‘Certification is the future of the industry’

by Meindert Brouwer

In Gabon history may be written. All forest concessions have to be managed in a sustainable way according to today’s best standards: those of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). If this transition succeeds, it will change forestry in the Congo Basin and possibly elsewhere in the world’s tropical forests. Minister Lee White explains.
You have been director of the Gabonese National Park Agency ANPN for many years. In June 2019 you were appointed Minister of Water, Forests, Seas, Environment and Climate Strategy of the Republic of Gabon. What made you decide to accept the offer to become minister in these fields?

‘In many ways my decade running the National Parks was the perfect preparation to becoming Minister. I have had to deal with local communities, parliamentarians, ministers and Presidents; have dealt with local and international issues; and built ANPN up from very little into an effective park management agency with over 800 staff. The new role I was offered in June 2019 was to apply what I had learned to the Marine, Forestry and Environment Sectors as well as coordinating Gabon’s Climate Change policies, for which my 11 years as Gabon’s Forest and Agriculture negotiator again help me in good stead.

I took the job because it gives me the chance to apply the principles of sound management I developed at ANPN for the entire land sector, with a true political mandate to take the decisions necessary to make the Gabonese Forestry sector truly sustainable, 100% FSC-certified and to try to tackle planetary issues such as climate change and marine acidification and plastic pollution of the oceans.’

How would you describe your mission as a minister?

‘To ensure that there is a healthy equilibrium between exploitation and protection of renewable natural resources in Gabon and that our development is sustainable and climate resilient.’

**DECISION**

In the summer of 2018 President Ali Bongo of Gabon announced that all forest concessions in Gabon would have to be managed according to FSC-standards by the end of 2022. What are the reasons for this decision? Were the forest concessions not managed well before?

‘Some forests were already certified by FSC and other schemes and were well managed. That said, illegal logging began to rise after the log export ban in 2009 and when in 2017 we discovered the scale of illegal logging – as subsequently reported in the “toxic commerce” report of EIA (Environmental Investigation Agency, ed.) – the President decided to impose 100% FSC, to add an external audit to any re-enforced controls put in place by the forestry ministry.’

What are the benefits of FSC-certified forest management for Gabon?

‘The current FSC-concessions can almost be considered as protected areas – timber is harvested following a rigorous sustainable harvesting plan based on detailed field inventories; wildlife is protected; ecological services maintained and there are effective social programmes for surrounding communities. Progress is monitored in 6-monthly audits.’

What kind of social programmes have been put in place?

‘FSC companies have been much better than other companies in investing in community funds which fund schools, clinics, solar power and many other local initiatives. In addition company schools and medical facilities become resources for communities around the concessions.’

What are the benefits of FSC-certified forest management for forest concession holders operating in Gabon?

‘FSC certification opens up some markets that are otherwise closed to our timber products and results in a modest price increase in some markets – but to be honest the benefits are not in proportion to the effort required and this is something we need to work on.’

But for forest concession holders the major incentive of FSC-certified sustainable forest management is

FACTS ABOUT GABON

- Surface area: 267,667 km², 6.5 times the size of Switzerland.
- Population: 2.1 million, of which 800,000 live in the capital of Libreville.
- 80% of Gabon’s territory is covered by forest.
- Gabon holds 23.7 million hectares of forest, which is 10% of Africa’s forest area.
- Deforestation rate below 0.01%.
- 21% of the territory set aside as terrestrial protected areas.
- 13 terrestrial national parks.
- 9 marine parks.
- 11 aquatic reserves.
- Gabon hosts almost 60% of the surviving forest elephants in Africa.


Source: Forestry Department, Gabon
that timber harvesting can continue well into the future instead of being cut off in a short time after unsustainable practices and depletion, don’t you agree?

‘I believe 1) FSC guarantees timber is legal, climate friendly, biodiversity friendly and socially friendly, protecting our wood from unobjective boycotts, while 2) it also protects the forests and its wildlife and 3) guarantees a sustainable approach that will create jobs for people and revenues for governments in perpetuity.’

INVESTMENT
For forest concession holders, transition to FSC standards may be a large investment. What are the financial incentives of the Gabonese government to convince forest concession holders to go ahead and do it?

‘We are currently looking at ways to help with this process, for instance we may create a company that will help the smaller Gabonese companies to work through certification. But the bottom line is that if companies want to continue working in Gabon they will have to obtain certification.’

How will the Gabonese government facilitate and support forest concession holders so that they are able to meet the FSC standards?

‘Again, we are looking at this – but it is the responsibility of the private sector company to undertake this work and there are plenty of consultants available to accompany them if they lack some or all of the capacity.’

What will happen to forest concession holders who do not meet the FSC standards by the end of 2022?

‘We will undertake an audit of progress in 2020 and on the basis of this we will make it clear what the penalties will be for companies that have not finalized the process. The severity of punishment will depend on the progress made.’

What kind of penalties could be imposed for what?

‘This has not yet been decided. I image fiscal penalties for companies engaged but not finished and in the extreme case where companies have not engaged cancelling permits.’

Between the announcement of the President in the summer of 2018 to go for FSC and the deadline of FSC certification of 31 December 2022 there are four years. Perhaps forest concession holders are going to extract as much timber as they can and then pull out at the end of 2022. How are you going to cope with this risk?

‘As I have already said – we will audit progress in 2020 and then monitor it regularly. Companies not making progress will be sanctioned.’

Some people think that compulsory FSC certification of forest concessions in Gabon in some cases will lead to depletion of forest concessions before the deadline and pave the way for new oil palm plantations. What do you think about that?

‘Oil palm plantations are only allowed in savannas or in highly degraded forest areas with less than 118 ton of carbon/ha based on our 2020 maps. We will be monitoring logging and any excessive harvest will be strictly sanctioned. Such behaviour is not allowed in management plans and this is not a risk.’

What is the destination of forest concessions which have been degraded?

‘This is not an issue in Gabon – with or without FSC certification our law requires a sustainable management plan that prevents degradation of this sort. In exceptional cases where excessive logging has happened in the past forests will be left to regenerate. Our Space Agency has funding from the CAFI program (Central African Forest Initiative, ed.) and from a tax on forestry companies to monitor the extent and intensity of logging and there will be field audits undertaken by our Forest Agency.’

CAPACITY
Do you have sufficient capacity to carry out field audits and to check compliance with forest laws and regulations? Will the Gabonese army be involved in demanding compliance?

‘Yes, with some additional in-service training we have the capacity – and we will not be using the army for this. It is not their role.’

Some say certification of forest concessions in Gabon will take place in steps: first PAFC certification, then PEFC certification and finally FSC certification. Is this just a rumour?

‘It is already happening this way. Companies often prefer to go for PAFC certification first and then go for PEFC certification. The process is then much easier.’
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to start with a less comprehensive (and therefore less challenging) system and work their way up. We are happy with this approach.’

What are the barriers to achieve a transition to sustainable, FSC-certified forest management all over Gabon?

‘The key barriers will be capacity in the forestry and certification communities; lack of motivation of some companies; and up-front investment to fund the process.’

What are the opportunities to achieve the transition?

‘Unless we make the transition, our wood products will come under ever increasing threats in the future from well-intended, perhaps sometimes ill-informed or naïve and even occasionally malicious boycotts by consumer groups. Certification is the future of the industry.’

Taking the FLEGT Action Plan of the European Union into account, integration of the FSC certification system in a national verification and traceability system could make export of timber from Gabon to the European Union easier. This could also help to refocus FLEGT on regulating the informal sector. Do you agree and would you consider integrating these systems?

‘Our vision is to have an exemplary forestry industry and to formalise all use of wood in Gabon – I agree.’

How will you formalise all use of wood in Gabon?

‘A lot of the illegal wood is transformed in sawmills that specialise in laundering wood, either supplying wood dealers and exporters who hide their profits in offshore accounts, or supplying the informal sector in Gabon. We plan to strengthen traceability and monitoring through an electronic database and tracking system to ensure that all wood in Gabon is legal.’

AUDITORS

Some FSC indicators in forest management seem to be multi-interpretable and may be used in either a severe or in a looser way, depending on the auditor. Auditors are independent but appointed and paid by the companies they certify. This may lead to the appointment of auditors who use indicators the loose way. Would you consider using some of Gabon’s forest tax income to establish a fund which pays FSC certification of forest concessions instead of the companies?

‘I have not considered this option – interesting idea! We will be undertaking our own evaluations in parallel to try to minimise this risk.’

In Gabon log demand is increasing with the establishment of more and more processing units in the Special Economic Zones of Gabon. On the other hand, the Government wants all the forest concessions to be FSC-certified by 2022. Next to that it would like to reduce the area occupied by forest concessions by 3 million hectares. These policies mean that less timber will be harvested annually. How do you think this gap can be filled? Should it be filled?

‘Our medium-term plan is to supplement precious timber from natural forests with plantation timber grown in areas currently covered by savanna or highly degraded forests.’

Are you planning to grow hardwood or softwood or both in plantations?

‘Our plan is to start with Eucalyptus and Teak and to test other fast-growing species, but also to look into the viability of plantations of enrichment of degraded areas with harder slower growing native species.’

What will be the volume of timber plantations in hectares in Gabon in 2030?

‘We plan to plant up to 300,000 ha of plantations and to achieve a production of about 10 million m$^3$.’

What is the destination of the 3 million hectares if they cease to be forest concessions?

‘I do not yet have the full answer to this. Some will be new protected areas, others likely will be in ‘ecosystem services’

Employees at FSC-certified forest concessions and their families are provided with local housing.
or sustainable development concessions. It is a work in progress. We passed a Sustainable Development Law in 2014, which creates the legislation for a national sustainable development register and offsetting system. We plan to implement in 2020. We will have a common accounting system for impacts on climate (carbon emissions or sequestration), biodiversity and human capital. A company or administration will calculate their impact – positive or negative – on each and come up with a sustainable development impact. If negative (or if higher than the allocation for that sector), they will have to offset and pay for credits from Sustainable Development Concessions. We are also examining the Costa Rica model of payment for ecosystem services.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONCESSIONS

What are Sustainable Development Concessions? What is happening there, who owns them?

A SD concession is an officially recognised concession – like a logging concession – where the concession holder can undertake activities to increase the carbon stock, creating carbon credits – this is the easy part to account for in tons of CO₂ –, to increase biodiversity and ecosystem services – creating biodiversity credits, what we have not worked out yet is what increase in elephant density is equivalent to a ton of carbon –, and to increase human capital – well being – by generating sustainable jobs and livelihoods, investing in education and health etc.

In Gabon there are two Special Economic Zones [SEZ] on the coast, specifically one near Libreville and one near Port Gentil. They provide new investors, including timber processing companies from China and palm oil giant Diam International, with fiscal incentives, including 100 percent exemption from withholding tax, property tax, VAT and import duties for 25 years and repatriation of funds. Will these fiscal incentives remain this way? Will the two SEZs perhaps be expanded?

The SEZ in Nkok has been the motor for shifting from rudimentary processing to the manufacture of high value furniture and use of almost all off-cuts. It is a “for-export” model, but results in significant benefits in terms of employment and growth in transport and supply sectors that pay taxes. I think the jury is still out when it comes to the absolute benefits: many economists hold very different views. We plan to continue to develop this model, with new developments in Franceville and Port Gentil, but we also plan to further develop “on-shore” investments for the local market and particularly for the continental common market.

The palm oil industry in Gabon is committed to being carbon neutral. No oil palm is allowed in High Carbon Stock or High Conservation Value areas.

Please explain what you mean by “on-shore” investments here.

‘These SEZs are tax free and therefore are considered to be offshore when it comes to customs charges – if they sell in the local market, they have to pay import duty. Sawmills outside these SEZs are subject to national fiscality.’

Is demand for sawn timber and perhaps timber products on the continental common market of Africa increasing? Which countries are demanding more?

‘We are certainly looking at the markets in Nigeria, South Africa, Eastern Africa and North Africa with great interest.’

Besides compulsory FSC certification in forest concessions, which other measures are you taking or planning to take to safeguard the forests of Gabon and their biodiversity?

‘FSC is a monitoring tool – the real safeguards are in the law. Our sustainable development law passed in 2014 is visionary and somewhat complicated to implement. It will require annual sustainable development impact assessments that will evaluate the impacts of each company on carbon stocks, biodiversity and human capital (well-being). We will strengthen our forestry department, particularly the forestry ministry, to ensure that we are a strong partner, helping the good companies and penalising the bad. The new penal code, which is very tough on corruption is an important tool. It will put foresters who corrupt officials behind bars for 4 years, but the government officials who take the money will get 10 years.’
To which extent can forests be cut and converted into oil palm plantations? Which sustainability criteria apply to oil palm production in Gabon?

All Gabonese oil palm is RSPO-certified (Round table on Sustainable Palm Oil, ed.). The industry in Gabon is committed to being carbon neutral. No oil palm is allowed on High Carbon Stock or High Conservation Value areas. Our cut-off for deforestation for oil palm is 118 ton of carbon / ha. I challenge you to find a country with better policies and a 100% certification of greenfield plantations! (Greenfield – developing from zero where there is no history of this type of activity, ed.)

What is the development agenda of the government of Gabon? What will be the focus sectors?

‘We plan a transition from a $500 million timber industry to a $5 billion timber industry by 2030, maximizing a 3rd level transformation of natural and plantation-grown timber.

We provide enough jobs and raise living standards of the people throughout Gabon.

‘We expect to create 60,000 jobs over the next 5 years in the forestry sector in Gabon. In Gabon it is not poor rural people who are responsible for forest crime, but rather criminals and illegal forestry companies.’

In tropical countries with an extensive forest cover like Gabon, could a national economy based on forest ecosystem services bring prosperity to all, making it unnecessary to develop industries and factories like in France or in England?

‘In an ideal world maybe – but there is zero market for this today. Look at REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, ed.), the most obvious service that we might expect to be able to materialise – we have less than 5% of the funding needed to make it a global reality. Developed countries are not ready to pay for ecosystem services in developing countries!!!’

CHINA

In September 2019 China and Gabon signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Could you tell what you agreed with regard to the extraction of natural resources – timber and mining –, agriculture, building of infrastructure in Gabon by Chinese companies, facilities for Chinese companies in Gabon and trade?

It was an agreement between the Forestry departments, therefore focussed on forestry and biodiversity. We made a commitment to work together to ensure legality in the forestry sector in Gabon – including by prosecuting Chinese companies of forest according to our law. We are working together on national parks management and World Heritage and to exchange technology and knowledge to ensure sustainable harvests and the wise use of forest resources.’

What kind of technology and knowledge are you talking about?

‘Mostly about wood transformation technology.’

Through the Central African Forest Initiative (CAF) Norway will support Gabon with up to 150 million euro. Will you be using (part of) this amount for the transition to FSC-certified forest management? How will the people of Gabon benefit?

“This program is a results-based payment for reductions in forest carbon emissions and increases in sequestration and the funds will be used for programmes that allow Gabon to maintain its very low deforestation rate and to further reduce forest carbon emissions. It is likely we will split the funds fairly evenly between conservation, sound forest management and working with rural communities to improve traditional agriculture and reduce human wildlife conflict.”

Regarding traditional rural community agriculture, do you consider to facilitate the replacement of slash and burn by sedentary farming?

‘Yes – we are doing a pilot programme with IGAD (Gabonese Institute for Development Support, ed.) with electric fences and financial markets and IT) and to develop tourism, including a strong conservation tourism sector. Who knows, we may even develop a carbon market if the world ever gets serious about climate change.’
we have built to keep elephants out of peoples’ fields. Our ambition is to use modern tropical agricultural methods to increase production and fix agriculture so we can develop agroforestry in the areas no longer being cut and burnt. This is critical in the Congo Basin, particularly in DRC where the deforestation rate is up to 1.8% per year, mainly because of bad agricultural practices.’

Could you give examples of human wildlife conflict and of solutions to solve these? ‘The major issue for us is the conflict between humans and elephants. We are the only country with elephants all over the country. Since most Gabonese citizens respect the fact that elephants are protected, we are seeing more and more cases of crop raiding. This is made worse by the intense poaching we have experienced in remote, mostly border areas, which drives the surviving elephants out of their remote forest strongholds towards people. The solution is multi-form: stop the poaching, build electric fences in places with lots of elephants and develop insurance and compensation in areas were the problem is limited.’

EXPERIENCE
You have been involved in nature conservation in Gabon for many years, as director of the Gabonese National Park Agency ANPN and now as Minister of Water, Forests, Seas and Environment. What has been your saddest experience? ’We lost 25,000 elephants to trans-national criminal gangs between 2006 – 2012 – that tragedy could have been avoided.’

What has been your happiest moment? ‘If you would allow me to mention two happy moments: when Omar Bongo (former President of Gabon and father of current President Ali Bongo, ed.) took my hand and walked me out of the presidential palace in 2002 the day he announced the creation of 13 national parks; and the day in 2012 when Ali Bongo Ondimba got emotional about what we are doing to our oceans and instructed Mike Fay and me to create Gabon’s marine protected areas; a process we finished in 2018 with the creation of 20 new marine protected areas covering 27% of our EEZ.’

What drives you to keep going for nature conservation? ‘The wonder and importance of nature and my children, whose futures depend on our re-establishing the equilibrium of our planet.’

We expect to create 60,000 jobs over the next 5 years in the forest sector.

President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon visits one of the sawmills of Rougier Gabon and the workers are proud. In 2020 Rougier Gabon employs around 1200 people, equally divided between logging and industrial timber processing. The company is FSC-certified and part of Rougier S.A. based in Paris.

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