



Teacher information 2: Background on Congo Basin rainforest

Where is the forest?

Second in size only to the Amazon, the Congo Basin rainforest covers more than 180 million hectares, spreading across the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), most of the Republic of Congo, the southeast of Cameroon, southern Central African Republic (CAR), Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. This vast area is a vital regulator of regional climate, a carbon store of global significance and a massive reserve of biodiversity hosting over 10,000 species of plant, 1,000 species of bird and 400 species of mammal including three of the world's four species of great ape.

Forest people

The Congo Basin is thought to have been inhabited by man for more than 50,000 years and today is home to more than 40 million rural people. This includes up to 500,000 indigenous forest people, most of whom are still, at least partially, nomadic. The main groups are Mbuti, Aka, Baka and Twa. The forest is a vital resource for these groups, providing food, water, shelter and medicine as well as being central to cultural identity and spiritual beliefs. Their nomadic lifestyle is less damaging to the rainforest environment because it allows the groups to move without over exploiting the local game and forest resources. Many now trade with farmers selling bush meat and honey in exchange for manioc (the local staple) and honey.

Considered the poorest of the poor, many Forest people in Central Africa still do not have a birth certificate or national identity documents, are not represented in government and have little or no access to education, health services and other state services.

Treats to the forest

The Central African countries emerged from European colonial rule in the 1960s but still maintained colonial land laws which give the state overall ownership of the land. Indigenous and local communities have virtually no formal or legally-recognised control of the territories they traditionally occupy, or of the forest resources on which they depend, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

Today much of the region has been handed out to foreign logging and mining companies, most of which are characterised by poor social and environmental practice. Although rates of outright deforestation in the Congo Basin region are lower than in other regions, the processes leading to deforestation, such as the opening up of 'frontier forests' by logging companies are well underway and very extensive; deforestation is very likely to accelerate greatly in the coming years. This leaves local people homeless,



drives animals and plants to extinction and releases around 12-14% of all man-made climate carbon dioxide emissions.

Tropical deforestation is an issue that affects us all. However, as elsewhere in the world, attempts at strict environmental preservation, which now also cover large parts of the Congo Basin region, have often excluded local populations, resulting in their forced eviction from traditional lands.