

Cameroon's Vision

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Photo: James Whitlow Delano

In true African fashion, Cameroon is a land of contrasts and complexities. Home to over 1,700 linguistic groups, and a geography of deserts, beaches, forests, savannas, lush tropical rainforests, not to mention political and social stability, and a complex colonial history where Portuguese, Arab Muslims, Germans, French and British, with input from the League of Nations, all squabbled over the place until independence in 1960.

There was much to squabble over: Cameroon is a land rich in natural resources. Around two-thirds of the population are involved in agriculture, with the rich, fertile soil and climate lending themselves perfectly to commercial production of bananas, rubber, and tea, with oil and cocoa beans leading the way in export trade. The diverse population of over 20 million tends to congregate in their own groups in specific pockets of the country: Sudanese groups and Fulani take up the northern lowlands and central highlands; Lake Chad is home to Shuwa Arabs; Bantu-speaking

tribes inhabit the coastal and equatorial regions; and settled in the south eastern and coastal rainforests live the Baka Pygmies.

There are many groups of pygmies in the world, not all of whom are African. The term, now considered by some to be perjorative, was used by anthropologists to define any human shorter than 1.55 meters, or 5'1", and refers solely to their appearance – not in itself problematic since we refer to people in that way everywhere - but there is no other acceptable term barring calling each group by their ethnicity. In Cameroon, the pygmies are mostly from the Baka group who inhabit parts of Cameroon, northern Gabon and northern areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and while they are traditionally semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, their culture is slowly becoming more sedentary.

In Baka society, there is no leader, no hierarchy, and this creates some issues when dealing with modern-day politics – especially the politics that comes with Camer-

oon's dedication to becoming a technology-hub and developing nation.

"Vision2035" – the government's extensive plan to transform Cameroon into an emerging nation by 2035 – counts among its goals the eradication of poverty, reducing it to less than 10%; increasing people's average income to middle class status; and becoming a newly industrialized country by increasing manufacturing production. Partnerships between public and private sectors, as well as foreign investment is key to the plan's success. In recognizing that the infrastructure of the country does not have the financial base to do the required work and therefore needs to attract foreign investment to assist, the greatest weakness of Vision2035 is the lack of actual environmental protection measures, despite mention of climate change and the importance of the environment within the plan itself.

THE FORESTS

The degradation of the forests of Cameroon has various causes: population growth especially in the urban areas, and the attractiveness of export crops like oil, coffee, timber, and palm oil, make turning forests into agricultural land highly attractive. With limited conservation efforts by the Cameroonian government, thousands of hectares of some of the oldest woodland in the world is now threatened.

As always happens throughout history, and particularly in Africa's history, where there is lax regulation and untold fortune to be made, a new colonial force will appear – this time, it's China.

China has become Cameroon's major trading partner, with a massive far-ranging investment across private and public sectors. While the influx of foreign capital

may initially appear very attractive to a country on the path to development, there is also growing concern that Cameroon is sinking deeper into debt, and government is not keeping pace in instituting protective regulations. No colonial power that has a history of ravaging the wealth of the African continent, encourages regulation of its behavior, and China is no different. With its massive spending power, and insatiable hunger by a growing and developing Chinese population, China appears to have seduced Cameroon into turning a blind eye towards illegal, or barely legal but certainly unethical, practices. Africa appears to view China favorably because of its own terrible experience with European colonialism, and China is seen as something of the antithesis to Europe.

Exports of timber from Cameroon to China increased from around 29% to 65% in the span of 6 years beginning in 2003, and about 85% of that is unregulated. There is a partial log-size ban on some species of wood, but this is frequently ignored by Cameroonian concessionaires and family and friends of the country's elite. This has resulted in estimates that Cameroon's unique forests will only sustain around another 5 or so more years. If both countries were to take a long term view, stricter regulations and enforcement would be to the benefit of both.

KRIBI

75% of Cameroon's projects planned as part of their vision for development include massive construction projects in the south and east, as well as expanding the mining sector. And those plans are all concentrated in the nearly 5 million hectares of tropical forest - home to the Baka pygmies.

The coastal town of Kribi lies on the Port of Guinea, and is an important part of the Vision2035 plan, with a deep sea port that will provide access to the mining pipeline, as well as attracting shipping from other West African nations. As necessary as the increased trade might be, the port will also destroy some 27,000 hectares of forestland. The Cameroon government has been replanting to restore devastated areas in a stark realization of the impact of deforestation on climate change, but these efforts come up against the allure of development and a chance for Cameroon to grow its economy.

Already, the deep sea port has forced the relocation of 5,000 people, including Baka, from their homes. This displacement has come with small compensation, but it also forces people from a lifestyle and traditional means of survival. Now that the government controls or owns most of the forestland, farmers and pygmies are faced with moving to a town to try and find work, or to try and remain in their homes and be faced with extreme poverty and hunger.

PALM OIL

Beyond the timber exports and mining, there is a new demand on Cameroon's fertile land: palm oil. Derived primarily from the African palm tree (and to a far lesser extent the American oil palm and South America's Maripa palm), this popular oil contains very low cholesterol and is most frequently used globally as a commercial cooking oil, biofuels, soaps (including "Palmolive" and "Sunlight" brands), and even noodles. The global demand by manufacturers like General Mills, Johnson & Johnson, Kraft Foods, Walmart, among many others, has resulted in farmers and

governments replacing traditional forestland with palm oil plantations, and the impact on the environment has rapidly drawn negative attention.

Cameroon was one of many who rushed to develop trade for palm oil, becoming the third-largest palm oil producer and as of 2015, planned to increase production by another 26%, planting an additional 30,000 hectares of land over the next three years.

With Indonesia and Malaysia dealing with land scarcity, as well as their refocused attention on the impact of climate change, concessionaires and investors are looking to Cameroon. These plans may have increased palm oil production, but they have largely been greeted with anger by the residents.

MOVING HOME

Promises of development – better education, housing, jobs – have not materialized, and the taking of traditional land for commercial purposes is a growing source of discontent. The use of land for the palm oil industry is also forcing people to move into the higher mountain regions, which then threatens the great apes. While the mountain parks are protected land, at their fringes are some of the most densely populated rural populations. Recent research has shown a marked increase in respiratory diseases among gorillas in the region, and in 2009, gorilla deaths were directly linked to secondary bacterial pneumonia infections from a human virus. Massive efforts by Gorilla Doctors means a change in general conservation policy – where normally, nature is allowed to take its course and human intervention is discouraged. Now, when a "human-induced" health issue be-

comes life threatening, the veterinary team immediately intervenes.

In recent years, over USD500 million has been spent by various governments and international organizations in an effort to protect this swathe of rainforest, but set against the aims of Vision2035, it appears to have largely been a failed effort.

Conservation efforts did not provide work for the people, and a heavy-handed approach to hunting or preventing people from going into the forest to get timber or medicine has resulted in greater suffering by the pygmy people whose lives overlap and intertwine with the forest. As seen in other regions with indigenous populations whose lifestyle is dependent on coexisting with the land, they are not the drivers of poaching or deforestation. A blanket, one-size-fits-all approach by governments and environmental groups fails the very communities they purport to protect.

In this issue's photo essay by renowned photojournalist, James Whitlow Delano, we take a closer look at the impact of development on the Cameroonian people and the environment.

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