

Sustainable Landscapes in the Amazon and Congo Basin

ISSUE The Amazon and the Congo Basin are the world's two largest remaining areas of tropical rainforests, covering 1.1 billion hectares. These forests have high levels of endemism and they harbor more than 200,000 million tons of carbon. Because they represent a large expanse of continuous forest, the Amazon and the Congo Basin exert a regional and global influence on climatic and rainfall patterns. Both ecosystems are also home to forest-dependent people (local communities and Indigenous People) with significant traditional knowledge of forests management. Sustainably managing the Amazon and the Congo Basin forests therefore remains a considerable challenge for humanity. Population growth, the extension of agriculture, energy development, mining and oil extraction, and the associated infrastructure to support this expansion are all placing increased pressures on ecosystems. Fragile governance and the absence of adequate institutions, policies, incentives, and land-use planning undermine the development of effective responses by Government and the private sector.

More than 40% of the rainforest remaining on Earth is found in the Amazon and it is home to at least 10% of the world's known species. The Amazon River accounts for roughly 16% of the world's total river discharge into the oceans. The Amazon River flows for more than 6,600 km and, with its hundreds of tributaries and streams, contains the largest number of freshwater fish species in the world. The Amazon basin is one of the largest and mostly undisturbed forest ecosystem that still has the potential to be conserved and managed sustainably.

Equally important, the Amazon plays a critical regional and global role in climate regulation. Amazon forests help regulate temperature and humidity, and are linked to regional climate patterns through hydrological cycles that depend on the forests. The Amazon contains 90-140 billion metric tons of carbon, the release of even a portion of which could accelerate global warming significantly. Still, land conversion and deforestation in the Amazon release up to 0.5 billion metric tons of carbon per year, not including emissions from forest fires.

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Central Africa contains more than 2.87 million km² of forest ecosystems, comprised of both humid and dry forests. The region's 2.27 million km² of remaining closed canopy tropical forest represents one fifth of what remains in the world for this highly valuable forest type, and, after the Amazon, is the earth's second largest area of contiguous moist tropical forest.

The forest habitats of the Congo Basin are the largest in Africa and are home to an extraordinary diversity of life. Congo Basin forests provide vital regional and global ecological services such as carbon sinks, basin catchments, regulators of regional rainfall patterns and large-scale atmospheric circulation. The recent identification of one of the most carbon-rich ecosystems on Earth—a peatland area larger than England that sequesters some 30 billion metric tons of carbon, or nearly 30% of the world's tropical peatland carbon—reinforces the values of these tropical forests as a global common asset. These forests ecosystems also provide livelihoods and services to 60 million people who live in or near the forests, and fulfill social and cultural functions essential to local indigenous populations.

Several interrelated factors drive deforestation and degradation in the Amazon and the Congo Basin. In the Amazon these are related to export markets, transport infrastructure development, social inequality, and poverty. All these are linked to the context of each country in the Amazon and in some cases to shortcomings of sectoral policy frameworks to support sustainable development and value ecosystem services, weak governance of some institutions and governmental entities to establish and enforce legislation for nature conservation and other sustainable development policies, and lack of appropriate land use planning. Given current environmental and development trends, the opportunity to make a lasting impact at the basin scale is likely to disappear in 10 to 20 years.

Deforestation rates are still low in the Congo Basin, but forest degradation is pervasive; the main drivers are small-scale agriculture (subsistence) and harvesting of fuelwood. The development of new infrastructure, industrial agriculture, and mining, are increasing at a high rate and currently intact forests are seriously threatened in the near-term. The direct causes of declines to emblematic species such as primates

and elephants are strongly linked to poaching and other changes in land use, most notably clearing of forests for farming and infrastructure development. Challenges associated with extreme poverty and tensions between local people and protected area management strategies add to the complexity.

SOLUTION

The GEF established the Amazon Sustainable Landscapes Program in GEF-6, with participation of Brazil, Colombia, and Peru that together span 83% of the basin. The Program builds on over a decade of work in the Amazon to strengthen biodiversity conservation, reduce deforestation, and improve community livelihoods. It focuses on improving the management and financial sustainability of protected areas; strengthening sustainable forest management; reducing carbon emissions from deforestation; and incorporating biodiversity management principles (both conservation and sustainable use) into selected sectors that are drivers of deforestation (i.e., agriculture, extractive industries and infrastructure) through policies, sectoral agreements, and/or instruments that engage private sector actors. These interventions together aim to improve the overall connectivity of the Amazon ecosystem, thereby furthering the integrity of the local, regional, and global ecosystem services.

Sectoral agreements and/or instruments will be voluntary and will cover specific actions and commitments of the different parties. Thus, government agencies will dedicate attention and resources to the identification and implementation of mainstreaming opportunities that enjoy the support of relevant stakeholders. It will also pursue strategies for incorporating the objective of biodiversity conservation and sustainable land use into policies, programs, projects, and development plans at different levels of government activity. These mainstreaming practices will be tested through applied land management activities adopted in cases that have environmental implications for connectivity and conservation in the Program area (e.g.: agriculture, etc.). If successful, these practices will contribute to scale up the mainstreaming of environmental policies from the bottom, which could be translated at the top into the



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promotion of incentives, access to credit, and similar measures for the segment of producers involved.

The program takes a multi-scale and multi-stakeholder integrated approach to protecting the Amazon ecosystem. The regional approach reflects commitment by countries and partner agencies to coordinate actions and priorities that cover a significant portion of the entire ecosystem, with the aim of creating connectivity of the forest across borders, enhancing ecosystem integrity, and achieving biome-wide reductions in deforestation. The coordinated approach includes expert knowledge sharing between the countries, which will serve as building blocks for deepening transboundary collaboration in addressing shared management challenges that are regional in nature, such as the management of freshwater ecosystems, infrastructure development for transport and energy development, and gold mining, among others. The program as a whole will deliver multiple global environmental benefits, such as maintaining 73,000,000 hectares of forest land, promoting sustainable land management in 52,700 hectares, and supporting actions that will help reduce CO₂ emissions by 300 million tons by 2030.

In Central Africa, the Congo Basin Sustainable Landscapes Program will focus on a few transboundary landscapes in the heart of the Basin, prioritized based on their potential for transformation and multiple benefits, and where the GEF can make a difference. The main objective of the program is to incorporate environmental management principles in forest management through integrated approaches at different levels (local, national, and transboundary). The notions of connectivity, corridors, and their governance will be considered in an inclusive way with local communities. Innovative mechanisms and partnerships will be developed to improve law enforcement against illegal logging and poaching of global important biodiversity.

Unlike other forested basins, a political and technical capacity already exists in the Congo Basin among the Heads of State, Ministries, partners, and various stakeholders. This existing framework, and especially some of the active networks, will be essential to foster cooperation, deliver actions in key landscapes, address key threats to endangered species, globally

important forest habitats, and forest dependent peoples. Many initiatives on forests, carbon, and conservation are on-going in the region and will provide a strong baseline of partnerships and lessons on which to build. The role of the private sector will be considered under different entry points to promote innovative approaches for conservation, peace-building, and benefits for local communities.

LOOKING AHEAD

Managing the Amazon for environmental, economic, and climate benefits requires working across all sorts of boundaries: across countries and between jurisdictions in country; from local communities and indigenous peoples to national line ministries and international treaty organizations; and between line ministries.

Based on this assumption, the GEF-6 Amazon Sustainable Landscapes program was the first significant regional investment by GEF to manage terrestrial ecosystems in the Amazon biome that included the participation of multiple countries. The GEF-6 Program design will serve as a strong basis for the expansion of the program to other countries during GEF-7, while potentially including additional thematic areas to be identified by the participating countries, which may include the management of freshwater ecosystems and aquatic resources, formalization or regulation of the artisanal and small-scale gold mining sector, etc.

This integrated regional approach will be further strengthened through the Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) Impact Program, which covers both the Amazon and Congo Basin ecosystems. The novelty of this Impact Program resides in the fact that GEF will be aiming at maintaining the ecological integrity of entire biomes by concentrating efforts, focus, and investments, as well as ensuring strong regional cross-border coordination. Past SFM investments were often isolated and mainly focused on integrating SFM principles in land management projects at the project scale only. The SFM IP will address the drivers of forest loss and degradation through strategies aimed at creating a better enabling environment for forest governance; supporting rational land use planning across mixed-use landscapes;



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strengthening the management and financing of protected areas; clarifying land tenure and other relevant policies; supporting the management of commercial and subsistence agriculture lands to reduce pressure on adjoining forests; and utilizing financial mechanisms and incentives for sustainable forest management.

The Private Sector has a significant role to play to improve the sustainability of many sectors operating in the Amazon and with the potential to reduce deforestation. Promising progress is being made with large companies that produce or trade global commodities like soy and beef. But small and medium-sized enterprises generally face more costly barriers to improve production practices and achieving scale in the commercialization of their products. The program will explore partnering with emerging platforms that are aiming to set reimbursable investment funds for small and medium rural producers businesses operating in the Amazon. National, state, and commercial banks are willing to partner in joint pilot initiatives that pursue differentiated financial arrangements for public credit lines directed at small farmers and suppliers.

Managing the Amazon also should include finding a path out of poverty for the 34 million people who live there and depend on the living Amazon and its natural capital for their welfare and future. This requires finding new production technologies; transforming ecological goods and services for growing markets locally and internationally in a way that protects the natural capital that produces these goods and services. That very sustainable production method then serves as a competitive advantage in those markets while providing ownership opportunities for local and indigenous communities in the business ecosystem so they are not just labor or consumers but drivers of economic change.

In the Congo Basin, a GEF-4 Strategic Program for Sustainable Forest Management paved the way for regional cooperation on key topics (REDD+, illegal logging, bushmeat, sustainable financing of protected

areas) while country-based projects supported the network of protected areas in Cameroon, DRC, and Gabon. In GEF-6, countries received support from the Global Wildlife Partnership Program to fight poaching and the illegal wildlife trade. In addition, GEF's Restoration Initiative supported forest restoration in the Basin. In GEF-7, GEF will establish a new program for the Congo Basin that will focus on addressing the drivers of forest degradation through transboundary landscape management and will promote a bottom-up approach that emphasizes multiple stakeholder engagement including forest dependent communities and civil society.

Looking ahead, it is mandatory to articulate the sectoral plans for development in the Congo Basin countries. Economic plans are often dependant on oil, mining, timber, agroindustry sectors. For the Congo Basin to be managed sustainably, countries need to include ecosystem values in planning and decision-making processes. Also, it is key to involve communities in these valuations. For instance, payment for ecosystem services programs need to engage with local communities and indigenous people.

Additionally, SFM efforts need to coordinate actions with initiatives aiming to tackle some emerging problems that go beyond the environmental field such as poaching, trafficking, and illegal timber. These challenges are rooted into the conditions of fragility, violence, and conflict present in the region, as well as depend on international networks of organized crime.

Finally, there is an urgent need for long term monitoring and understanding of Congo Basin ecosystems and promoting science-based actions. Particularly, it is important to develop a better understanding of the ecosystem/people interactions and harnessing indigenous people knowledge to replicate solutions and strengthening bottom up approaches.

