

At a plantation in Central Africa, Big Oil tries to go net-zero

by Ashoka Mukpo on 20 January 2022

- *In March 2021, French oil giant TotalEnergies announced that it would be developing a 40,000-hectare (99,000-acre) forest in the Republic of Congo that will sequester 500,000 tons of carbon per year.*
- *The project is part of a renewed global push for governments and corporations to hit their emissions targets partially by the use of carbon credits, also known as offsets.*
- *But advocates say what TotalEnergies describes as a "forest" is a commercial acacia plantation that will produce timber for sale, with little detail on who stands to profit or lose access to land.*

After a disappointing track record (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-06/-crazy-carbon-offsets-market-prompts-calls-for-regulation>) over the past two decades, carbon credit markets (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/12/mongabay-explains-do-carbon-offset-markets-really-work/>) are back in style. Also known as "offsets," carbon credits are having a renewed moment, as corporations and governments look to reach their climate targets partially by banking emissions savings elsewhere. At COP26 in Glasgow last November, countries agreed on new rules (<https://www.iisd.org/articles/paris-agreement-article-6-rules>) for a global carbon market, which some analysts say could be worth as much as \$180 billion by 2030 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-06/-crazy-carbon-offsets-market-prompts-calls-for-regulation>). Even oil and gas companies are getting in on the action, making "net-zero" pledges they say include the development or trading of offsets. But what does a climate-friendly oil company look like?

TotalEnergies says it has part of the answer.

Last March, the French multinational, better known as Total before rebranding last year, announced a plan (<https://totalenergies.com/media/news/press-releases/total-and-frm-to-plant-forest-in-congo>) to create a 40,000-hectare (99,000-acre) acacia plantation in the remote central savannas of the Republic of Congo. Managed by its newly created "nature-based solutions" unit (<https://totalenergies.com/group/commitment/climate-change/carbon-neutrality>), TotalEnergies says this "forest" (<https://news.mongabay.com/2017/03/in-defining-plantations-as-forest-fao-attracts-criticism/>) will sequester more than 10 million tons of carbon dioxide over the next 20 years. But critics of the project say it's emblematic of what stands to go wrong in a new scramble for climate credits generated in the developing world.

"I'm very concerned that if this model is replicated, it will present huge risks for food security and livelihoods," said Myrto Tilianaki, climate justice advocacy officer at CCFD-Terre Solidaire, a French Catholic humanitarian NGO. "It feels like this is a new way of placing the problem elsewhere and endangering the lives of countless communities in Africa and Latin America."



The offset project plans to plant non-native acacia trees from the South Pacific in neat rows across 40,000 hectares of the Batéké. Image by Ahtziri Gonzalez/CIFOR via Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

The forest from the trees

TotalEnergies' offset is being planted on the Batéké Plateaux (<https://congo.wcs.org/wild-places/bateke-plateaux.aspx>), an 8.98 million hectare (22.2 million acres) savanna that stretches across the Republic of Congo and into neighboring Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Dry and wind-swept, the Batéké doesn't host iconic predators or great migrations of antelope like the more famous great plains of East Africa, but human settlements dot the landscape along with populations of elephant, duiker and other wildlife (<https://congo.wcs.org/wild-places/bateke-plateaux.aspx>) in its small gallery forests.

"This is one of the least-studied areas of tropical Africa — few scientists have studied its plant diversity or how the trees, grasses and animals in it coexist," Paula Nieto-Quintano, author of a 2018 study (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/btp.12606>) of the plateaux's biodiversity that was published in the journal *Biotropica*, told Mongabay in an email.

TotalEnergies' partner in its Batéké Plateaux offset is the French timber consultancy Forêt Ressources Management (FRM), which provides technical support and guidance to logging and agriculture companies working in the Congo Basin. On FRM's website (<http://frm.group/en/plantations-en>), the firm says it has been "involved for 20 years in the implementation of plantation projects across the world."

FRM plans to plant non-native acacia trees from the South Pacific in neat rows across 40,000 hectares of the Batéké. Acacias have (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316186425_Carbon_storage_potential_of_Acacia_plantation_A_viable_option_for_cli) They can also readily be turned into commercial wood products — which is what FRM and TotalEnergies plans to do with them once

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Total and Forest Resources Management to Plant a 40,000-Hectare Forest in the Republic of the Congo

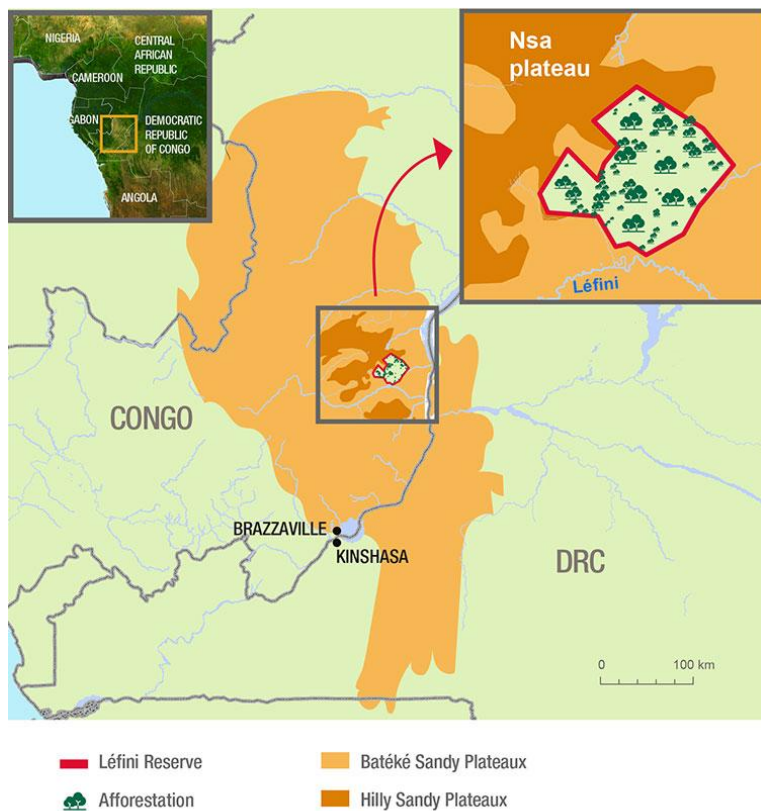


Image by TotalEnergies.

In a Congolese media report (<https://www.adiac-congo.com/content/industrie-forestiere-total-investit-150-milliards-fca-dans-la-reserve-de-lefini-125207>), FRM founder Bernard Cassagne described the TotalEnergies project as a “plantation timber industry” venture that will feed the Republic of Congo with plywood and sawn timber.

While FRM will supervise the project, the entity that holds the lease is called Forest Neutral Congo (FNC), which an FRM spokesperson told Mongabay is a “fully owned subsidiary” of the firm. But when asked to provide details about FNC’s board and shareholders, he declined to answer, describing it as “confidential.” Like much to do with the project, information about who stands to profit once the acacia trees are chopped down and sold off is opaque.

“It’s an example of what you’d expect many of these projects to be,” said Simon Counsell, former director of the Rainforest Foundation UK, who published an investigation (<https://redd-monitor.org/2021/04/16/anatomy-of-a-nature-based-solution-total-oil-40000-hectares-of-disappearing-african-savannah-emmanuel-macron-norwegian-and-french-aid-to-an-election-rigging-dictator-trees/>) into the Batéké Plateaux project on the website REDD Monitor last April. “If you’re going for the offsetting route you’re obviously going to do it at the lowest possible cost, or preferably even at a profit which potentially this could be for someone or other.”

FRM told Mongabay that timber harvesting won’t begin until 20 years after the first trees are planted, after which they expect the plantation to produce 160,000 cubic meters (5.65 million cubic feet) per year of commercial wood products. An environmental and social impact assessment for the project is currently underway, the spokesperson said, but despite the fact that some trees have already been planted (<https://totalenergies.com/media/news/press-releases/republic-congo-planting-more-one-million-trees-begins-bateke-plateaux>), it’s still “several months” from completion.

When asked about local consent for the project, FRM said discussions with people living in the area had been ongoing for more than a year and a half. Pressed for more details of those consultations, however, including how many people are likely to be affected and the structure of the negotiation process, the spokesperson told Mongabay that it was “too early for us to communicate as the work we are leading (not the Ministry) is ongoing and complete information is not yet available.”

According to Nieto-Quintano, while the region is sparsely populated, it is nonetheless inhabited. “Today, the value of the savanna for local people is high, since it is a source of sustenance and part of their culture,” she said.



Batéké Plateaux landscape, Gabon. TotalEnergies' offset is being planted on the Batéké Plateaux, a savanna that stretches across the Republic of Congo and into neighboring Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Image by huguesn via Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

In a video posted to Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=591157945527058>) last November, the Republic of Congo's minister of forest economy was filmed visiting the project area and urging residents of the region to be "proud of what you are going to contribute to the fight against climate change."

But Tilianaki of CCFD-Terre Solidaire, which published research (<https://ccfd-terresolidaire.org/nos-publications/nos-communiqués-de/compensation-carbone-7131>) about the project after it was announced last March, said that one Congolese activist she spoke to told her there had been little dialogue with the local population about it prior to FNC's deal being inked.

"He confirmed the presence of Indigenous communities and in general communities living nearby who would be affected by the project, and what he told me back in July was there had been no consultation and in general there was no publicly available information on this project," she said.

Tilianaki told Mongabay that despite the project's size and TotalEnergies' high profile, it was nearly impossible to find details about it beyond what was available in press releases.

"I had a very difficult time finding any public information about it, the only thing I found online was the contract (https://www.finances.gouv.cg/fr/signature-bail-forestier_031120) with [FRM] and the Congolese government, and I actually found that there were discrepancies between the number of hectares specified in the contract and the number mentioned in Total's press release," she said.

The limited transparency from FRM about the plantation is compounded by the challenges civil society advocates and journalists face (<https://www.fern.org/publications-insight/the-republic-of-congo-is-intimidating-civil-society-activists-1970/>) in the Republic of Congo, which is ranked 118 out of 180 in the Reporters Without Borders 2021 World Press Freedom Index (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>). Without on-the-ground reporting or research, how people living in the area feel about the massive development or what they're being told about how it will change their lives remains a black box.



A typical Bandundu savanna village in neighboring DRC. Indigenous and other communities living nearby would be affected by the project, according to researchers. Image by Nick Hobgood via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2.0).

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TotalEnergies' press release, which says the acacias will sequester 300,000 tons of carbon dioxide per year. Whether that figure includes carbon released by the process of cutting down and processing the wood (<https://www.sciencenews.org/article/planting-trees-climate-change-carbon-capture-deforestation>) after 20 years, or if any of the acacias will be converted to carbon-emitting charcoal, remains unclear.

FRM and TotalEnergies say they will use the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) (<https://verra.org/project/vcs-program/>) to check and validate their carbon sequestration figures and monitor the project's integrity over its near 100-year life span. The non-profit Verra, which administers the VCS program, maintains a popular registry of carbon credit-generating projects.

A spokesperson for Verra said that any project accepted into its registry must be validated for compliance with its standards before any carbon credits are issued. But they added that it's the responsibility of project developers themselves to hire and pay "independent third-party auditors" to carry out that validation.

"What happens is they provide the methodology that the project developer has to adhere to, which is then assessed by a third-party, which are called verification and validation bodies," said Jonathan Crook, policy officer at Carbon Market Watch.

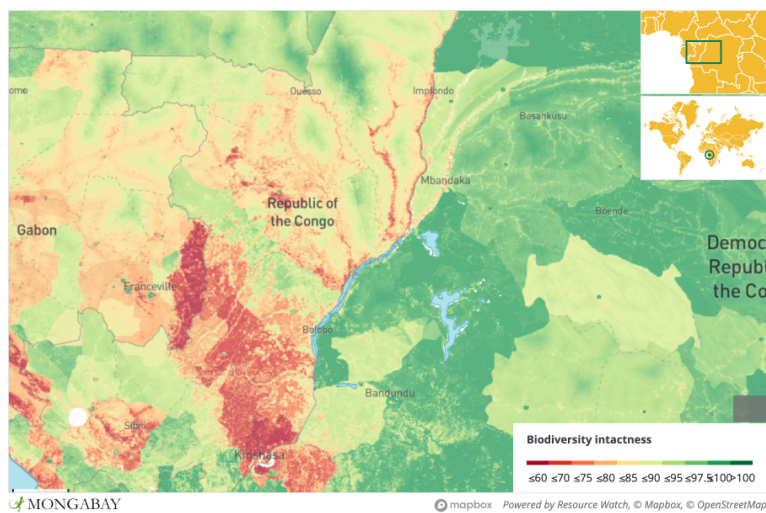
A separate project managed by FRM and listed on Verra's registry (<https://registry.verra.org/app/projectDetail/VCS/2319>) suggests those auditors might need to look closely at the consultancy firm's math. A few hundred kilometers to the south, the firm operates another acacia plantation, which the documents uploaded to the registry say will sequester nearly 800,000 tons of carbon over 33 years.

That plantation produces charcoal for sale in the capital city Brazzaville's markets, not lumber or plywood. But the total figure for sequestered carbon doesn't include what happens after that charcoal is burned — namely, that it is immediately released back into the atmosphere.

Verra's spokesperson said that neither of FRM's projects have been validated yet, and therefore it was "premature to make any statement on the[ir] carbon accounting."

Were it to be accepted, FRM's confusing climate math might wind up being necessary to preserve TotalEnergies' expected carbon savings, though. One of the key characteristics of the Batéké Plateaux — making it a risky choice for a commercial Acacia plantation, particularly in a warming climate — is that it is prone to brush fires.

"Fires in the Batéké are very frequent, mostly during the dry season," said Nieto Quintano.



A map showing the relative biodiversity intactness for the region.

Seeds in one hand, drill in the other

As TotalEnergies celebrates its move towards environmental responsibility on the Batéké Plateaux, it is engaged in a very different project in the north of the country, and one with far greater significance for the climate: exploring for oil in a carbon-rich rainforest. In 2019, the oil giant acquired the rights to two blocks deep in the jungle, including Mokolé-Mbembé (<https://news.mongabay.com/2019/07/congolese-government-opens-nouabale-ndoki-national-park-to-oil-exploration/>), which overlaps with the Cuvette Centrale peatlands.

Those peatlands, only recognized by scientists in 2017 (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/12/the-idea-uncovering-the-peatlands-of-the-congo-basin/>), hold the equivalent of 20 years' worth of U.S. fossil fuel emissions. Yet, according to confidential communications seen by Mongabay, the company began conducting aerial reconnaissance of the Mokolé-Mbembé block late last year, in what could be the first step toward moving from exploration to production in the remote area.

The Congolese government has promised to protect the peatlands — for a price — but last year a high-ranking official told Mongabay (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/12/layers-of-carbon-the-congo-basin-peatlands-and-oil/>) that the country would be within its rights to extract oil from the region if it so chose.



The Cuvette Centrale peatlands in the Republic of Congo, image courtesy of ITPC.

Out of the workshop and back on the shelf

Carbon credits don't have a good track record. First established as part of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, efforts like the U.N.'s Clean Development Mechanism created a market awash in shaky projects (<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/why-are-carbon-markets-failing>) that often did little to reduce carbon emissions and which eventually all but collapsed. In some cases, perverse incentives led to companies polluting more in hopes that someone would pay them to stop.

But with the world unable to agree on sharp, immediate cuts to carbon emissions, some say offsets have to be part of the world's approach to climate change while the global economy gradually decarbonizes.

"Before, people were really thinking it was an either-or, and now it's a both-and," said Ruben Lubowski of the Environmental Defense Fund. "We need to decarbonize every sector, and we need massive investments in natural climate solutions and protecting and restoring forests, and it's all incredibly urgent and has to happen right away."

Advocates for carbon markets say they've learned hard lessons over the past few decades, and that this time around those markets will work better than they have in the past. Instead of focusing on piecemeal, small-scale projects that can cause what's called "leakage" — when emissions-causing activities like deforestation move from one area to another — countries will be taking a "jurisdictional" approach that securitizes the protection of much larger swaths of forest than before, for example.

But while the COP26 regulations set the rules for a so-called "compliance" market that will be supervised by the U.N., other "voluntary (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/10/for-companies-eyeing-net-zero-carbon-emissions-no-clue-how-to-get-there/>)" markets will set their own rules.

"Since companies engage with the voluntary carbon market on a voluntary basis, there's problematically little to no regulation and oversight about what they can actually claim, which creates a lot of room for a wild west scenario," said Crook of Carbon Market Watch.

As the visible impacts of climate change grow along with public anxiety related to it, financial institutions and multinationals want to signal that they're part of the solution. Many consider carbon credits to be an appealing option, and almost overnight huge streams of financing (<https://www.reuters.com/business/sustainable-business/carbon-offsets-gird-lift-off-big-money-gets-close-nature-2021-02-26/>) have poured into what is anticipated to eventually become an enormous liquid market.

To counter claims of "greenwashing," some supporters of carbon markets say they're working to set global standards for what carbon credits should look like through projects like the Voluntary Carbon Market Initiative (<https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/global-initiative-aims-bring-transparency-voluntary-carbon-markets-2021-07-29/>). And industry partnerships like the LEAF Coalition (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/09/forest-finance-expected-to-advance-under-new-trees-standard-and-leaf-coalition/>) require their members — who include Amazon and Nestlé, among others — to develop a road map for gradually decarbonizing their operations in alignment with the rules of the Science Based Targets initiative (<https://sciencebasedtargets.org/>) (SBTi). Without that roadmap they can't buy credits generated by LEAF's partners.

But the SBTi doesn't have a road map for oil and gas companies yet, whose business model and survival hinges on the burning of fossil fuels. Yet many of those companies, including those who've spent decades lobbying against climate policy (<https://www.npr.org/2021/07/01/1012138741/exxon-lobbyist-caught-on-video-talks-about-undermining-bidens-climate-push>) and waging disinformation campaigns (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/18/the-forgotten-oil-ads-that-told-us-climate-change-was-nothing>), are either pondering or have already made pledges to reach net-zero (<https://abcnews.go.com/Business/experts-slam-oil-giant-exxon-mobil-net-ambition/story?id=82325190>) emissions. In some cases those companies have even begun marketing "carbon neutral

their customers, which they say aren't their responsibility to address.)

Convincing the public that they're making progress on their net-zero goals often means acquiring offsets, either through voluntary markets or by developing them on their own. In some cases that could mean financing a conservation project, in others, developing their own "nature-based solutions" like TotalEnergies' acacia plantation on the Batéké Plateaux.

"On the one hand, fossil fuel companies have enormous resources, and they should be investing massively in natural climate solutions along with their own transition," Lubowski said. "The planet needs it, and that's a good thing. On the other hand, there isn't any consensus yet on what's an appropriate net-zero pathway for fossil fuel companies and what's ambitious voluntary corporate behavior in that sector."

But advocates for Indigenous land rights say that skyrocketing demand for carbon credits could pose a huge threat to rural and forest-dwelling people across the world. At COP26, human rights groups pushed hard for language related to free, prior, and informed consent rights to be included in compliance market guidelines, but they lost out (<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/states-fail-adequately-address-climate-change-indigenous-peoples-analysis-cop26-decisions>) in favor of a softer clause on grievance procedures. That wasn't just a missed opportunity, they say, it was an admission that padding the world's carbon budget is going to come at a cost to some communities.

"We're already in that logic of, we anticipate that these projects might harm people but we're still doing them. And we're doing them for the environment, but there's no proof that they actually work," said Tilianaki.

For oil and gas companies looking to set up their own offset projects, working in countries like the Republic of Congo where they have preexisting relationships and knowledge of the terrain is an appealing option, particularly if those projects are generating revenue for the government. But many of those governments have a proclivity for violating human rights, and activists worry that the rush to claim progress towards corporate net-zero goals could turn into a new vector for land grabbing.

"Big polluters claim that it's OK to carry on pumping out greenhouse gases, so long as they 'offset' their pollution or destruction by planting some trees somewhere or 'preserving' an existing forest," said Fiore Longo, a campaigner with Survival International, an NGO that advocates for Indigenous rights. "They can do so through markets for 'carbon credits.' What they don't tell you is that the land they destroy for profit and the land they use for offsetting, it's not empty: usually, those are rich environments inhabited by Indigenous peoples and other local communities."

For projects developed by oil and gas companies, violations of Indigenous rights or the use of questionable carbon savings figures (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/05/bad-science-planting-frenzy-misses-the-grasslands-for-the-trees/>) could be insult piled on top of injury. In those cases, the damage would be done on behalf of the industry most responsible for the climate crisis.

"Total is expanding its liquefied gas extraction projects all around the world, but at the same time it claims that it has a 2050 net-zero goal. It's highly contradictory," said Tilianaki.

Banner image: *An acacia plantation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, image courtesy of CIFOR.*

Citation:

Nieto-Quintano, P., Mitchard, E. T., Odende, R., Batsa Mouwembe, M. A., Rayden, T., & Ryan, C. M. (2018). The mesic savannas of the Bateke Plateau: Carbon stocks and floristic composition. *Biotropica*, 50(6), 868-880. doi:10.1111/btp.12606 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/btp.12606>)

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