

# Illegal sawnwood in the East Province of Cameroon

**An analysis of the economics behind illegal sawnwood trade**

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**Seized:** Illegal sawnwood stored at the Forest and Wildlife headquarters in Bertoua. *Photo: J.L. Betti*

**C**AMEROON is located virtually at the centre of Africa and covers about 475 000 km<sup>2</sup>. It contains about 16.5 million hectares of dense rainforests (FAO/PNUD 1983, FAO/PNUD and Minagri 1989). Within this area of great biodiversity, there are various types of tropical rainforest: humid savannah, forest galleries, dry forests, dry savannah, and steppes, as well as manmade agroecosystems (Letouzey 1968, 1985). The country contains two main climatic zones, namely the equatorial zone and the tropical zone.

The utilization of resources in Cameroon is not always sustainable, constituting a major threat to biodiversity. Systems of farming such as slash-and-burn agriculture constitute the major causes of tropical forest destruction. Poaching has also become a major threat for wildlife that has increased with the proliferation of logging activities (Betti 2004, MINEF 1995).

***On 20 April 2007, anonymous informants based in Bertoua alerted the authors to 600 m<sup>3</sup> of illegally sawnwood that had been seized and stored at the East Provincial Delegation of Forest and Wildlife headquarters.***

Cameroon's new forest policy introduced statutory involvement of rural populations, partners and stakeholders in its implementation, notably by the ownership of community forests and hunting zones (MINEF 1996). This is intended to encourage people to become better stewards of wildlife and forests. Community forests and hunting zones are used by local communities, who can sign specific agreements with the forest administration and private sector partners to harvest their forest resources. However, most of the agreements signed with forest companies are not profitable to local communities. Also, some companies

abuse their relationships with community forests to illegally harvest and transport wood.

To stop such illegal harvesting and enhance the contribution of the forest sector to the development of the local communities, the Ministry of Forest and Wildlife implemented control actions in Cameroon's East Province. However, adequate material, financial and human resources are not available to control the whole province, one of the largest in the country. Control actions have therefore been concentrated around the city of Bertoua. This article discusses the reasons for the proliferation of illegal timber sawing in the East Province, focusing specifically on the Koundi community forest located 50 km from Bertoua.

## **Illegal timber in the East Province**

Cameroon is divided into ten administrative provinces: the Centre (Yaoundé being the capital), the Littoral (Douala), the East (Bertoua), the Southeast (Buea), the Northwest (Bamenda), the South (Ebolowa), the Adamaoua (Ngaoundéré), the North (Garoua) and the Far North (Maroua). East Province is covered by semi-deciduous and transition forests, and is often referred to as Cameroon's main timber reserve, contributing 53.5% of the country's total harvest in 2005 (MINEF 2006). It also contributes about 3 billion CFA francs (FCFA) per year in felling taxes to government revenues.

On 20 April 2007, anonymous informants based in Bertoua alerted the authors to 600 m<sup>3</sup> of illegally sawnwood that had been seized and stored at the East Provincial Delegation of Forest and Wildlife headquarters. Field investigations were undertaken in Bertoua and Koundi to examine in detail the background of this timber and the factors driving its production.



**On the road:** Illegally logged timber is mostly transported to the northern part of Cameroon (Ngaoundéré, Garoua, and Maroua) by chartered trucks. *Photo: J.L. Betti*

The seized wood resulted from a two-week field operation conducted in the beginning of April 2007 by forest officers based in Bertoua. The wood was of three main species: *Triplochilton scleroxylon* (ayous), *Lovoa trichilioides* (bibolo), and *Entandrophragma cylindricum* (sapelli). Ayous, or 'white wood' accounted for more than 90% of the total volume seized.

Wood illegally sawn in the East Province, particularly ayous, is transported from Belabo by train or from Bertoua in chartered trucks to Ngaoundéré. There it is conveyed by tradesmen and exporters by chartered trucks to the northern provinces, namely the North (Garoua) and Far North (Maroua). Much of the wood is used in the domestic markets of the north, but some leaves the country through neighbouring Chad. From Chad, the wood takes various routes through the Saharan desert to supply Libya, Sudan, Egypt, Niger, Algeria and the north of Nigeria. Compared to Meliaceae family timbers (bibolo, sapelli), or 'red wood', ayous is more resistant to the high temperatures that characterize this area. Ayous can withstand very high temperatures and long dry seasons without changing its form.

### **Koundi community forest**

The community forest of Koundi covers 4738 hectares in the northeast of Bertoua, in the 'agricultural and residential' zone of the non-permanent, State-owned estate. It is a natural transition forest. A cooperative known as GIC-DOH is responsible for the management of this community forest. The process of establishing the Koundi community forest started in 2003 and was finalized in June 2006 with the financial support of some traders from the Northern part of the country known as the *Aladji*. GIC-DOH has entered into five main timber sales contracts with private sector partners, of which four are with the *Aladji* (GIC-DOH 2006). The terms of these contracts state that the *Aladji* must provide financial support to the group for managing their community forest, while the group has to sell their sawnwood exclusively to the *Aladji* at 10 000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup> for both red (bibolo, sapelli) and white (ayous, fraké) wood.

Production, including the felling and transportation of wood from the forest to the village, is at the expense of the *Aladji*. The felling and transportation of wood is exclusively conducted by GIC-DOH villagers.

### **The economics of illegality**

The production cost of 1 m<sup>3</sup> of sawnwood is about 20 000 FCFA (1 US\$ = 500 FCFA). This includes the felling of trees, pit-sawing in or near to the forest, and transporting the sawnwood from the forest to the village. A chartered truck often transports 70 m<sup>3</sup> of sawnwood. The transportation cost of this quantity of wood from the village to the Bertoua city market is 70 000 FCFA (about 1000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup>). Thus, the total cost of the wood, including the 10 000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup> profit margin for GIC-DOH, from the forest to Bertoua is about 31 000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup>. At the Bertoua market, the sawnwood is

sold for between 45 000 and 50 000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup> depending on the species, giving the *Aladji* a profit of between 14 000 and 19 000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup>.

However, the *Aladji* also buy timber directly from households in the village rather than through GIC-DOH. The price of one tree is between 4000 and 6000 FCFA depending on the species. Given that one tree can (on average) provide 3 m<sup>3</sup> of sawnwood, the wood price of a cubic meter at the village level becomes very low, between 1500 and 2000 FCFA. From the forest to Bertoua, the cost is therefore reduced to between 22 500 and 23 000 FCFA, giving a profit of between 22 500 and 27 000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup>. To avoid controls from the forest administration, the *Aladji* claim that the wood is harvested in the community forest, using trucks marked 'GIC-DOH' to transport their products, since local communities do not pay any felling taxes to the government for harvesting their forest.

The profits realized by the *Aladji* also increase with the distance the wood is transported. In Ngaoundéré, for example, the price of white wood is 80 000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup>. In Maroua, the price of the white wood reaches 110 000 FCFA/m<sup>3</sup>, amounting to 7 700 000 FCFA for a 70 m<sup>3</sup> chartered truckload of white wood. The transport cost from Bertoua to Maroua for a chartered truck of 70 m<sup>3</sup> is about 3 000 000 FCFA, resulting in a total cost (production and transportation) of about 5 100 000 FCFA if the wood comes from the community forest. The *Aladji* realize a profit of about 2 600 000 FCFA (about US\$5200). When the sawnwood is bought directly from households (i.e. illegally produced inside or outside of the community forest area), the total cost of a 70 m<sup>3</sup> chartered truck in Maroua becomes 4 540 000 FCFA, giving a profit of 3 160 000 FCFA (about US\$6320).

Local communities support private sector groups like the *Aladji* who provide them with substantial funds for their timber. Communities can be resentful of forest officers who seize illegally produced sawnwood, sometimes resulting in conflicts between the forest administration and the villagers. In the East Province of Cameroon, cacao and coffee were once the two most important cash crops for rural farmers. When production and shipping of these crops was hindered by the economic crisis, trade in illegal timber gained importance as a readily available source of cash income. The example of the Koundi community forest suggests that at least in the short run, and especially for traders, sale of illegally produced sawnwood is a relatively simple and lucrative activity.

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