



Congo Basin Institute facilitates international science on the spot

by Meindert Brouwer

Graduate students and young professionals in biology, ecology, nature conservation and tropical agriculture have a new, exciting opportunity in Central Africa.

On the outskirts of Cameroon's capital Yaoundé, next to the forest, a new center of scientific excellence is on the rise: the Congo Basin Institute. Researchers from Africa and countries around the world can learn there from one another and work together to find ways to protect ecosystems and biodiversity and raise the level of food security in Africa.

The main partners are the renowned Center for Tropical Research of the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the highly reputed International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) with headquarters in Ibadan, Nigeria. Other scientific institutions have joined them. Rashid Hanna, Country Director of IITA and co-Director of CBI is clear: 'Together we can do a lot more than individually.'

It is on the campus of IITA in Yaoundé that the Congo Basin Institute will take shape. The new institute will be a dream come true for founding father, Professor Tom Smith (60) of UCLA. More than 30 years ago, Smith arrived in Cameroon for the first time as a student carrying a backpack. He has done research in rainforests all over the world ever since.

Smith is specialized in an intriguing niche: speciation in ecotones – locations where different ecosystems meet. These ecotones represent highly diverse habitats for living organisms, which may lead to the evolution of new species. Smith has documented speciation in birds in ecotones, and the phenomenon is believed to occur in other organisms in the same areas. Smith teaches in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at UCLA, and directs the Center for Tropical Research. International nature conservation organisations regularly seek his advice.

CRITICAL JUNCTURE Smith is a gentle person, but also very determined. He underlines the necessity of research in Central Africa: 'We are at a critical juncture. There is climate change, which is going to affect Africa more than any place on the planet. And there are more than one billion people living in Africa now. This number is expected to quadruple



Cameroonian student Michel Dongmo examines specimens under a microscope at a laboratory on IITA's campus in Yaoundé.