

Tropical forestry in the Congo Basin - Forum in Cologne documents successes and highlights challenges

On 22 May 2025, around 60 international experts from science, business, politics and civil society gathered at the Cologne Zoo to discuss the future of tropical forests in the Congo Basin as part of the "Tropical Forestry Forum on the Congo Basin". The event was organised by FSC Germany, WWF Germany and ATIBT in cooperation with Utrecht University. The focus was on how sustainable forestry, in particular according to the FSC standard, can contribute to the preservation of biodiversity, climate protection and the improvement of the living conditions of the local population - and what hurdles need to be overcome.

The importance of the Congo Basin

At around 200 million hectares, the Congo Basin is the second largest contiguous rainforest area in the world and stores around 60 billion tonnes of CO₂. It is home to around a fifth of the world's biodiversity and is the basis of life for millions of people. However, the region is under massive pressure: biodiversity loss, resource depletion, economic pressure on local communities and the consequences of climate change are jeopardising both nature and people.

Scientific findings: FSC certification works

A key topic of the conference was the latest research findings on the impact of FSC-certified forestry. The presentation by Dr Joeri Zwerts (Utrecht University) stood out in particular. He vividly presented a large-scale study on the diversity of larger wildlife in the forest, which was carried out in the region. The results are clear: FSC-certified forests are home to 2.7 times more large mammals such as gorillas and forest elephants and 2.5 times more medium-sized species such as leopards and chimpanzees than non-certified forests. The Utrecht research team also refers to scientifically proven correlations between the presence of large mammals in a forest and the ability of these forest areas to absorb more CO₂ than other forest areas. The researchers linked the results to specific requirements from the FSC standards applicable in the Congo Basin. In particular, the closure of forest roads after harvesting, access control through checkpoints in forest areas and the involvement of the local population in forestry operations and further processing, coupled with independent controls, contribute to the reduction of poaching and illegal deforestation.

"Our data shows that FSC-certified forestry not only protects the habitat for large and endangered mammals, but also strengthens the functioning of the entire ecosystem and opens up sustainable prospects for local people," emphasised Dr Zwerts in his presentation.

Social and economic aspects

The speakers emphasised that sustainable forestry in the Congo Basin is not only ecologically but also socially indispensable. It creates jobs, ensures fair participation of the local population and contributes to poverty reduction. For instance, innovative business models, investments and programmes such as "WWF Forest Forward" or FSC Verified Impact were presented offer sustainable economic models and are intended to open up alternative or additional sources of income for local people.

Countries in the Congo Basin emphasise the value of responsible forest management

An important item on the conference programme was the presentation by Chouaibou Nchoutpouen, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC). In his presentation, he emphasised the central role of COMIFAC as a coordinating institution for forest and environmental policy in Central Africa and as a recognised technical cooperation centre for the global biodiversity agreement.

Nchoutpouen emphasised that the forests of the Congo Basin, which cover 301 million hectares, are considered the "green lungs of the earth", absorb around 720 million tonnes of CO₂ every year and store enormous carbon stocks. Despite progress - around 36 million hectares are managed more sustainably, of which 6.5 million hectares of forest are FSC-certified - the countries in the region face major challenges: too little international funding, complex access to extraction, growing threats from poaching, illegal use and political instability. Mining and the expansion of settlements and agriculture are threatening the region's previously intact primary forests.

He emphasised that sustainable forestry is crucial for the preservation of forests, biodiversity and people's livelihoods. At the same time, he called for fairer international recognition and financial compensation for the region's ecological services. Only in this way could the Congo Basin be protected as a global common good in the long term.

"Innovative financing approaches with a focus on mixed financing are needed to promote sustainable local value chains," adds Dr Julia Barske, WWF Germany, "this is the only way to protect the forests together with and through the local population in the long term."

Challenges: Falling demand in Germany

Despite the demonstrable benefits of FSC certification, a pressing problem also became clear at the forum: the demand for FSC-certified tropical timber in Germany and Europe is low and is even continuing to fall. The reasons for this include reservations about tropical timber, uncertainties in the market and a lack of awareness of the positive effects of sustainable forestry.

Products such as cocoa and coffee show that complex supply chains and environmental challenges do not have to be an obstacle. Recognised certifications and political support are increasingly being used for these raw materials. Tropical timber from sustainable cultivation deserves the same proactive approach - instead of being blatantly rejected.

Closing statement: Agreement on sustainable timber management in the Congo Basin

Strong national forestry laws in the Congo Basin promote sustainable forest management throughout the country. The implementation of these approaches must be strengthened through close cooperation with the respective government. Efforts should be made to harmonise the various

regulations in the region in order to efficiently implement and verify compliance, particularly through uniform tracking systems.

The event was moderated with great expertise by Kim Carstensen, former Director General of FSC International and former Managing Director of WWF Denmark. Carstensen was able to bring together the different perspectives, structure the discussions and repeatedly emphasise the common goals: "Preserving the forests of the Congo Basin is a global task in which FSC-certified forestry plays a key role," said Carstensen.

At the end of the conference, the organisers agreed on a joint statement that summarised the most important findings:

"There is no alternative to sustainable forestry in the Congo Basin when it comes to preserving forests, protecting biodiversity, sequestering CO₂ and securing the livelihoods of the local population. Politics, business and civil society are called upon to strengthen sustainable forestry and supply chains in the Congo Basin. Sustainable use and protection must be understood as a continuum that, in combination, creates long-term benefits for the local population, biodiversity and the global climate - and thus ultimately benefits us all. "

Conclusion

The Tropical Forestry Forum in Cologne has impressively demonstrated this: Sustainable forestry in the Congo Basin is an effective tool for protecting nature and the climate, with certifications such as FSC playing an important role in ensuring this sustainability - and especially for the local people. One of the biggest challenges remains to make these successes visible in the markets and to increase demand for sustainable tropical timber where the wood can play to its strengths in terms of its utilisation properties. There was a clear consensus among the international experts: without more efforts and long-term solutions that integrate different approaches such as FSC-certified forestry and conservation concepts on an equal footing, it will not be possible to preserve the tropical forest in the Congo Basin and its unique ecosystems.