

## **From Abundance to Scarcity. Indigenous resource management and the industrial extraction of forest resources. Some issues for conservation.**

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### **Introduction**

While conducting fieldwork for my PhD in Congo – Brazzaville during the 1990s I was struck by the observation that local people, and particularly the Yaka Pygmy hunter-gatherers with whom I lived<sup>1</sup>, do not distinguish between the activities of conservationists and those of logging companies, though they do between the Euro-Americans currently present in the forest and their colonial predecessors. This paper explores the cultural conceptions and observations that underpin their conflation of what seem to us opposed activities, and uses these to challenge the dominant assumptions informing major international financial institutions and conservationists' attempts to assure the future of the flora and fauna of the Congo Basin.

One common way that Yaka talk about other groups is in terms of animal labels. Whereas the colonial administrators and traders of the past are called 'elephants of our fathers' (*banjoku na batata*) in ordinary speech, today's *Mindele* (white people) are referred to as 'red river hogs' (*bangwia*). Europeans involved in this area during colonialism mostly lived alone. When they entered the forest they often went singly though accompanied by Chadian or Senegalese soldiers. Today, whether loggers or conservationists, Euro-Americans live grouped together in substantial purpose-built settlements. When they travel in the forest both tend to go in teams, locating and counting forest species using Yaka guidance and expertise, and Bilo literacy.

The massive wealth of Euro-Americans is alluded to in these metaphors. Whereas large elephants were very valuable to the Yaka in the past, today, with the development of the bush-meat trade supplying urban centres, red river hogs are more commercially valuable. Their habit of living in groups means that sometimes three or four may be killed at a time.

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<sup>1</sup> Field research was undertaken in the Northern Republic of Congo, in 1994-1997 with generous support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, an Emslie Horniman Anthropological Scholarship and a Swan Fund Scholarship. I am grateful for an Alfred Gell Memorial Scholarship to assist in writing up. Further annual visits were made between 2000 and 2004.

Everyone lives in the same forest, yet *Mindele* are all incredibly wealthy, just as red river hogs somehow grow exceptionally fat. There is a certain mystery concerning how pigs become so fat from the forest that all creatures share. This mysterious production is also attributed to Euro-Americans' ability to generate huge wealth from Yaka forest using baffling technology. The implications of this labelling extend beyond these observations and led me to think harder about the way Euro-Americans engage with the forest and its resources in comparison to the Yaka.

Indeed, here I argue that there are two contradictory models through which people conceive and understand forest resources in Northern Congo-Brazzaville. Although outlining some of the nuances between these two poles, I will focus on the poles for analytic purposes. **I argue that in general, people coming from industrialised countries value forest resources because of their scarcity and those people living in or near the forest value them because of their abundance.** The paper concludes by arguing that conceptions of forest resources as abundant provides a more appropriate model for resource management in Central Africa than the continued imposition of models based on scarcity.

### **Congo - Brazzaville**

#### MAP OF CONGO BASIN

The forest of Northern Congo-Brazzaville is part of the Congo Basin forest covering large areas of Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R. Congo), Central African Republic, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Northern Angola. This is the second largest forest in the world and the object of intense international interest from commercial logging and mining concerns, the national governments of rich countries, environmentalists, and the media.

With a population of only around two and a half million people Congo-Brazzaville is the fourth largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa. Surprisingly the country remains highly indebted to international financial institutions and debt arrears continue to escalate. In an attempt to address this debt, international creditors have applied strong pressure on the Congo to follow specific economic policies, including developing the non-oil sectors, particularly forestry, as well as commencing work on a 'Poverty Reduction Strategy'. Congo's creditors have been strongly encouraging timber exports and they are now the country's second major source of export revenues after oil.

## **The Mbendjele Yaka**

(MAP OF YAKA GROUPS)

The Yaka (Mbendjele) Pygmies<sup>2</sup> living in northern Congo-Brazzaville are forest living hunter-gatherers who are considered the first inhabitants of the region by themselves and their farming neighbours, the Bilo. Each Yaka associates her or himself with a hunting and gathering territory they refer to as “our forest”. Here, local groups of Yaka move around visiting ancestral campsites in favoured places where they will gather, fish, hunt and cut honey from wild beehives depending on the season and opportunities available. Though many occasionally make small farms or work for money or goods, they value forest activities and foods as superior to all others.

Hunter-gatherers such as the Yaka have been characterised as ‘egalitarian societies’ by the anthropologist James Woodburn (1982). This is based on a useful distinction that contrasts these ‘immediate-return’ hunter-gatherer societies with agricultural, herding or capitalist ‘delayed-return’ societies. In delayed-return societies work is invested over extended periods of time before a yield is produced or consumed. This delay between labour investment and consumption results in political inequality because it becomes necessary to establish hierarchical structures of authority to distribute work, resources and control vital assets. The majority of contemporary human societies are based upon delayed-return economies. Egalitarian societies based on immediate-return economies are common among hunter-gatherers such as Central African Pygmies, Southern African San and the Hadza of Tanzania, as well as among Orang Asli groups such as the Batek or Chewong in South East Asia.

‘Immediate-return’ hunter-gatherers such as the Yaka are strongly orientated to the present. People obtain a direct and immediate return for their labour – as hunters, gatherers and sometimes as day labourers. They value consumption over accumulation and will share out for general consumption most of their food production on the day they obtain it. The Yaka are nomadic and positively value travelling and living in different places. Social organization is based on a temporary camp generally containing at most some 60 people in ten or so quickly but skilfully built leaf and liana huts. Camps are able to expand or contract in order that the viability

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<sup>2</sup> Mbendjele claim shared ancestry with other forest hunter-gatherer groups in the region such as the Baka, Mikaya, Luma or Gyeli. All these groups are called Yaka people by the Mbendjele. Outsiders frequently refer to these groups as Pygmies, and occasionally members of these groups do too.

of hunting and gathering activities, and social harmony, be maintained. If Yaka have difficulty finding game in one area of forest they simply move to another area, in effect allowing game to replenish. In general, Pygmy peoples use their mobility and flexibility to avoid or resolve problems like hunger, illness, conflict, political domination or disputes among themselves.

Yaka greatly stress obligatory, non-reciprocal sharing as a moral principle that serves to distribute resources and regulate the development of social inequality within the group. A person who happens to have more of something, such as meat or honey, than they immediately need is under a moral obligation to share it without any expectation of return. In this way resources taken from the forest are equitably distributed among all present, and accumulation is both unfeasible and impractical. Other camp members will, if necessary, vociferously demand their shares from someone with more than they can immediately consume.

Anthropologists have characterized this type of sharing as ‘demand-sharing’<sup>3</sup> and observe that it leads to a high degree of economic and social equality. There is a noticeable absence of social inequality between men and women and between elders and juniors. Any individual, man or woman, adult or child, has the opportunity to voice their opinion and resist the influence of others as they see fit<sup>4</sup>. Yaka actively shun status since it will attract jealousy that may ruin their success in valued activities. Thus good hunters will refrain from hunting too often, or boasting about the dependence of the group on their labour, lest their colleagues become jealous and curse them.

The forest, in contrast to cleared spaces such as farms or rivers, is idealised as the perfect place for people to live. Yaka women like to give birth to their children in the forest. Every day Yaka conversations are obsessed with the forest, with the locations of desirable wild foods, with different tricks and techniques for finding and extracting them, with the intricacies of animal behaviour or plant botany, on stories of past hunting, fishing or gathering trips, or on great feasts and forest spirit performances. Yaka say that when they die they go to a forest where Komba (God) has a camp. Yaka cannot conceive of their lives, or deaths and afterlife, without the frame of the forest around them. They express their dependency on and the intimacy of their relationship with the forest in the proverb “A Yaka loves the forest as he loves his own body.”

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<sup>3</sup> Woodburn in Hahn ref contra N. Peterson.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis 2002 elaborates on this in Yaka society. Gender relations in immediate-return hunting and gathering societies are the most egalitarian anthropologists have observed (Endicott 1989, Woodburn)

The Yaka believe that Komba (God) created the forest for them. It has always been, and will eternally be there for them. Yaka have an unswerving faith that the forest will always provide them with what they need. Abundance is taken as the natural state. Should people not experience abundance it is not because resources are diminishing but due to someone not sharing properly or breaking rules known as *ekila*. This natural state of abundance is elaborated upon and celebrated in a sophisticated ritual life in which, among other things, singing and dancing are shared with forest spirits to support the Yaka in satisfying their needs.

### **Abundance**

Most local Congolese conceive of the forest and its resources as abundant. In the 1990s this conception was largely supported by experience, and scientifically confirmed by conservationists, whose interest in this area led to its designation as an area of rich biodiversity. Perceiving forest resources as abundant can produce various relationships to these resources. To illustrate this briefly I will describe some divergences between the Yaka conceptions that inform my argument and those held by their Bilo neighbours<sup>5</sup>, and others.

In contrast to Yaka hunter-gatherers, Bilo groups depend on subsistence farming that requires the felling of large trees and the clearing of forest to create fields for cultivation and dwellings. The forest on the borders of their habitations and farmland requires constant and energetic clearing if it is to be prevented from reclaiming domesticated land. In this context, the abundant forest is seen as a wild force that needs to be conquered for successful social life to occur. Bilo relations with the forest are concerned with restraining and controlling it in a constant battle between civilized spaces and forest encroachment.

Bilo often justify claims to own forest areas in terms of conquest. In contrast to Yaka, conquest is positively valued by Bilo, and is used as an important justification for their claims to authority over land, people and goods. Bilo claims to ownership over land they stay on during their

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<sup>5</sup> The Yaka term 'Bilo' refers to any non-Yaka, village-dwelling African people who live near Yaka people. Although growing urban populations are also called Bilo, typical Bilo are village dwelling, agriculturalists, and fishing or trapping peoples, who speak Bantu or Ubangian languages. The Yaka describe Bilo village people as recent arrivals to the forest who discriminate against them, attempt to exploit them, claim rights over their land and labour, and make aggressive claims to own farmland, rivers, forest and even other people. Mbendjele elders often emphasised that it is their transience that makes Bilo claims vacuous and therefore not to be taken too seriously. Rural migration to urban centers is the latest migratory movement of the Bilo. Currently 80% of Congo's population live in two cities.

migrations are based on the legitimising ideology of conquest, of both the forest and the people they found in it. By clearing forest Bilo create spaces for habitation and cultivation that are recognised in national law as belonging exclusively to individuals. No such recognition of hunter-gatherers' forest rights exists.

As the experience of Europeans and Americans attests, a 'conquering' relationship with an abundant nature can have disastrous consequences on natural systems, especially when combined with modern industrial technology. Only relatively recently, with the expansion of scientific research into capitalism's impact on environmental systems, have Euro-American conceptions of an abundant nature been replaced by careful estimations of individual resources' value in terms of their scarcity and human demand for them.

Bilo and earlier Euro-American views of an abundant and wild nature placed human society outside it, and emphasised metaphors of control and conquest in describing human relations with natural environments. In contrast, the Yaka see themselves as part of a socially interacting and generous nature that provides abundantly to all so long as certain rules are respected. It is these Yaka understandings of how people can maintain an abundant nature that I suggest should offer conservation organisations a new paradigm for conceptualising their role in the management of Central African forests, and establish the basis for a meaningful dialogue with local people.

### ***Ekila* as an ideology of proper sharing**

The Yaka idiom for discussing how to maintain the natural state of abundance is *ekila*. For them people should be successful in their activities because nature is abundant. If they are not, it is because they, or somebody else, has ruined their *ekila*. *Ekila* is either present or it is ruined, it cannot become stronger than another's. *Ekila* is a complex polysemic word that I discuss in detail elsewhere (Lewis 2002: 103- 120). Here I wish to emphasise how *ekila* serves to regulate abundant resources by ensuring they are properly and equitably shared. Yaka share even when there would seem to be no need to share – when for instance huge amounts of fish are captured in the dry season, and continue to share even when this means the producer remains with almost nothing.

*Ekila* practices and beliefs structure productive activities according to gender roles, human-animal relations and human-plant relations. In its broadest unfolding *ekila* constitutes a forest

management regime. As Yaka children grow and their bodies change they become increasingly aware that they have *ekila*, and that many animals and plants do too, and that their conduct affects their own and other people's *ekila*. In general, when a person's *ekila* is not ruined it is demonstrated in men by hunting success and in women by success in childbirth and rearing infants. These two complementary and gendered realms of production are interconnected by *ekila* practices and beliefs<sup>6</sup>.

*Ekila* affects Yaka environmental relations through defining what constitutes proper sharing. To illustrate this some examples follow. By not sharing food, especially meat, properly among all present a hunter's *ekila* may be ruined so that he is unsuccessful in future. A hunter who is too often successful may stop hunting for a while for fear that his successes will attract envy and ruin his *ekila*. If either a husband or wife inappropriately shares their sexuality with others outside their marriage, it is said that both partners have had their *ekila* ruined. A menstruating woman is said to be *ekila* and her smell will anger dangerous forest animals. She and her husband must remain in camp at these times, and he should not hunt. She must share part of her menstrual blood with forest spirits in order that her male relatives continue to find food. Even laughter, a highly valued activity, should be properly shared. Whereas laughter shared between people in camp during the evening makes the forest rejoice, laughing at hunted animals ruins the *ekila* of the hunter so he will miss in future.

If *ekila* has been ruined it causes men to miss when they shoot at animals, and for women it causes them to have difficulties in childbirth. If parents eat certain *ekila* animals when their children are still infants this can provoke illness in their children and even death. Failure or difficulties in the food-quest or procreation are discussed in relation to *ekila* rather than to inadequacies in human skill or the environment's ability to provide. People recognise each other's skills but in this egalitarian society it is impolite to refer to them. Rather, hunting success is talked about in terms of the person's proper conduct in personal and mystical relationships, embodied in the ideology of sharing and talked about in terms of *ekila*.

The idioms Yaka use for discussing the efficacy of food gathering activities may seem odd but they are practical. For instance in areas of forest where hunting is consistently unsuccessful, Yaka hunters will place leaf cones stuffed with earth on all paths leading into that area of forest. This warns other Yaka that the forest is populated by voracious spirits or has been cursed, and that

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<sup>6</sup> *Ekila* practices and beliefs are not static. I detail some recent innovations in Lewis 2002: 103-120.

they should not attempt to find food but turn back or simply pass through. Despite a non-scientific reasoning the effect of this allows degraded areas of forest to be left in order that their resources increase to sustainable levels again. As a body of practices *ekila* forms a forest management system.

Although couched in unfamiliar idioms, *ekila* represents a theory for maintaining abundance. Adherence to these practices, and their explanation, has established a relationship with forest resources that has assured that Yaka people have experienced the forest as a place of abundance for the entirety of their cultural memory. This long experience of abundance has made it difficult for Yaka to recognise the impact increasing numbers of outsiders are having on forest resources.

### **From abundance to scarcity**

Even in the short time I have been visiting the forest, areas I stayed in during the 1990s are considerably less abundant now than they were then. While visiting in 2003 I found myself walking in wide elephant trails (*mbembo*) that were obviously becoming overgrown from lack of use. I remarked this to my companions. They responded that the elephants walk elsewhere now due to the noise of the loggers' bulldozers, not that elephants were becoming scarce. Adherence to the idea of abundance means that Yaka are unlikely to perceive resources as scarce until they are almost gone<sup>7</sup>.

Explained within the logic of *ekila*, outsiders coming into Yaka forest have not understood the importance of proper and equitable sharing as the means to guarantee the continuing abundance of its resources. Indeed the opposite is occurring as outsiders, such as loggers, obtain exclusive rights to resources that they systematically remove without replacement for great personal enrichment, and others such as conservationists who obtain large grants to exclude all other people from areas of forest they occupy.

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<sup>7</sup>One consequence of this view for forest dwellers is that forest resources are converted by central government into faunal and floral assets that are traded and distributed to international conservation organisations and logging companies. Logging companies then make inventories of trees in Yaka forest become described as assets for international companies who can claim the trees located in the inventory are their assets and boost their share value. In these ways ancient trees on who the Mbendjele depend for food, construction materials and medicines are already part of global economics despite their location in remote areas of Northern Congo.



This process of colonial-like expansion by loggers and conservationists is far advanced in forest belonging to another Yaka group, the Baka of Cameroon. When I visited Cameroon in November 2002 a Baka elder, called Lambombo explained to me:

*'Before this was all our forest, our ancestors were all hunters who lived in the forest. Our fathers told us to live in this forest and to use what we needed. Komba (God) made the forest for all of us, but first of all for the Baka. When we see the forest we think 'That is our forest'. But now we are told by the government and the conservationists that it is not our forest. But we are hunters and need the forest for our lives.'*

*'Of these others who say our forest is theirs there is Ecofac (the conservationists), MINEF (the ministry for forests) and the loggers. When the loggers cut our trees we got nothing, and we still get nothing. **We who are older notice that all that was in the forest before is getting less. We used to always find things – yams, pigs and many other things – we thought that would never end. Now when we try and look we can't find them anymore.***

*The government and the conservationists have messed up our forest. When we looked after the forest there was always plenty. Now that we are forbidden to enter our forest when we put out traps they remain empty. Before if we put out traps and nothing walked on them we would take them elsewhere to let the forest rest. We know how to look after the forest.*

*Instead, now we are persecuted by Ecofac. They take anything we hunt from us, even small animals from behind our houses. The Eco-guards are terrible. They even take our crops from our forest camps and harass us for game. For instance if the Eco-guards were to see one of us walking out of the forest from our farm with a basketful of bananas or manioc, and maybe a small duiker resting on top, they will stop us and confiscate everything, including the freshly harvested crops. They just take it home for their supper. All we can do is say 'Hey Komba (God), they just took everything!'*

The Baka elder Lambombo Etienne, of Miatta village on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2002.

Lambombo describes the movement from abundance to scarcity that he has witnessed. His perceptive analysis of how this situation came about and the persecution they continue to experience is unfortunately marginalised by those, such as the government and the conservationists, that have been entrusted with responsibility for these areas.

Though it goes back further than he may realise, as Lombombo suggests, the increasing scarcity of forest resources coincides with Euro-Americans' engagement with them. Since the Atlantic Trade Era and the arrival of Europeans in Central Africa the demand for forest products has been steadily increasing. The Atlantic Trade Era brought ivory, slaves, and cam wood onto international trade circuits. In the colonial period ivory, rubber, copal resin, duiker skins and red wood were the main exports. Since independence those resources that remain valuable, namely hard woods and minerals, have been increasingly intensively exploited using industrial technology combined with political and military strategising.

Local elites now obtain such an important income from permitting multinational corporations and conservation projects to impose top-down development in forest areas that they offer them exclusive rights over forest resources. This has led to large urban developments around the activities of logging companies, the intensive development of road networks throughout the forest, opening up previously inaccessible areas to commercial exploitation.

In practical terms for local people their forests have been converted into floral and faunal assets that have been traded or rented out by the national government under pressure from international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, wishing to reclaim loans. It is this system of intensive and unsustainable exploitation of forest resources by outsiders, that is euphemistically called economic development, that is the root cause of the severe environmental problems facing the forests of the Congo basin.

By contrast, the sustainability and success of Yaka forest management over many centuries is portrayed as unrestrained and primitive by non-Yaka. Traditional subsistence activities such as hunting, petty trade in forest products or slash and burn agriculture are often depicted as destructive activities. Local people have been stereotyped as careless about their environment, easily corrupted, uneducated and only interested in short-term gain. However, the majority of intensive commercial poaching is organised by local elites who manipulate their power to set up

effective poaching and trafficking networks that are immune from prosecution. The weak majority is being scapegoated due to the activities of a powerful minority.

Such misreading of local realities serve to justify international elites sending expatriate conservation managers to apply Euro-American ideas about wildlife management developed in industrialised countries to places such as Yaka forest. The result of such management regimes is that part of the forest is turned into an animal refuge where western scientists can study forest ecology and western tourists can watch forest animals, while the land around the park is 'developed'. In Congo, international funders, and government attitudes perceive of hunting and gathering in areas around the park as primitive and wasteful, whereas industrial logging, extensive commercial tree plantations and similar activities are considered desirable development.

Yet this view of development is bringing about the steady impoverishment of the world's resources to the benefit of rich nations and national elites. Forest resources are now so effectively destroyed throughout the rest of the world that they are increasingly scarce and the subject of guilt and intense anxiety from industrialised governments and their peoples. However, their commitment to globalising industrial capitalism conflicts with this realisation.

The result is that the relationship between the intensification of industrial extraction and the increasing diminishment of natural resources is ignored or glossed over. Indeed the latest effort to impose industrial exploitation on the Congo Basin is being heralded as a conservation initiative. In 2002 the world's five richest countries, the World Bank, international conservation groups and giant logging companies combined together to develop the Central African World Heritage Forest Initiative (CAWHFI) that promotes business-conservation partnerships as the future for conserving Congo Basin Forests.

These propositions promote alliances between huge logging companies, governments and conservationists to impose militarily enforced protected areas, in small areas of forest while encouraging industrial development in remaining areas. To date no logging concern in Central Africa has been able to obtain Forest Stewardship Council certification<sup>8</sup> proving that they are logging sustainably. Enforcement of forestry regulations is undermined by rampant corruption.

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<sup>8</sup> Forest Stewardship Council certification is widely considered the least controversial set of criteria for establishing sustainable forestry practices.

Existing documentation of illegality and abuse of cutting regulations<sup>9</sup>, strongly suggest that current logging practices in Central Africa are profoundly unsustainable. There seems to be a significant risk that adopting such projects as the model for conservation will condemn Central Africa to become an expanse of industrially logged and impoverished woodland surrounding small islands of militarily protected forest.

### **Loggers and conservationists**

A partnership between loggers and conservationists seems strange. But there exists a rarely considered relationship between loggers and conservationists in the Congo Basin. Since the 1970s industrial logging has rapidly expanded with the importation of foreign technology and skills to exploit the forest in ways that mostly earn money for international companies and local elites. This has numerous consequences.

Industrial logging requires a substantial labour force and large infrastructural developments to sustain it. Regular wages create demands for goods and services from employees that attract other people to provide them. Employees' less well-off relatives come to live with them in town. These communities need feeding; intensive farming or hunting to supply the town with food offer an attractive income for traders and others. Roads used to evacuate logs also provide transport for bushmeat and other forest products. They also disenclave remote villages. People flock to the logging town out of curiosity, to seek employment and to enjoy the intense social life available there.

Urban developments suddenly emerge in areas of high biodiversity, changing the land for kilometres around and leading to the common problems associated with rapid urbanisation in a forest environment. Local elites see lucrative opportunities for gain by combining their political immunity with modern technologies and the access to the forest provided by the loggers' infrastructure.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Forest Monitor 2001 provides examples.

<sup>10</sup> In northern Congo in the mid-1990s members of the local elite were responsible for organising some of the most damaging environmental practices. These included large scale elephant massacres using high powered machine guns (the remains of over 300 corpses were found in one forest clearing in 1997), large scale wood theft from logging companies and the extensive clearance of forest for commercial plantations and farms.

The consequences of opening up forest by loggers draws wider attention to it from international environmentalists who take an interest in logging's impact, and associated activities on forest resources. The impact is great. To date most environmentalists' reaction to this focuses on establishing small areas of forest for protection and isolation from local people, and intensively policing them.

Exclusion and protection displace the problem, they do not solve it. Elephant poachers I met near the Nouabale Ndoki National Park in 1996 in Congo explained that they simply crossed the river into Cameroon to hunt for the local Congolese mayor. Corruption allows the biggest culprits of environmental crime to escape with impunity. Commercial bush-meat traders and farmers go elsewhere. But for Yaka hunter-gatherers it is much more difficult since each zone will have important seasonal wild resources not necessarily available elsewhere in the territory they normally live and travel in. The extensive militaristic enforcement of hunting restrictions around protected areas does not address the root economic causes of the bush-meat trade.

As explicitly stated in the CAWHFI proposal, exclusionary policies are justified with reference to the bush-meat trade, whose intensification can seriously affect animal populations<sup>11</sup>. Using shocking images of dead monkeys, apes and other game conservationists seek funds in rich countries to support their activities. But this focus is acting as a diversion from addressing the root causes of the serious environmental problems facing Central Africa. Local people are being scapegoated unfairly.

As international capital draws more and more of the forest's resources out of the forest international environmentalists are seeking to isolate increasingly large areas of forest and exclude local people from them. The implications of this dual occupation of the forest by loggers and conservationists are potentially very serious for Yaka and other Pygmy people. They will be the easy victims of those outsiders extracting resources and those 'protecting' them. In the meantime the real causes for the long-term abuse of resources remain unaddressed.

From Yaka perspectives conservation, like logging, makes abundant forest scarce. By sealing off areas to all except privileged Euro-American scientists and tourists, important officials and project workers conservationists claim to protect wildlife. This enforced preservation of forest is

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<sup>11</sup> In the CAWHFI project proposal the illegal bushmeat trade is cited as the single greatest threat to the Central African forests and used to justify the draconian imposition of exclusion zones protected by armed 'eco-guards' on local people.

presently serving to justify the forest's decimation elsewhere. International institutions such as the World Bank promote and finance conservation initiatives at the same time as promoting, funding, and even obliging governments to open their national resources to exploitation by foreign corporations<sup>12</sup>. These institutions appear to be justifying the promotion of industrial exploitation by simultaneously providing grants to conservationist organisations<sup>13</sup>.

Like the World Bank, loggers and conservationists are each using the other to justify their actions and obtain funding to develop their activities. Loggers are able to divert attention from the negative impact of their activities with reference to efforts being made to protect conservation areas. Conservationists justify the draconian repression of local peoples' traditional rights, in addition to their exclusion from huge areas of forest, by referring to the destruction caused by activities associated with logging or that depend on the infrastructure created by loggers. As exclusion zones encompass more and more forest, logging companies use their existence to justify enlarging and accelerating their activities around the protected areas.

Why conservation agencies often focus activities on limiting local peoples' hunting or bush-meat trading activities rather than on the massive road building activities of multinational companies seems to be an issue of scale. It is less daunting to attempt to control local people than to address the underlying causes of environmental destruction – the obligatory capitalisation of resources imposed on poor countries by the big international lenders.

The economics of industrial forest exploitation are rarely challenged by national governments or conservationists working in Central Africa. Within the context of the debt arrears facing the Congo the value of the forest is calculated according to its value on international markets – i.e. the commercial worth of its timber. Promoters of industrialisation couch their arguments in terms of wealth generation and poverty reduction. However, the substantial profits generated by industrial exploitation are unequally distributed. They go to a few, probably foreign, businessmen

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<sup>12</sup> DRC zoning being done without any consultation with local people to divide up the forest into manageable chunks for multinationals' activities. Rainforest Foundation current campaign.

<sup>13</sup> This began earlier than many realise. In 1992 Polly Ghazi noted how the World Bank, despite a 'green forestry policy', offered commercial rate loans to boost Congo's timber exports. 'To help tempt the government of the Congo, which already owes the West huge debts, the loan offer is being linked to a free UN grant for setting up protected conservation areas. The \$10 million grant will come from the new Global Environment Facility, raising fears that the much heralded green fund could be misused to damage rather than protect rainforests...'

and members of the national elite. Despite the language of poverty reduction local people are largely marginalized.

The value of non-timber forest products to forest people, one of the poorest social groups, in addition to the ecological functions of watershed maintenance and biodiversity protection that a large forest provides, have been ignored. These omissions in conventional economic analysis undervalue the forest's resources and may make alternative land uses appear more attractive than they are. Indeed, in Cambodia's Ratanakiri forest Bann (2000) calculated the forest to have a value of US\$3,922 per hectare to local people in comparison to no more than US\$1,697 per hectare if harvested for timber<sup>14</sup>.

This lack of concern to calculate the value of the forest from local peoples' perspectives is condemning huge areas of Central Africa's forests to become resources for industrial activities that have yet to prove their ability to operate in a sustainable way.

### **Scarcity**

The bias to industrial models of forest management is informed by a fundamentally social evolutionary and discriminatory attitude towards local people and their capacity to manage their own environment, and the infatuation of Euro-Americans, and capitalists more generally, with goods that are scarce in their own countries. The discourse of endangered species is premised on this. Rarity is also an explicit theme in media portrayals of Yaka forest. It is depicted as the last great wilderness of the Congo basin (*Congo. Spirit of the Forest*, 2000), or more dramatically in the National Geographic as 'Ndoki, Last Place on Earth' (Chadwick 1995). These sensational portrayals are promoted by documentaries glamorising their material and underpin conservationists funding applications.

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<sup>14</sup> Bann's (2000) 18-month study in Ratanakiri, Cambodia examines the social and environmental costs and benefits of different uses and management of forest land. By estimating the value of using the forest land for traditional purposes such as harvesting non-timber forest products (NTFP), and comparing this against its value for commercial timber extraction. The results show that forest products have a value that may be as high as US\$3,922 per hectare of forest. If this forest were to be harvested for timber, it would have a value of no more than US\$1,697 per hectare. Considering the other negative ecological impacts of timber harvesting on watershed maintenance and biodiversity conservation, then the net benefits from harvesting timber are diminished further. The forest must remain intact for local peoples' unique values and traditional knowledge to continue. NTFP are a very important source of subsistence for the poorest sectors of society. All households in the study relied on NTFP, but only 30% of households in the region were estimated to have a family member engaged in the wage economy. Forest products provide an important natural mechanism for alleviating poverty without explicit government investments.

Both loggers and conservationists are voraciously monopolising what they conceive of as scarce resources; loggers want control of precious trees, conservationists of rare animals and undisturbed forest areas. The perception of scarcity is the ideological bedrock of both these activities, and a driving force in the industrialisation and capitalisation of the world's resources. The Yaka's conflation of loggers and conservationists is more perceptive than most people realise.

Most conservationists come from industrialised nations where the awesome power of industrial exploitation has devastated the original environment and turned it into patchworks of spaces in use by people in different ways, with the occasional token to the original appearance of the land in the form of well-managed parks. Industrialised nation conservationists then go out to non-industrialised nations like Congo and apply the same model of development, focusing themselves on delimiting and protecting small pockets of faunal and floral resources from local and industrial exploitation.

The competition for scarce funding puts pressure on conservation to appear to be effective; to be seen to achieve goals and be successful. Indeed these pressures are so great that most conservation organisations need to be more concerned with appearances to the rich north than to the local area where work is being done. The quickest way of appearing to be doing something is to take the protectionist approach and isolate an area of forest, exclude locals and enforce protection<sup>15</sup>. The enforcement and protection of protected areas becomes a military-like operation sometimes described by conservationist field-workers as a 'war on poaching'. This aggressive and colonial-like imposition of protected areas on local people understandably antagonises many and establishes their relationship to conservation as involuntary and based on force. This is the basis for most of the conflicts conservation faces and is likely to face in Central Africa.

From local perspectives, rich and powerful outsiders are denying poor people access to their basic needs. This is seen as a grave abuse of basic human rights by many locals. Local people may rarely protest in front of powerful white people, but the resentment they feel may (and does) lead to serious problems for conservationists. In this context it is very difficult for conservationists to convince local people that they are concerned with their best interests.

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<sup>15</sup> Despite IUCN and other policy documents admonishing such tactics, they continue to be tolerated in Central Africa. This is confirmed by the CAWHFI proposal in which 84% of funding is for enforcement activities and no funding is planned for community consultations, co-management initiatives or capacity building. Indeed no local NGOs were consulted in the elaboration of CAWHFI.



Protected areas in the Congo basin have been imposed on local people by international organisations pressurising national governments. Many contemporary conservationists' narrow view of their task in Central Africa is resulting in the acceleration of the industrialisation of forest resources, the very process underlying the problems conservation seeks to remedy. By isolating small areas for protection and excluding all commercial activities, conservation legitimates industrial exploitation in forest around protected areas.

Rather than grasp what local conceptions can offer conservation, in Central Africa conservationists seek to change how locals understand their environment. The very notion of 'endangered species' depends on an approach to resources focussing on their scarcity, whereas most locals experience these resources as abundant. For people like the Yaka, to understand current conservation discourse requires a dramatic reformulation of their thinking that they have little reason for, or interest in doing.

### **Making the Yaka lifestyle scarce**

Yaka forest knowledge and practice have ensured that large areas of forest thrive and endure. Later-comers, such as conservationists, are benefiting hugely from this good custodianship of forest resources. While conservationists depend on Yaka forest knowledge and skills to identify, explore, and understand the environments they come to control, the exclusionary policies they impose on Yaka people threaten the very relationship with the forest that permitted the transmission and development of the forest skills and knowledge conservationists need.

When access to good forest is denied or made dangerous for Yaka, it becomes difficult to transmit forest knowledge adequately to succeeding generations. Over time forest knowledge will become rarer among young Yaka people as resources are impoverished or access denied. Eventually Yaka knowledge may only remain in the notebooks and publications of anthropologists, ecologists and other scientists. The ultimate disenfranchisement of the hunter-gatherers will thus be complete. Their forest land and resources are denied them or destroyed, and they no longer have the knowledge necessary to return into the forest if ever their rights were to be recognised. This process is occurring throughout the region. It is probably most advanced among the Twa Pygmies in the Great Lakes Region, most of whom have become landless potters and beggars (Lewis 2000).

Conservationists applying the protectionist model are turning forest knowledge into a scarce resource that project staff monopolise, and through which they justify their right to protect forest resources by excluding local people. Forest knowledge, like forest resources, has been transformed from being abundant and widely available into a scarce and controlled expertise, only recorded in formats available to those with a northern-style education – a format that so far excludes access by Yaka forest people.

If current activities continue in the Central African forests, the hunter-gatherers' fate will be sealed by the continued imposition and dominance of an ideology of scarcity. Whether forest resources are over-exploited and depleted as a consequence of industrial capitalist extraction methods or sealed off from local people by zealous animal protectionists from rich countries, the result for local people is the same. There will be no space in the forest for forest people unless they become involved in the activities of the foresters or the animal protectionists. Their livelihood and resource base have been swept away from them and control over it given to multinational companies and Euro-American animal protection agencies.

While the forest was in local people's control it was considered abundant, and actually was so. Since Euro-Americans arrived and began to perceive of forest resources as scarce, desirable and valuable, so they have become. Now control over the future of the forest is vested in the hands of people with little or no genuine long-term or generational interest in preserving it beyond their limited engagement with it, often for just a fiscal year or two, or a project funding cycle.

The tradition of natural resource use in rich countries, if widely applied through the process of globalisation to other parts of the world, will result in massive areas of farmland, urban dwellings and industrial areas, surrounding the occasional token to the original appearance of the land in small and insignificant protected areas. This is not a viable model for the future of Central Africa.

Nor is it a model for long-term environmental conservation more generally in non-industrialised areas. How long will small islands of protected resources be able to survive when surrounded by extensive urban sprawls with subsistence slash and burn agriculture supporting impoverished populations, or when surrounded by industrially exploited or otherwise transformed areas from which all valuable resources have been intensively removed, and most of the profits from their exploitation successfully exported to rich countries?

## Abundance

Maybe rather than attempt to change the conception of abundance common among local people, the onus is on conservation to change its point of view from one that endlessly chases and protects scarce natural resources to one that sees natural resources as adequate, even abundant. Seeing that there is enough for everybody, but it just needs to be shared properly, is the lesson that we can learn from the Yaka and *ekila*.

The Yaka are offering conservation a model for the future. Rather than repressing them and disregarding their basic human rights, conservationists need to learn from them. This will be the key for the future success of conservation in Central Africa. Rather than seeking to introduce problematic concepts based on scarcity, or to reject local notions of abundance, conservation needs to take abundance as its starting point for creating a meaningful dialogue with local people that could create the conditions necessary for effective and durable conservation of Central African environments. For conservationists *ekila* is a metaphor for the need for political engagement in decisions about how resources are distributed and used.

This would result in conservation taking the maintenance of abundance as its goal, rather than the protection of scarcity. Following *ekila* logic the key to abundance is equitable sharing. This translates in the language of modern environmentalism as effective resource management and benefit sharing. In other words, moving away from seeing conservation as a series of protected areas surrounded by industrial zones, to a process of equitably managing resources. This is clearly not happening within the currently popular paradigm of scarcity.

Conservationists need to address the total influences on ecological systems – this inescapably includes human issues such as income distribution, poverty, other economic forces, and international politics. Environmentalists can only expect non-industrialised nations to stand up to the forces of international capitalism if they do so themselves, and apply greater pressure to counter the imperatives of global capital in the places from where it originates - in Europe and America. Industrial capitalism is the real menace to the key world environments that we all depend upon, not Yaka hunters seeking food for their families. There can be no effective conservation of our planet without committed political engagement and a willingness to question the assumptions that underpin dominant attitudes to the environment.

The key will be to achieve a shift in our fundamental understanding of our place in nature. Humanity is part of nature, not something to isolate from nature. We need to move away from seeing natural resources as scarce commodities to be controlled by the most powerful, and follow the Yaka lead to realise that nature can be an abundant provider and home for all creatures if it is shared properly.

The scarcity model precludes the idea of sharing, it even encourages voracious consumption. Conservation needs to get away from the paranoid thinking that informs the hoarding mentality underpinning industrial capitalism and much conservation activity, and cease to be enslaved to market economics. The economic considerations of multinational corporations and institutions presently dominate too much decision-making. Instead decisions should be based on the understanding that nature is indeed abundant and capable of sustaining all life. Then we, like the Yaka, can focus our attention on assuring that we share whatever we take from nature properly, and behave respectfully and considerately to each other and the planet that we all depend upon.

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