

CIB – FSC'S GREAT AFRICAN EMBARRASSMENT

Nothing encapsulates the dismal weaknesses of the FSC system quite as well as the case of Congolaise Industrielle des Bois (CIB) – which for many years has been FSC's flagship certified logging operation in Africa.

Much has been written about CIB, which has been one of the most controversial logging operations anywhere in the tropics. Critics have questioned whether the company should qualify for certification right across the sweep of FSC's requirements – its environmental and social impact, and its economic sustainability. Now it seems that its claim to sustainability in all three areas has unravelled, raising further serious questions about how the company could ever have been certified in the first place. Some of the major problems emerged precisely at the time SGS was certifying the company's newer operations last year.

CIB's main concessions Pokola, Toukoulaka, Kabo and Loundougou, are all considered to be 'High Conservation Value Forest', and are adjacent to several important protected areas

CIB has four concessions in northern Republic of Congo, together covering around 1.5 million hectares. Tellingly, it has expanded northwards and eastwards into new concessions – the Loundougou and Toukoulaka Forest Management Units (UFAs), which were merged in 2006 to form one 550,000 hectare concession – to continue its operations. It first obtained FSC certification for its Kabo concession in 2006, followed by the Pokola concession in 2008 and Loundougou–Toukoulaka in early 2011. All of the certificates have been issued by SGS. Since 2004, CIB has relied on the services of the Tropical Forest Trust (now renamed The Forest Trust) to help obtain its FSC certificates.

One of the more controversial aspects of CIB's operations has been its impact on wildlife in the rainforests, some of which the company has been exploiting for the last four decades. In 2008, we ran an [article](#) looking at CIB's impacts on the local elephant population. New evidence on the impacts of the company emerged in 2009 when the respected scientific journal Conservation Biology published [research](#), conducted at CIB from 2000–2006. This noted that, amongst other things, "The significant increase in the proportion of smoked animals in Pokola, Kabo, and Ndoki 1 [...] suggests that hunters are travelling farther to find prey – a strategy made possible by company vehicles that, despite a ban on transport of hunters and bushmeat, carried 52.5% of all bushmeat to logging towns."

Running out of forest: northern Congo's forest elephants are threatened by habitat fragmentation and poaching.

CIB has always strenuously denied that its vehicles were used for wildlife hunting and poaching. The research found that tens of thousands of animals (not all necessarily from CIB) were ending up in nearby markets and that “development of industrial logging operations led to a 69% increase in the population of logging towns and a 64% increase in bushmeat supply”. Another [study](#), published in 2010, based on research in 2006, reported finding elephant carcasses in each of CIB's Pokola, Kabo and Toukoulaka concessions, “indicating that poachers are profiting from the road networks to penetrate deeper into the forest away from urban settlements to hunt elephants, even in the CIB concessions”. In May of this year, a CIB truck driver was [imprisoned](#) for trafficking ivory.

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But things really started to go wrong for CIB at the end of 2009, when the company was forced to fire a [reported](#) 775 workers in the Kabo concession, because of growing economic losses (other sources put the number of job losses at less than 700). It is not known what will become of these workers or their families once the redundancy payments have been spent; one concern would be that, following the typical course of logging operations throughout the tropics, having brought hundreds of workers into the forest for their unsustainable operations, they are basically abandoned there and have little other option but to clear forest for farmland and hunt wildlife in order to feed themselves.

CIB's Kabo concession has quietly been removed from FSC's database of certified operations – though no explanation has been issued by FSC, CIB, or The Forest Trust. The certificate was due for renewal in May this year, and perhaps CIB realised that even SGS's auditors and TFT combined would struggle to put a certifiable gloss on an abandoned sawmill and perhaps hundreds of jobless former workers languishing in the forest. Kabo had been the first of CIB's concessions to be issued with a FSC certificate, but its 'social sustainability' and 'economic viability' lasted less than five years.

Despite receiving generous tax cuts from the Congolese government, the financial situation of CIB evidently continued to deteriorate, and at the beginning of 2010 its parent company, DLH, announced that it was going to “divest all forestry and production activities including CIB” in order to “reduce debt and losses”. A search then ensued for a buyer for the company, and at the end of 2010 it became clear that the new owner was to be Olam – which describes itself as a “global leader in the supply chain management of agricultural products and food ingredients”, based in Singapore. Olam has been heavily [criticised](#) by Greenpeace as a ‘Congo-trashing’

company, and accused of felling in forests in the DRC which had been illegally allocated for logging operations.

Although the negotiations for the sale of CIB had been going on at precisely the time that SGS was carrying out the assessment for the large Loundougou–Toukoulaka concession, there is curiously no mention of the imminent sale in SGS's [certification assessment](#) report. Under [FSC's rules](#), “when ownership or management changes during the period of validity of a certificate, the certification body must withdraw the certificate, and may re–issue it in the name of the new owner/manager only if the certification body is satisfied that the conditions on which certification depends are still being complied with.”

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So whereas SGS conducted the assessment under DLH's ownership of CIB, the certificate was very quickly passed on to Olam. Arguably, it should have been torn up and the assessment started again. It is not known whether Olam intends to continue precisely the 'management' regime that was certified by SGS, but they now have a 5–year FSC certificate anyway.

Then in March this year, the final blow to the credibility of CIB's certification came when the company admitted what some environmentalist foresters had long suspected; that CIB's heavy reliance on just a few prime timber species – notably sapele (sapelli) and sipo – was highly unsustainable. After the completion of the takeover by Olam, CIB's Director General, Christian Schwarz noted in an [interview](#) for La Semaine Africaine that the company's 'production' (i.e. exploitation) of these two species had fallen from 340,000 cubic metres in 2008 to an expected 103,000 cubic metres in 2011. Whilst CIB had proudly proclaimed that three of its concessions were covered by approved forest management plans – an important requirement for FSC certification – SGS's certification auditors had evidently failed to identify that these did not address the looming shortage of primary timbers.

CIB's Christian Schwarz: running out of good timber

No–one seems to have referred to academic silvicultural studies which raise serious doubts about the sustainability of felling species like sapele on a 30–year 'rotational' cycle, when regeneration is doubtful and trees might take several centuries to reach the age of those being felled. Any

forest management plan based on the long-promoted concept of 'diversification' and wider use of 'lesser-known species' is partly wishful thinking, because tropical timber markets have remained stubbornly conservative, preferring mostly 'well-known species'. CIB had increased the number of species felled since 1997, but only four timbers, including sapele and sipo, still continued to represent the bulk of the company's income.

SGS's [certification summary report](#) for CIB's Pokola concession in 2008 stated that the company's forest management system was designed "according to the exploitable volume of target species in order to guarantee a steady supply from the commercial species...for most target species, including sapelli and sipo, regeneration (according to the available data) appears to be relatively abundant and sufficient to ensure population renewal". Immediately after assessing the "steadiness" of the supply of logs to CIB's sawmills, the supply started to dry up.

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In practice, what seems to have happened is that the unsustainability of CIB's exploitation of primary timbers in its older logging areas has driven it to rely on the less exploited and larger areas of primary forest in the Loundougou–Toukoulaka concession, whilst the depleted operation in Kabo has been shut down. As a Greenpeace [report](#) noted about the Kabo concession already in 2005 (i.e., shortly *before* the FSC certificate had been issued) "The standing volumes of both Sapelli and Sipo have been significantly reduced. This raises serious concerns about their reconstitution and must have clear implications for further logging these two species in all concessions." Sawmilling has moved to the new mill in the Loundougou concession, which Greenpeace said in 2005 would "have a heavy impact on the flora and fauna of these largely intact forests, as well as on the indigenous [Mbendjele 'Pygmies'] living in this area".

The February 2011 FSC certification of CIB's Loundougou–Toukoulaka concession seems to have been conducted as if the closure of Kabo was completely irrelevant. The only reference to the closure of Kabo in SGS's Summary [certification report](#) is to note "Many workers interviewed at the [Loundougou] sawmill were part of those employees who were laid off from the Kabo FMU". Bizarrely, even though it was clearly aware of the closure of the Kabo concession, SGS noted of the Loundougou–Toukoulaka concession management plan that "A precautionary approach was followed in the compilation of the management plan, e.g with the annual increment volumes not being taken into account, thus providing a significant safety element in the determination of the Annual Allowable Cut. This was based on earlier experience on the adjoining Kabo FMU". The report also notes that "The evaluation of the Loundougou–Toukoulaka FMU was preceded in 2007 with the evaluation of the adjacent Kabo FMU which applies the same management principles".

Astonishingly, not a single Major Corrective Action Request (CAR) was issued by SGS to CIB in the assessment of Loundougou–Toukoulaka. Of the ten Minor CARs, not one referred to any issues with the management plan or levels of 'sustainable' harvesting.

The emergence of the truth about CIB has no doubt come as a huge embarrassment not only to FSC and SGS but also to the company's many boosters – who have clung on to the certificates as evidence for the possibility of sustainable industrial logging in the Congo Basin. Foremost amongst these has been Scott Poynton, Director of The Forest Trust, which was contracted by CIB in 2004 to help it through the FSC certification process. Poynton has repeatedly heralded CIB's certification as a beacon of progress in Congo Basin logging.

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In 2006, TFT offered its "[warm congratulations](#)" to CIB for their first FSC certification and welcomed "CIB's pioneering determination to raise forest management standards at its Kabo concession". Five years later, the concession had been shut down and the certificate had lapsed. In 2008, Poynton [praised](#) CIB as a "living breathing example that timber production does not have to be synonymous with the destruction of tropical forests". Two years later, the company had been sold to new owners with a dismal reputation for causing forest damage. As recently as 10th March 2011, Poynton [stated](#) that CIB had made "dramatic progress in adopting sustainable timber practices". Only two weeks later, CIB admitted that its 'production' of prime timber had plummeted.

Poynton now appears to have abandoned any pretence at justifying his continued support for the CIB certificates. In correspondence seen by FSC–Watch in which Poynton was asked to comment on CIB's admission of its own problems, he responded only with the evasive "Ommmmmm..... Look beyond what you see..." – perhaps inadvertently repeating advice given by Rafiki the baboon from Walt Disney's Lion King.

Scott Poynton (left, with Congolese Minsiter of Forests, Henri Djombo); running out of excuses.

Despite the collapse of the credibility of CIB's FSC certificate, along with that of people who have supported it, there is still much vested interest in maintaining the myth of (FSC certified) sustainable logging in the Congo Basin. TFT claimed in March that, with its help, "timber

operations in Congo Basin surpass 5 million hectares of tropical forest certified as sustainable". The Fondation Chirac has given TFT over half a million euros to try and get more companies in the Congo Basin, like CIB, certified. FSC-Watch wonders whether former French President Chirac is aware that what he is likely to get will be no more credible than CIB's certificate.

Fortunately, not everyone is continuing to be conned about 'sustainable logging' in the Congo Basin by the outpourings of the likes of FSC, SGS and TFT. In March 2009, Greenpeace, formerly a supporter (if a critical one) of the CIB certification called for a moratorium on certifications in 'intact forest landscapes' (which by definition would include most of the equatorial African rainforests), and then two years later specifically for a moratorium on the issuing of more FSC certificates in the Congo Basin.

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