

# Progress, Contradictions and Dilemmas

**HENRI DJOMBO** describes an important initiative to conserve biodiversity and calls for better partnership to realise it

The importance of biodiversity for our planet is undisputed, as demonstrated by the sheer number of international treaties on it. Between 1958 and 1992 (the dates of the signatures of the Geneva Convention on the High Seas and the Biodiversity Convention) there have been no fewer than 13 conventions or international accords on this all-important subject. Natural resources are the trump card to be played by countries that have so far been able to protect their biodiversity in ecologically and economically difficult circumstances (including deforestation, poaching, the heavy burden of debt, and climate fluctuations) so as to put into place the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Conserving biodiversity is an essential factor in fighting poverty and managing the environment sustainably.

## Unique experience

The Congo Basin Forest Project, for example, is a unique experience that has been welcomed and embraced by the international community – a success story in conserving biodiversity.

The Congo Basin forests cover an immense area – 228 million hectares, incorporating more than 11 countries. Comprising 18 % of the world's tropical forest, it is the second largest such forest in the world, after the Amazon, and thus one of the planet's vital "green lungs". Preserving



Fiona Teede/UNEP/Still Pictures

the "common human heritage" concerns us all. The United Nations General Assembly resolution 54/214 on the conservation and sustainable development of Central African forest ecosystems reflects the global consensus on the need to protect them.

These forests play a vital role for the entire planet in regulating climate and protecting biodiversity. They boast an exceptional range of biodiversity: more than 11,000 plant species, 409 species of mammals, 1,086 bird species, 152 species of snakes and 1,069 of fish.

## Preserving biodiversity

The Central African Heads of States are aware of how high the stakes are and of their responsibility towards humanity. In a spirit of solidarity and of safeguarding common interests – and in view of protecting the future of coming generations – they solemnly declared at Yaoundé in 1999 and again in 2005 at Brazzaville their "adherence to the principle of preserving biodiversity and of sustainable development of forest ecosystems". Their ambitious Convergence Plan combines the demands of sustainable development and the management of natural resources. Adopted in February ►



Stuart G.R. Warner/UNEP/Still Pictures



Steve Poe/UNEP/Still Pictures

2005, it is a long-term subregional strategic plan to ensure the conservation and sustainable development of forest ecosystems in Central Africa.

Its principal objective is “to manage the forest resources of the subregion in a sustainable and concentrated way and to establish protected areas that are representative of biological diversity and different ecosystems, for the good of the people and the balance of the planet.” It amounts to a common vision of Central African states for realising the Millennium Development Goals and better preserving biodiversity.

**Convergence Plan**

This important initiative was conceived along several strategic vectors which slot perfectly into the Goals, specifically the fight against poverty and hunger. It also reflects the eighth Goal – to develop a global partnership for development – in that 11 countries of the Central African region have joined together to form the Congo Basin Forest Partnership. This was launched in Johannesburg at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development to promote the sustainable development of the Central African forest ecosystems.

Several recent reports, such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

**Its principal objective is “to manage the forest resources of the subregion in a sustainable and concentrated way and to establish protected areas that are representative of biological diversity and different ecosystems, for the good of the people and the balance of the planet”**

published in April 2005, are very clear on the state of global biodiversity and also put forth the very plausible theory that the MDGs in this area – and on environmental protection more generally – are unlikely to be met. The Assessment unambiguously states that we must brace ourselves for a major deterioration in biodiversity, and it underlines the economic implications of this, especially for the fight against poverty. It is clear that if we do not succeed in reversing current trends, our efforts to halve poverty by the year 2015 will be in vain. It is thus imperative that a functional partnership be established.

Despite certain encouraging efforts by the North in this direction – such as the recent British initiative in the framework of the G8 – the general tone is dominated by a lack of solidarity and a blatant disregard for previously made

commitments. Goal 8 should be the driving force behind all the other MDGs. Northern countries must face up to their obligations, to enable us all to reach our aim of achieving sustainable development together.

The future of this common human heritage of the forests of the Congo Basin is being decided right now. Why is it, then, that the countries of Central Africa have undertaken to provide 40% of the 2 billion US dollars needed to put in place the Convergence Plan, while Northern countries display extreme reluctance in coming up with the remaining 60% to save this world heritage.

**Illegal logging**

How do 2 billion US dollars over 10 years compare to the 300 billion US dollars annually doled out by OECD countries in agricultural subsidies? This modest 2 billion dollar sum, desparately needed to save the planet’s biodiversity, is equal to the cost of purchasing eight F16 fighter jets. We consider the financing of the Convergence Plan not just a moral obligation, but the responsibility of the Northern countries, for is it not they who are the greatest polluters, the predators and destroyers of the tropical forest? Where does the capital that is used to exploit the forests of the South come from? Or the companies? Which are the countries who refuse to put into place a system of eco-certification of tropical woods, to counteract illegal logging and the pillaging of tropical forests? Who organises the poaching, and who purchases and uses the products of this illegal activity, such as elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns? Are they not extremely valuable and sought after in the West and in Asia?

Who conducts biological experiments and exploits local populations, while at the same time using their local knowledge for free? Do the results of this research benefit the South – or improve the knowledge base of laboratories in the North? It is the biodiversity of our forests that makes these experiments possible – yet we do not benefit from them at all. Only the Northern laboratories benefit, ▶

**In an attempt to protect our biodiversity, we have created national parks and protected areas**

not just in terms of knowledge, but financially.

In an attempt to protect our biodiversity, we have created national parks and protected areas. But, as it turns out – in line with structural adjustments imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions – most of our states stopped recruiting as long as 15 years ago. How, then, are we meant to protect our national parks, those sanctuaries and immense reserves of biodiversity, against the commercial aggression of the wealthy?

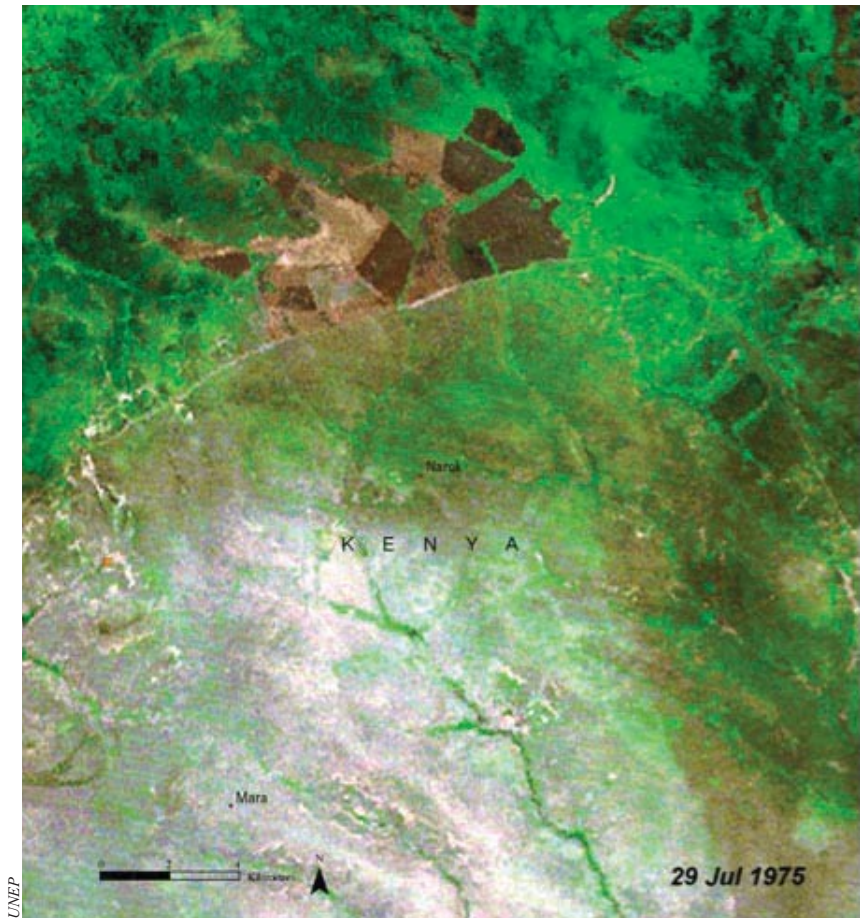
It is even more ironic when these “predators” – through their NGOs and other government structures – try to teach us how to protect our biodiversity and our ecosystems. What we expect from them is more solidarity, and an adherence to their commitments. Some of our partners, such as Italy, have shown the way by cancelling the debts of the countries in the region, against the financing of the Convergence Plan.

**Financial transparency**

We look forward to the establishment of innovative financing mechanisms for environmental projects to replace traditional forms of aid – which seem to be aimed primarily at employing Northern experts and financing projects chosen by the North, without first consulting with the local authorities. Furthermore, the system is characterised by a staggering lack of financial transparency, which facilitates corruption.

Taking into account these injustices, and this hesitation, it is clear that we desperately need a real partnership. This is what it will take to put into practice the dream that world leaders had, one day in September 2000 at the Millennium Summit ■

*Henri Djombo is Minister of Forestry Economy and Environment of the Republic of Congo*



**These images, taken from *One Planet, Many People: Atlas of Our Changing Environment* (UNEP, 2005), show the dramatic changes that have occurred over the past three decades in forest regions all over Africa.**