

CONGO BASIN

Information
S E R I E S

Conservation In a Region of Civil Instability

The Need to Be Present and Assist

Key Concepts

More than a third of countries in sub-Saharan Africa have been affected by armed conflict since 1990.

It is predicted that competition over dwindling natural resources will increase in the future, resulting in even greater social and political strife.

The negative impacts of armed conflict on the environment are a result of many factors such as human population displacement, lack of law enforcement, decline in tenure security that increases incentives for populations to mine natural resources, and increased dependence of people on wild resources when other livelihoods, such as agriculture, become impossible.

Ways to mitigate these impacts include preparedness planning, making information on biodiversity readily available to relief agencies, trying to maintain a presence in protected areas throughout the conflict, collaborating with other sectors, and being prepared to start activities again as soon as possible.

Political, Civil and Military Conflicts and Their Environmental Impacts Are Increasing in Africa

During the 20th Century the number of wars increased, particularly in Africa. Conservation organizations have been grappling with the direct environmental problems caused by wars and the secondary impacts of the resulting civil and economic instability. Many of these wars are fueled by the hegemonic desire of political elites or military strongmen to control natural resources, particularly mineral resources such as gold and diamonds. It is predicted that competition over dwindling natural resources will increase in the future, resulting in even greater strife. During the last ten years in the Congo Basin, the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of Congo, as well as the neighboring countries of Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Angola have all suffered from civil and military conflicts. If conservation organizations are going to be effective in minimizing the environmental consequences of conflicts they need to learn what actions they can take and when. ■

How Do Wars Cause Environmental Damage?

The civil wars in the Congo Basin are not generally fought by two major armies facing each other across a front line, as has often occurred throughout history in other parts of the world. Wars today are primarily fought by transient groups of combatants, who often gain temporary control over towns and villages, but almost never are able to subdue the surrounding areas. Repeated fights for and changes in, who controls what has devastating impacts on human lives, and causes (1) a breakdown in the rule of law and other controls during and immediately after conflicts; (2) a decline in agricultural production and trade, (3) increased dependence on wild resources (such as bushmeat) for survival when other livelihoods are made impossible, (4) decreased incentives for people to conserve natural resources that once, but no longer, generate revenue from tourism, (5) increased abundance of firearms, (6) mass movements of people, (7) lack of funding, (8) the need for governments to raise funds for fighting, or after the war to kick-start the economy and to pay off debts.

Parks and reserves can suffer even more significant environmental impacts than non-protected areas, because they are often located in remote, frontier areas and can provide refuge for rebels or a convenient location from which to stage cross-border attacks. They also often contain more wildlife than other areas and can, thus, provide a ready supply of meat for rebels or small armies. Moreover, when it becomes too dangerous for protected area staff to continue patrols the frequency of illegal mining of gold and diamonds, hunting for ivory and bushmeat, felling of timber, and agricultural encroachment often increases. It is therefore important for conservation projects working in protected areas to be prepared for conflict and have strategies for immediate action if war breaks out. ■

Related Issue Briefs

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What Can You Do to Take Action on the Issue

Although it may seem that environment concerns should be a low priority during war, the fact that a large percent of human livelihoods in Africa are directly dependent on natural resources, makes it essential that the environment is considered. Rehabilitation after the damage has been done is often a great deal more expensive than the costs of preventive measures put into place before conflict. Although it may seem impossible to do anything during war, experience from the region shows that there are tangible actions that can help avoid or reduce the environmental impacts of war on protected areas.

Develop formal contingency plans in preparation for conflict

When over one-third of the countries in Africa have experienced conflict during the last decade, it is essential that all conservation projects be prepared for war. Organizations should clarify who will have what responsibilities and discuss plans for evacuation, strategies for continuing the flow of funds, and guidelines for what to do with equipment. They should also develop protocols for when to pull out and under what circumstances they are prepared to stay.

Try to maintain a presence throughout the conflict

Areas where NGOs and governments are able to continue to operate and maintain some sort of presence throughout a conflict are less adversely affected than areas where projects pull out. Having people on the ground means that there are people present to negotiate with rebel groups, local government, international relief agencies and local people. They can help, for example, in decisions about where to settle refugees. The presence of a conservation project also demonstrates that the conservation of that area is valuable from both a national and international point of view.

Make information on biodiversity available to as many government and non government agencies working in the country as possible

By providing information on biodiversity hotspots, boundaries of protected areas, endangered species, and ecologically sensitive areas, and the names and contacts of biological experts that can be called upon for emergency environmental assessments, relief and development organizations working in the country may be better equipped to include environmental concerns in their decisions. ■

Make Every Attempt Possible to Continue Funding

In Central Africa most conservation activities are supported by external funding. During conflicts donors tend to reduce or cease their financial support, either because of political constraints, or risk aversion. Yet to maintain a presence, a reasonably regular flow of funds for salaries and basic supplies is clearly important. Experience from conflict zones has shown that even when receiving no immediate financial reimbursement, the belief that support will continue sometime in the future is one of the most important reasons that project staff continue to work during times of instability and conflict. Donors should look for ways to keep funds flowing, maybe by channeling funds to sites through NGOs when it is politically difficult to give support directly to governments. NGOs should look for flexible funding sources whose funds can be used in these circumstances. ■

Promote the Training of Junior Staff

Senior project staff and protected area managers are often targets of armies and rebel group's aggression, as they are often perceived as having access to money or material goods such as the keys to vehicles. Many senior staff have been forced to flee or have been killed in the Congo Basin for this reason. It is often the junior staff (rangers, field assistants, accountants etc.) who are left to continue project activities. Traditionally support for leadership training has tended to focus on senior staff alone, but it is now apparent that junior staff should also be receiving some of this training so that they are able to competently continue activities in the absence of the senior staff. ■



► The negative impacts of armed conflict on the environment are a result of many factors such as human population displacement.

Maintain Good Communications

Maintaining regular communication is vital in a war situation, as any military commander knows. This is also true for people working in conservation. Protected areas are often isolated and remote so that communication is difficult at the best of times. Staff on site should have the means to contact local administrative and military authorities, as well as other NGOs working in the region, in order to keep up to date on the current security situation. Similarly they need to be able to communicate with sponsors to let them know that activities are continuing. Radios or satellite phone systems that can easily be transported and, if necessary, hidden are ideal in such situations. ■

Attempt to Maintain a Neutral Position

Whenver possible, it is important that conservation organizations maintain a position of neutrality. If the local community perceives that the protected area authority favors the wrong side, this can lead to great risk to staff security. Of course, appearing to remain neutral can be extremely difficult at times, as conservationists must communicate with whichever authority is in power in their region. Making decisions openly and with consultation with local community leaders is critical to maintaining their neutral status. ■

Ensure Staff Safety

Most important, conservation organizations have a responsibility to ensure the safety of their staff and families. In certain situations it may be necessary to withdraw staff for reasons of security. Rather than seeing this as a setback, staff can be provided further training during this time, even outside of the country. ■

Make an Effort to Work with Other Sectors

Greater collaboration between conservation organizations and other groups, such as relief, development and planning agencies, human rights organizations, and even the military is important. Relief organizations, for example, have much more experience in working during periods of insecurity than conservation organizations. Conservation organizations therefore have a great deal to learn, for example, in putting together contingency plans, and identifying ways to obtain regular updates on the security situation during a conflict. By working more collaboratively, it is also possible for conservation organizations to help other sectors to use better practices and so reduce their impacts on the environment. For instance, the siting of refugee camps near Goma at the edge of the Virunga National Park led to the deforestation of 113 km² of the park, and might have been avoided if the relief and conservation sectors had worked more collaboratively. That said, it must be recognized that different sectors have very different mandates. The mandate of most relief organizations is to save people's lives. Conservation organizations therefore must learn to speak the language of the relief sector and make an effort link their environmental concerns to human welfare. ■

Post-Conflict, Be Prepared to Start Work Again As Soon As Possible

Often the greatest environmental destruction occurs post-conflict when governments are eager for cash, and before new policies regulating the use of the environment are formulated and enforced. Conservation organizations should be ready to jump in as soon as possible to help with policy reform, and capacity building of new government decision makers and other staff who may have little technical training or experience. ■

► More than one third of countries in sub-Saharan Africa have been affected by armed conflict since 1990.



For More Information

Technical Reports:

Fimbel, C. and R. Fimbel. 1997. Conservation and civil strife: Two perspectives from Central Africa. Rwanda: The role of local participation. *Conservation Biology* 11:309-310.

Hart, T. and J. Hart. 1997. Conservation and civil strife: Two perspectives from Central Africa. Zaire: New models for an emerging state. *Conservation Biology* 11:308-309.

Plumptre, A. J. 2000. *Lessons learned from on-the-ground conservation in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo*. Presentation at the Conference on War and Tropical Forests: New Perspectives on Conservation in Areas of Armed Conflict. Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. (March 30 - April 1).

CARPE ... What Is It?

Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE)

Launched in 1995, the *Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE)* engages African NGOs, research and educational organizations, private-sector consultants, and government agencies in evaluating threats to forest integrity in the Congo Basin and in identifying opportunities to sustainably manage the region's vast forests for the benefit of Africans and the world. CARPE's members are helping to provide African decision makers with the information they will need to make well-informed choices about forest use in the future. BSP has assumed the role of "air traffic controller" for CARPE's African partners. Participating countries include Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and São Tomé e Príncipe.

Web site:

<http://carpe.umd.edu>

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