
Preface

I am honored and profoundly moved to write the foreword to this historic report of the Science Panel for the Congo Basin. The Congo Basin deserves every superlative that we can muster, and the Science Panel has done justice to this remarkable part of humanity's biological heritage. As this report makes profoundly clear, the roughly 3.56 million km² of the Congo Basin is home for 130 million people in Central Africa, the habitat for tens of thousands of species, and a vital regulator of the Earth's climate and biophysical systems at continental and planetary scale.

The Science Panel for the Congo Basin is itself a remarkable creation, following in the path of the Science Panel for the Amazon. Both Science Panels and their third companion, the Science Panel for Borneo, are built on one main idea. The vital expertise regarding the history, management, and sustainable future of the great rainforest biomes lies with the scientists of each region, of course, in partnership with the global scientific community. The Science Panels seek to empower each region's scientists to take the lead in proposing science-based solutions for the sustainable management of the respective biomes. While outside experts play a highly constructive role, it is the scientists of each region who must be the guides and stewards of the rainforests. As such, the Science Panels serve directly the people and governments of the region, as well as the whole human community.

Moreover, the term "serve" is also on point, since the scientists are generously donating significant amounts of time as well as their unique expertise to this effort. A remarkable volume of work has been mobilized through the spirit of public service of the scientists involved. The Science Panel for the Congo has thereby gone a vast distance in producing the most comprehensive and up-to-date scientific study of the Congo Basin of recent years, and probably ever.

One hundred Eighty scientists have contributed to this report, enabling its comprehensive and panoramic perspective. This report discusses the geological history of the Congo Basin, and every aspect of the science of this wondrous ecosystem: geology, geodynamics, hydrology, climate, soils, biodiversity and its evolution, ecology, cultural diversity, land-use systems in agriculture, pastoralism, forestry, hunting, fishing, mining, and other activities, drivers of deforestation, protected areas, urbanization, and much more.

The aim of the Science Panels, of course, is not only to produce excellent science but also excellent public policy. This report fulfills that aim. After a remarkably deep,

holistic, and up-to-date scientific report on the state of the Congo Basin and the main drivers of human-induced change, this volume proceeds to holistic solutions. Our aim is not merely sustainability (in the environmental sense) but sustainable development, meaning the combination of environmental sustainability with economic well-being and social justice in the region. Farming, forestry, fisheries, mining, and other activities must continue to contribute to livelihoods and economic opportunity, but in a manner that is compatible with the environment, not contrary to it. With millions of degraded hectares of forest land, for example, the Congo Basin can be an enormous sink for carbon through regeneration of the forests. With the right incentives, through carbon markets and other mechanisms, the Congo Basin should receive tens of billions of dollars for carbon storage that recovers degraded lands, builds new livelihoods and strengthens biodiversity. The wisdom of the Science Panel is to propose win-win-win solutions, whereby local communities, biodiversity, and global humanity are all beneficiaries of the ethical, science-based, and forward-looking stewardship of the Congo Basin. The Science Panel for the Congo Basin will be a key leader in that grand initiative, supported by the wisdom in this volume.

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Congo Basin Resilience and Sustainability: From the Past to the Future

Summary for Decision-Makers

Congo Basin Resilience and Sustainability: From the Past to the Future, the 2025 Congo Basin Assessment Report, is the first ever, collective, and multidisciplinary work by 192 scientists active in the region. It was brought together by the Science Panel for the Congo Basin (SPCB), convened by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN), and was inspired by the Science Panel for the Amazon. It features 40 chapters, which are organized into four sections dedicated to the region's geological history, the emergence of humans and their impact on the Congo Basin's ecosystems, the emergence of sustainable development models post-Rio, and a vision for the future.

The Congo Basin, as defined in the report, covers an area of 3,462,806 km², representing the world's second largest tropical rainforest ecosystem, composed principally of the lowland wet and dry "Guineo-Congolian" rainforests, along with extensive swamp, mangrove, and Afromontane forests, bordered to the north and south by a mosaic of transitional rainforests and secondary grasslands.

The Congo Basin encompasses extensive areas in six nations: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Gabonese Republic and Republic of Congo (RoC), and smaller areas in a further six: Angola, Burundi, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Uganda.

It includes 73% of the Congo River Basin, which extends into areas of wooded savanna in Tanzania, Zambia, and Angola, as well as the entire catchments of the Ogooué, Sanaga, and numerous smaller rivers. The outer limits of the biome today are somewhat subjective because they represent a transition from wetter to drier forests, which is continually changing as a function of climate variability and human activities. The eastern limit is the eastern edge of the Afromontane forests of the African Rift Valley, while the western limit is the Cross River in Nigeria.

The Congo Basin plays an important role as a regional entity in the Earth system, the African continent's "green heart," a critical natural life support system, driving atmospheric moisture recycling, which generates 60–70% of the rainfall in the region and sends moisture to the Sahel, the Angolan Highlands and Ethiopia.

The Congo Basin is the largest tropical carbon sink on Earth and is proving more resilient to climate change than the Amazon. It includes the Cuvette Centrale

peatlands, the largest tropical peatland complex covering about 145,500 km², which store around 30 billion tons of carbon (110 billion tons of CO₂).

It is one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on Earth, with over 10,000 species of vascular plant, 400 mammal, 1000 bird, and 700 fish species and includes the entire range of the bonobo and the two species of gorillas, and is home to three of the four subspecies of chimpanzee. Among these species, some are endemic to the Congo Basin and have very limited ranges, making them critically important for conservation. It is the only region where an intact megafauna survives, perhaps because of the long history of humans living in the forests, estimated to be at least 650,000 years.

The Congo Basin is a rich socio-ecological system where more than 600 languages are spoken. The languages encode complex taxonomies for plants, animals, and landscapes reflecting a deep place-based understanding of the environment. Traditional ecological knowledge extends beyond mere identification of species to include an understanding of ecological relationships, such as the seasonal movements of animals, the medicinal properties of plants, and the spiritual significance of certain forest locations, such as sacred forests, which are widely prevalent throughout the basin. This oral transmission of knowledge ensures that ecological literacy is embedded within cultural practices, with stories and rituals functioning as living manuals of forest stewardship, crucial for maintaining sustainable use of natural resources.

The shift from exclusively hunter-gatherer to early agricultural societies began about 4000 years ago. Human impacts on the forests increased markedly with the arrival of iron smelting and Bantu-speaking communities from the north, and the development of slash and burn agriculture from 2500 years ago. Between 2000 and 1000 years before present, there was a period of rapid human population growth, forest fragmentation, and widespread development of secondary vegetation across the Congo Basin, as human societies became ecological engineers, creating “cultural forests” shaped by their selective management of useful species, such as the native oil palm. There was a marked decline in human population between 1400 and 1200 BP, which lasted to about 800 BP, when populations recovered and expanded again.

European explorers and traders arrived from the fifteenth century onward resulting in increased trade. The Atlantic commerce in ivory, ebony, pepper, rubber precursors, and enslaved persons intensified the exploitation of natural resources. The introduction of firearms altered hunting efficiency, exacerbating pressures, particularly on elephants and other megafauna.

The arrival of European traders and the gradual penetration of trade routes and infrastructure into the Congo Basin resulted in epidemics of diseases to which people had not previously been exposed. Millions perished from diseases such as bubonic plague, smallpox, syphilis, cholera, measles, and chickenpox, compounding the social impacts of the slave trade.

The late nineteenth-century “Scramble for Africa” radically reshaped the Congo Basin. Colonial administrations, especially in the Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa, imposed concessionary systems that turned vast tracts of forest into rubber, timber, and mining concessions. Villages were forcibly relocated to serve as

forced labor for extraction sites, transport corridors, and plantations. Country borders were decided arbitrarily without taking sociological realities into account. In some cases, these borders separated populations belonging to the same tribe into different countries (e.g., Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea). Forced labor was used to exploit mineral and timber resources, which were shipped to Europe for processing.

The colonial economic model was to extract natural resources which were exported to Europe, where they fed the industrial revolution and the growth of wealth, a model that continues to this day. As African development came to be seen as a threat to species and ecosystems, the colonial authorities imposed a model of “fortress” conservation, creating protected areas by banishing human populations by force.

The period between 1960 and 1992 saw the progressive independence of the Congo Basin nations and rapid urbanization. Logging and mining remained the principal economic activities but were largely replaced in the Western Congo Basin countries by oil.

The early 1990s saw significant social-ecological transformations, including the beginning of the political transition to multi-party democracy. A political vision championing the principles of sustainable development gradually emerged on the road to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, where leaders from Congo Basin states played a key role in shaping global commitments to sustainable development, bringing both the legacy of colonial and post-colonial extraction and the enduring traditions of stewardship and ecological knowledge that had characterized the region for millennia to the table.

Forestry, historically one of the region’s most destructive extractive industries, underwent significant transformations. In the 1990s and early 2000s, governments began to introduce forestry laws that required companies to operate under long-term sustainable management plans. Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) were gradually institutionalized, embedding safeguards into planning processes. Voluntary forestry and timber certification schemes emerged as tools for both governance and market access. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) became the gold standard, and countries such as Cameroon, Congo, and Gabon emerged as leaders in Africa in certifying concessions under FSC standards.

While challenges remain in ensuring compliance and addressing illegal logging, these initiatives place Central Africa at the forefront of tropical forest management and certification worldwide. More recently, there has been a move to increase local transformation and even to ban the export of unprocessed timber from the region, to maximize local economic growth and job creation. These reforms mark a profound shift from the colonial-era extract-and-export model toward one that aspires to reconcile economic use with ecological sustainability, while maximizing local economic returns and job creation.

Even as forestry has moved toward sustainability, other resource sectors have remained firmly extractive. Mining remains a significant contributor to deforestation, pollution, biodiversity loss, and social disruption. While environmental regulations and Environmental and Social Impact Assessments are now formally required, enforcement is uneven, and artisanal mining continues to devastate river systems

and forests. Industrial agriculture—particularly oil palm and rubber—has also expanded since the 1990s, often encroaching on forest frontiers and undermining biodiversity commitments. Smallholder agriculture is technologically unsupported by states, allowing widespread landscape degradation through outdated slash and burn practices to continue and intensify.

Overall, these trends illustrate the contradictions of post-Rio development: formal sustainability frameworks exist and perform well when used, but business-as-usual extractive logics also endure. Sustainable land-use planning tools are in place on paper, but weak governance, overlapping land rights, poor agricultural practices, and international demand for minerals and commodities perpetuate ecological degradation. Strengthening governance and cross-sectoral institutions is vital for ensuring resource security and aligning extractive sectors with sustainable development pathways.

Hunting and fishing remain vital for livelihoods and nutrition, but the scale and intensity of exploitation have grown since the 1990s. The wild meat trade now supplies both urban and rural markets, with an estimated 1.6–11.8 million tons consumed annually. Inland fisheries continue to provide a crucial source of protein, particularly in the DRC, but overfishing and habitat degradation have reduced catches. Customary management systems such as taboos and seasonal bans, once widespread, have eroded under the pressures of market demand and weak governance. The “empty forest syndrome,” where forests remain structurally intact but devoid of large fauna, has become emblematic of these pressures, although protected areas often still preserve viable populations, preventing extinction and species becoming lost to nations forever.

Community-based management is emerging as a modern African conservation model, but success is uneven, often due to the level of degradation of wildlife communities, and to the inadequacy of alternative rural food systems. There is a growing evidence base for community management models that do deliver sustainable harvest and these could be scaled up across rural areas, but if underlying food systems are not improved, stemming biodiversity loss will remain challenging.

The key to peace and security, sustainable development and prosperity in the region are strengthened democracies, improved governance, including governance of natural resources, elimination of illegal exploitation of natural resources and better rule of law, as well as an efficient, objective, independent justice system able to fight corruption. These vital foundations for society are crucial to tackle challenges to attract the long-term investment needed to implement local processing of natural resources and to attract finance to invest in logistical infrastructure needed to optimize supply chains and ensure profitability in the private sector.

To attract the responsible investors and affordable finance needed to drive sustained economic growth, continued and accelerated improvements in democratic process, governance, rule of law, justice, and equity are needed in the Congo Basin nations. Political stability and elimination of illegality in the natural resource extraction industries are crucial to encourage international confidence and investment. Furthermore, integration and strengthening of local community involvement and rights in integrated spatial plans are also needed. International agreements such as

the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can help to chart a path but need to be adapted to local circumstances through regional leadership.

There is a need to foster affordable, dependable finance and equitable investment in sustainable development for the Congo Basin nations, to provide dignified, sustainable livelihoods for their people, while continuing to supply the global ecological services that benefit all of humanity.

Preservation and enhancement of nature-based solutions provides a critical foundation to boost sustainable development and climate resilience of nations and economies. The Congo Basin countries are leading the world through the development of economies that depend on sustaining ecosystem services, banishing the model of using Africa simply as a source of cheap raw materials that provision nations far from the continent, as was the case during colonial rule.

Africa is the continent that is most susceptible to climate change because of the vulnerability of its more arid ecosystems and lack of technological and financial capacity to adapt. The ecological stewardship and environmental resilience of the Congo Basin is critical for the region and for many other parts of Africa, whose weather patterns are impacted by moisture from the "heart and lungs of the continent," the Congo Basin rainforests. Nature preservation and nature-based solutions need to be integrated into ecosystem management, urban environments, and national planning, to ensure maximal climatic resilience for ecosystems, agriculture, and people in the coming century. This is by far the most efficient and effective way of reducing the costs of adaptation, while contributing to global climate change mitigation.

Looking to the future, harnessing all possible technological advances to optimize the preservation, management of natural resources, and monitoring of local and regional changes is critical for the future of the Congo Basin. It is hard to manage something that is not well understood, and many knowledge gaps remain. There is a need to promote the formal training and capacity building for scientists, sociologists, and natural resource managers to establish effective management systems that maximize ecological resilience and benefits for the region's economies and people and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. The Science Panel for the Amazon and its precursor, the Large-Scale Biosphere-Atmosphere Experiment Programme, provide powerful models that can be adapted to the Congo Basin.

The Congo Basin stands at a decisive crossroads. It is the world's second-largest tropical forest system, a vast carbon sink, and home to unparalleled biodiversity, but it is also a region of rapid population growth, particularly in Cameroon and DRC, persistent poverty, weak governance, and competing demands for development. Strengthened governance, equity, and justice; reliable finance and sustainable economies; technology and capacity; and ecological stewardship and stability are the four key foundations for the future emergence of the region. They will decide if the region's young population could become a competitive advantage.

In conclusion, the Congo Basin is a critical component of our planetary biosphere: a treasure house of biological and cultural diversity that provides key environmental services at local, regional, and global scales. After centuries of

extraction and degradation, there is real potential for a different future: one of genuine sustainable, locally led development for the welfare and benefit of its peoples and communities, where resources are sustainably managed and preserved and contribute to both African and planetary resilience in the face of inevitable impacts of climate change. Many challenges remain, including both needs and opportunities to reinforce good governance, strong institutions, and political accountability. Science, scientific institutions, and scientists themselves have important roles to play to monitor, generate evidence, and inform decision-making by those responsible for solving of collective problems and development of transformative solutions. Africa is facing a unique set of circumstances and opportunities to ensure a vibrant future. Many of these depend on the resilience of the Congo Basin's ecosystems.