

African forest on the front line of fight against climate change

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When Lee White first visited the central African nation of Gabon, he believed he had found paradise.

White, 53, was not new to Africa, having moved with his parents from Manchester, UK, to Uganda at the age of three, but in Gabon, as a doctoral candidate in 1989, he had arrived in the second-most forested nation on Earth.

"Gabon is teeming with wildlife and beautiful rain forests," White said in an interview in Johannesburg. "I fell in love, did my PhD there and never left."

He became a Gabonese citizen in 2008, head of the national parks agency a year later, and in June he took over as the nation's environment minister. Today, White is on the cutting edge of a drive backed by the UN to enlist preservation of forests in the fight against climate change.

His first victory came in September, when Norway signed an accord to pay the Gabonese government US\$150 million if it can prove it is increasing its carbon stock — the amount of atmosphere carbon stored within the forest ecosystem — and cutting emissions over the next five years.

It was the first such agreement in Africa.

Norway also agreed to pay double the usual carbon storage price, US\$10 for 1 ton (0.9 tonnes), compared with the US\$25 a coal-fired power plant in Europe would pay for allowances that cover its carbon emissions.

"Preserving forests is the most cost-effective way of reducing carbon emissions and therefore fighting climate change, and because it's cheaper to do it, people give it a lower value," White said. "The fact that they doubled the price gives hope to other countries. It shows we are making headway in our discussions about the role of forests."

The international recognition for Gabon's conservation policies could encourage neighboring nations to follow suit, including the Republic of the Congo, White said.

Like Gabon, the Republic of the Congo's forests are part of the Congo Basin, the world's second-biggest rain forest after the Amazon, and the nation has experienced relatively low deforestation.

While the forest in the Congo Basin covers a third of the area of the Amazon, its trees are taller and bigger, meaning that it has half the biomass of the Amazon. That is key in determining how much carbon it absorbs, White said.

White's appointment as minister and the Norway deal breakthrough came on the heels of a corruption scandal that prompted Gabonese President Ali Bongo to fire his vice president and forestry minister.

In February, customs officials seized large quantities of a protected rosewood in the port of Owendo. The wood, locally known as Kevazingo, is in high demand by Chinese furniture makers.

More than 300 containers subsequently disappeared from the port and authorities only recovered about 200 of them days later.

The Washington-based Environmental Investigation Agency also accused a major Chinese logging company of bribing officials to obtain vast concessions in the Congo Basin, overharvesting those concessions and evading taxes. After the report was published, the Gabonese government stripped the company — Deija Group — of its logging license.

Loggers have reason to be attracted to Gabon. Larger than the UK, it is almost entirely covered by tropical rain forest, has no highways and a population of 2 million, the majority of whom live in poverty.

Its shift toward conservation began under Ali Bongo's father, former Gabonese president Omar Bongo, who died in office after 42 years in power.

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