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How to stay evergreen: Gabon plans to harness its rainforests

Historically, Gabon has contributed to only 0.03% of global greenhouse gas emissions

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Gabon is the second-most forest-dense country in the world, with 88 per cent of its land area covered by forests.

The country harnesses this crucial resource by protecting its forests and generating carbon credits, leading the way towards climate action through nature-based solutions. The process has already started and would inspire other countries to do the same.

Gabon, also hosting the Africa Climate Week from August 29-September 2, became the first African country to receive payments for conserving its forests.

Gabon received \$17 million from Norway in June 2021 as part of a deal which would pay the country a total of \$150 million over 10 years. The deal, known as a Results Based Payment Agreement, was facilitated by the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI), a part of the United Nations Development Programme, in 2019.

Gabon has two other ongoing projects on forest conservation with CAFI. The payment was based on the independent verification of Reduced Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) in 2016 and 2017, according to CAFI.

The first payment is being used to establish projects to protect Gabon's forests and formulate systems to enable the country to trade carbon credits in the near future.

Gabon is already preparing to sell \$291 million worth of carbon credits before the 27th Conference of Parties (CoP 27) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which will be held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, in November 2022.

The 187 million carbon credits the country intends to create will be generated by calculating the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, announced Lee Smith, Gabon's environment minister, at the Commonwealth Meeting held in Rwanda from June 20 to June 26.

Under REDD+, Gabon is allowed to sell carbon credits worth 90 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂). If the country manages to sell each credit at \$25, it could earn \$2.25 billion.

"Exploiting the forest to save the forest," Smith had said at a UNDP capacity-building workshop held in March this year.

He explained the recent reforms undertaken to value the carbon market while presenting Gabon's climate risks.

"Valuing wood and selective controlled logging leads to fewer trees being cut down, higher incomes and more sustainable jobs for Gabonese," he said.

The 23.6 million hectares of Gabon's forests, part of the iconic rainforests of the Congo basin, absorb around 140 million tonnes of carbon dioxide every year and emit approximately 30 million tonnes, placing it among the few net-carbon absorbers.

The 110 million tonnes of CO₂ that Gabon's forests absorb accounts for around a third of the annual emissions in France.

Forests are essential for conserving biodiversity as they are home to around 8,000 plant species, 300 mammal species and 600 bird species. The most prominent among them are forest elephants, endangered in the rest of central Africa, but around 95,000 call Gabon their home.

Historically, Gabon has contributed to only 0.03 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and is taking several steps to remain carbon neutral up to and beyond 2050.

It has a considerably low rate of deforestation, 0 to 0.05 per cent, between 2010 and 2015, compared to other central African countries and countries with large forest cover, such as Brazil, according to CAFI.

The central African country has been able to conserve its forests due to socio-economic conditions and political will. Its economy mainly depends on its vast oil reserves, which are dwindling, pushing the Gabonese government to find other ways to source the economy. In the past two decades, Gabon has created 13 national parks.

Around 90 per cent of its population lives in urban areas and its dependence on the forests is low. The country has also enacted stringent laws such as the ban on exporting unprocessed logs out of the country to protect forests. It has also put in place regulations to protect the few communities living in the forests and dependent on them.

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