are certified according to Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standards in Africa, including Gabon.

MARKETS

China, Malaysia, Japan, EU, USA, Africa



CONTEXT

Threats

- Negative impacts of deforestation on habitat, ecosystems and species loss, soil erosion and carbon emissions (deforestation and degradation cause more carbon emissions than all global transport).

Opportunities

- Chinese investment in Gabon can contribute to responsible management and use of forest resources, local economic growth and job creation;
- Conservation benefits from reduced illegal logging and forest degradation;
- Improved governance and legal compliance, ensuring sustainable forest products on the global market and safeguarding livelihoods.

and trade laws and promote sustainable development,” says Jin Zhonghao, Director Market Transformation, WWF-China. “This is important not just for Gabon’s forests and people, but for their own long-term viability.”

Part of the problem is a lack of communication between government authorities, local people and Chinese companies, exacerbated by language and cultural differences. For the last five years, WWF has been working with the governments both from Gabon and China, Chinese companies and other partners to improve the situation – for example, by translating legislation into Chinese and providing training.

BEARING FRUIT

The work is beginning to bear fruit. In 2010, the area managed by Chinese companies under an approved long-term forest management plan amounted to just 818,932 hectares. By 2015, this had increased to nearly 4 million hectares – two third of the total area of concessions managed by Chinese companies. The management plan includes comprehensive assessments of forest resources, biodiversity and social and economic impacts, and can be a step toward Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. Previously, the majority of Chinese companies just registered their concessions again every three years under a new company name to avoid investing in a solid management plan.

In 2014, WWF brought together Gabonese and Chinese government officials, forestry companies and local NGOs to establish the Gabon-China Sustainable Forestry Roundtable. The 12 Chinese companies taking part, which manage more than 4 million hectares of concessions, have made significant commitments to protect wildlife and improve conditions for local employees.

“The roundtable allows discussion of the difficulties Chinese forest operators are confronted with when implementing the law, and of the fundamental principles of sustainable forest management,” says Ngavoussa.

Relationships between Chinese companies and the administration, as well as with communities and NGOs have improved, Ngavoussa adds. He mentions companies such as Tali Bois, which sought to follow up with corrective actions after a sustainability audit in its concession, and Société des Bois de Lastoursville (SBL), which has asked for guidance from NGOs as it seeks FSC certification.

“We hope that through building trust, exchanging ideas and sharing best practices, the roundtable will lead to further concrete improvements in forest management and ultimately, to increased FSC certification of Gabon’s forests,” says Zhonghao.



The Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) is an independent, non-governmental, not-for-profit organization established to promote the responsible management of the world’s forests.

fsc.org

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