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Congo to world: pay us \$1bn to save our rainforests ... or else

By Pilita Clark in London



Sustainable logging carried out in the Congo basin natural woodland

The Democratic Republic of Congo has a message for the world: pay us to protect a section of rainforest nearly as big as England or watch it get cut down.

In a bold example of how poorer countries are seizing on climate change to persuade richer nations to fund a greener form of economic development, the impoverished DRC says it hopes to get at least \$1bn to protect its vast forests.

“We have more forests than Indonesia and they got \$1bn,” said the DRC’s environment minister, Bavon N’sa Mputu Elima, referring to a 2010 agreement Indonesia signed with Norway in 2010 to halt deforestation, a big contributor to global warming.

Preserving forests as large as those in the DRC is unaffordable without outside help, the Congolese argue, and their forests are already facing the threat of exploitation from developers and local communities.

“This is very much about countries coming together on an international scale for the common good,” the minister said.

He was in the UK on Tuesday, meeting MPs and business executives to drum up support for a pilot “pay for performance” project to safeguard tropical rainforest in a 12m hectare zone bordering the DRC capital Kinshasa.

The strife-torn DRC has more than half of Africa’s forests and its Congo Basin Forest, second only to the Amazon in size, is home to endangered species such as the forest elephant and the bonobo ape.

“It’s ripe for exploitation, sadly,” said Mike Korchinsky, chief executive of Wildlife Works, a US company working with the DRC that specialises in helping companies offset their greenhouse gas emissions by funding African forest protection projects.

Years of conflict in the DRC have safeguarded the country’s forests “in the worst way possible”, said Zac Goldsmith, a Conservative MP who hosted a presentation from the minister in Westminster on Tuesday.

As Mr Korchinsky put it: “You don’t want to be in a forest with a chainsaw when there’s a 15-year-old with an AK-47.”

Wildlife Works has been helping Kinshasa develop the pilot project, which it estimates will need \$20m in start-up funding and then \$50m annually for at least six years after that.

The money will be used to pay for a “green development programme” that will encourage people to find economic alternatives to the logging and farming that have destroyed large tracts of forest in Brazil and Indonesia.

The scheme has echoes of an Ecuador initiative launched in 2007, when it said it would spare a species-rich area of Amazonian rainforest from oil drilling in return for \$3.6bn, about half the estimated value of the crude in the ground.

Quito scrapped the plan last year after receiving only \$13m in donations, partly because donors were nervous about handing out money to stop drilling that a future Ecuadorean government might permit.

But Mr Korchinsky said the DRC’s plan would be different because, although western government donations were expected in the start-up phase, it was hoped a lot of the money would eventually come from the private sector as regulation drove demand for offsetting company’s emissions.

Mr N’sa Mputu Elima said he hoped the UK would contribute at least \$100m to the initiative. The UK climate minister, Greg Barker, who attended the Westminster meeting, described the country’s forests as a carbon store of “global importance” but did not make any firm funding commitments.

Forestry carbon offsets are controversial because critics say it is hard to prove whether a forest has definitely been saved because of a certain project in one part of it – and even if it is, loggers can easily move to another part.

Mr Korchinsky is confident the knowledge gained from a project as big as the DRC's will provide an important example of how such pitfalls can be avoided.

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