

Forest certified in Congo

ITTO has assisted a large timber concession in its successful bid for FSC certification

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THE KABO concession in northern Congo recently became the first forest in the Republic of Congo, and the largest anywhere in the Congo Basin, to be certified under the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) umbrella. Now others are set to follow.

Kabo covers 296 000 hectares of dense tropical rainforest. It is home to semi-nomadic and other indigenous communities and a vast range of animal and plant life. Kabo is also a significant resource for economic development; Congolaise Industrielle des Bois (CIB), part of the DLH/tt-Timber Group, holds long-term timber harvesting rights to it.

FSC certification is sometimes construed as too difficult in Central Africa, and Kabo certainly has its share of difficult issues. Environmental groups and other concession-holders watched Kabo's progress towards certification with great interest. Was it economically feasible to meet the FSC requirements? Could the drive for certification raise social and environmental standards to a level that would earn the support of the likes of Greenpeace and the Wildlife

Conservation Society (WCS)? No FSC national standards currently exist in Central African countries, so the CIB certification process could be a benchmark for the region.

The challenges were, and are, significant. To achieve SFM, semi-nomadic indigenous communities must have a meaningful say over the decisions that affect their lives. Controlling commercial poaching for wild meat is perhaps the operation's biggest challenge, and economically viable logging must not jeopardize the integrity of this portion of one of the richest ecosystems on the planet.



Dinner time: stakeholders in a temporary Pygmy settlement in the Kabo concession.

Photo: Edward Parker/Images Everything

In March 2004, CIB announced its decision to pursue FSC certification for all of its five concessions, with technical support from the Tropical Forest Trust (TFT—see box). This followed an initial gap assessment against the FSC principles and criteria by the TFT.

CIB's approach was to work with people and organizations that could help raise its environmental performance to a level at which certification could be achieved. It has developed a partnership involving WCS and the Ministry of Forest Economy and Environment under a project called

PROGEPP. It aims to ensure that biodiversity conservation—based on a sound understanding of the forest's ecology—is integral to management planning and logging operations. Over US\$1 million of the US\$2.3 million available for this project has been provided by ITTO (through WCS), while the German overseas development assistance agency GTZ and the French Global Environment Fund (FFEM) have also provided assistance for forest inventories, management planning and studies of forest dynamics. ITTO recently contributed an additional US\$742,000 for a second phase of the project.

The certification process has encouraged CIB to be open about how it tackles social and environmental issues in its concessions. In December 2004, it gave Greenpeace unprecedented access to its operations; previously, such transparency would have been almost unimaginable in this part of the world. In a subsequent 70-page report, Greenpeace recognized the progress that had been made in the concession and also set out detailed recommendations for further improvements. Many of those recommendations provided valuable input to the certification effort.

An innovative approach was required to provide semi-nomadic communities with the information and means to participate in the process effectively. A recent World Bank grant will facilitate a radio service among these groups and, meanwhile, they are being assisted to map culturally significant areas, hunting grounds and other important zones. The information gained from this process is incorporated into harvest planning before felling starts. Hand-held computers, fitted with global positioning systems and featuring specialized symbols, are in development so that the communities will be able to take over even more ownership of the process.

The auditing company SGS carried out a full FSC assessment at Kabo in October 2005. This identified two major corrective action requirements (CARs): formal approval of the forest management plan by the Congolese authorities; and a more permanent and formal communications and negotiation process with indigenous communities.

By May 2006, SGS was able to confirm that these two major CARs had been met and it subsequently certified Kabo under its FSC-accredited Qualifor standard.

Heiko Leideker, FSC executive director, announced the certificate at the 11th Conference of African Environment Ministers in Brazzaville on 25 May 2006 in the presence of Congo's Prime Minister, reflecting the national and regional significance of the certification. CIB used the occasion to reaffirm its commitment to pursuing FSC certification in its four adjoining concessions which, with Kabo, cover 1.3 million hectares. With CIB now able to supply FSC-certified product and looking to expand its certification program, other concession-holders are likely to follow suit.

This certification is not the end of the story at Kabo. The concession remains under international scrutiny, and CIB continues to work on social and environmental management issues there. Greenpeace recognizes that Kabo has made 'a big step forward', but in a statement following certification it also questioned whether FSC certification should even be possible in previously unlogged forest in Congo.



Bath time: a forest elephant washes in a river in the Kabo concession. Protecting elephant habitat and migratory routes is now an integral part of forest management planning in the concession. Photo: Edward Parker/Images Everything

Scott Poynton, the TFT's executive director, responded: "We very much respect and value the Greenpeace position but do feel that the certificate has been justly awarded. CIB has made great progress and while we recognize that there is still work to be done to achieve the stated goal of making CIB the best FSC project in the world, we appeal to our stakeholders to not set the bar higher for CIB than for other FSC-certified operations".

The process towards certification at Kabo

The TFT's involvement in CIB's certification program is led by its Executive Director, Scott Poynton. In some TFT-supported forest projects, relatively low management capacity means that intensive technical advice and training is necessary. CIB already had a professional, well-resourced management team in place, so the TFT's role there has been to coach this team in the requirements for achieving FSC certification.

In February 2004, the TFT carried out an initial gap assessment of CIB's operations against the FSC principles and criteria for good forest management. This concluded that CIB was in a realistic position to pursue FSC certification, but that challenging issues lay in its path, including protecting high-conservation-value forest, introducing collaborative decision-making, and recognizing the customary rights of indigenous people.

The TFT and CIB's forest management team then developed a scheduled FSC certification action plan to close out the gaps systematically, focusing first on the Kabo concession. In developing and implementing the action plan, the TFT has supported a culture of collaborative decision-making with key stakeholders. The TFT facilitated a Greenpeace field visit, as well as subsequent collaboration with the Forest Peoples Programme and Jerome Lewis of the London School of Economics to help address complex issues with indigenous forest communities.

A critical outcome of this more open approach is the CIB policy statements, initially drafted by the TFT following consultation with social stakeholders. Through these, CIB formally recognizes the forest use rights of indigenous people. No other concession or major NGO project in the Congo Basin has done this. The TFT also played a significant role in the indigenous people's mapping and radio program—designing the program together with CIB and social stakeholders, securing funding from the World Bank, and now managing its implementation.