



MONGABAY

Mixed signals from Gabon officials to villagers fighting to save a forest

11 October 2021

MAKOKOU, Gabon — Villagers in northeastern Gabon have embarked on a first-of-its-kind initiative to reclassify part of a logging concession as a protected area and hunting ground, citing its ecological and heritage values.

The concession is held by Transport Bois Négoce International (TBNI), which began logging it in June. But residents of the Massaha group of villages have flagged irregularities ranging from uncontrolled felling, to obstruction of waterways, to partially cut trees left hanging from others and posing a safety hazard.

“Only a few days ago, we went into the bush with my husband, and saw that it was in a bad state. There was even one of my first cousin’s nets there, tangled up in branches that were blocking the river. That’s the side they’ve started logging,” said Mariane Ndjamendonga, a village resident. “If they start on the other side, what will we do then? We won’t be able to live anymore. They are still doing so much and our canoes can’t get through anymore. Ever since we’ve been here, they’ve been working non-stop.”



In August 2020, the villagers filed a proposal to protect an area spanning 11,300 hectares (28,000 acres) in two zones separated by the Liboumba River. There has been no logging south of the river. This southern area has unique ecological value. It is an almost undamaged ecosystem, home to many protected animal species including elephants, chimpanzees, gorillas, leopards, pangolins and

dwarf crocodiles, as well as many mature trees, including protected species such as the *moabi* (*Baillonella toxisperma*), *douka* (*Tieghemella africana*), *andok* (*Irvingia gabonensis*) and *kevazingo* (*Guibortia spp.*).

Makala Fulbert, leader of Massaha, cited cultural reasons for wanting to protect the forest. “First and foremost, we want to preserve our customs and promote them for future generations. Our children and grandchildren do not know the moabi tree, because around the village the loggers have cut all of them down,” Fulbert said

“This area could help us so that our children can see moabi and ozigo [*Dacryodes buettneri*, another tree species], and so we can preserve the places where our ancestors once lived. We still have the old villages, the camps, the fishing and hunting grounds, that’s why it’s so interesting.”

The heritage value of several of these now-abandoned villages is carefully documented in the application the community submitted to the Ministry of Water and Forests. For instance, in the old Ibenga village, the community wove fish traps called etoubili out of sacred liana vines; the first vine, which connected all the traps, was cut by a youth specially chosen for the task.

They also crafted special canoes known as boualôo here. A boualôo could only be made from the trunk of a belinga tree, *Nauclea diderrichii*, a species now prized by loggers. Belinga trees are still abundant around the old village of Balou, a hunting area previously untouched by loggers and once reserved for elders to perform sacrifices and rituals.

Fabrice Ombet, a young hunter in the village, explained the importance of the untouched portions of their forest. “It is an area which has never been exploited, that preserves Gabon’s natural beauty! We are protecting this, as part of Gabon’s heritage. I want officials to listen to our request,” he said.

Cause for hope for the community

Beyond Gabon’s international commitments to protect 30% of the planet by 2030 and its role as an African leader in conservation, the Massaha villagers are relying on provisions in the country’s forest code and other laws to request reclassification of an area that has already been allocated for commercial forestry.

There have been encouraging signs from the Ministry of Water and Forests that their campaign will succeed.

Earlier this year, Massaha hosted a delegation from the ministry led by the director-general of wildlife and protected areas (DGFAP), Lucien Massoukou. On May 14 and 15, he met with communities and members of the sustainable hunting management committee in Massaha and Makokou, the provincial capital, and praised and encouraged the community’s approach. Creating a protected area is possible, he said, since it has been done before with other logging concessions.

In the same vein, Lee White, the minister of water and forests, when asked about the protected area proposed by Massaha during a visit to Makokou on July 17, replied that, “Formalizing the protection of their traditional forests by classing them as a cultural protected area that the locals are going to manage, I think that’s a very interesting idea. There is already precedent for this in the forest code and it is something to be explored with the local people.”

Several promising research avenues

Massoukou also noted that it will be important to document research that proves this forest is of unique value. According to Serges Ekazama Koto, paraecologist and research assistant, several scientific studies of the area have been carried out in the contested area.

“In 2015 we did an inventory of wild animals with Duke University in the U.S. Since 2020, with support from TBNI, we’ve conducted camera trap studies with IRET” — the Research Institute for Tropical Ecology, a scientific branch of the Gabonese government — “and the WWF, and bioacoustic studies with TNC [The Nature Conservancy],” he said. The results of these studies, not yet published, will allow researchers to compare the area’s biodiversity with neighboring forests and existing protected areas in Gabon.



Zuzana Burivalova is an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the lead member of a bioacoustics research team drawn from her university and Gabon's Omar Bongo University, which is collaborating with Massaha paraecologist Koto.

"Regardless of the proposed new protected area, we are studying the impacts of selective logging on biodiversity. We are trying to understand how quickly biodiversity can be replenished in tropical forests after selective logging," she said. "This concession is part of our sampling plan, and we have just received a first batch of soundscape data from forests that have already been logged, as well as those untouched forests [in parts of the proposed protected area], and from Ivindo National Park.

"This is still an ongoing experiment, and we are currently working on preliminary analyses, so it is too early to say how untouched forest in the proposed protected area compares in terms of biodiversity to the forests that were logged a long time ago," Burivalova said. "But from what I've listened to so far, we can hear a lot of species vocalizing at the same time. The dawn chorus in these areas is very rich and I am delighted that our team is analyzing this data — this is such a rare chance to work in untouched forests!"

Conflicting interpretations of the law

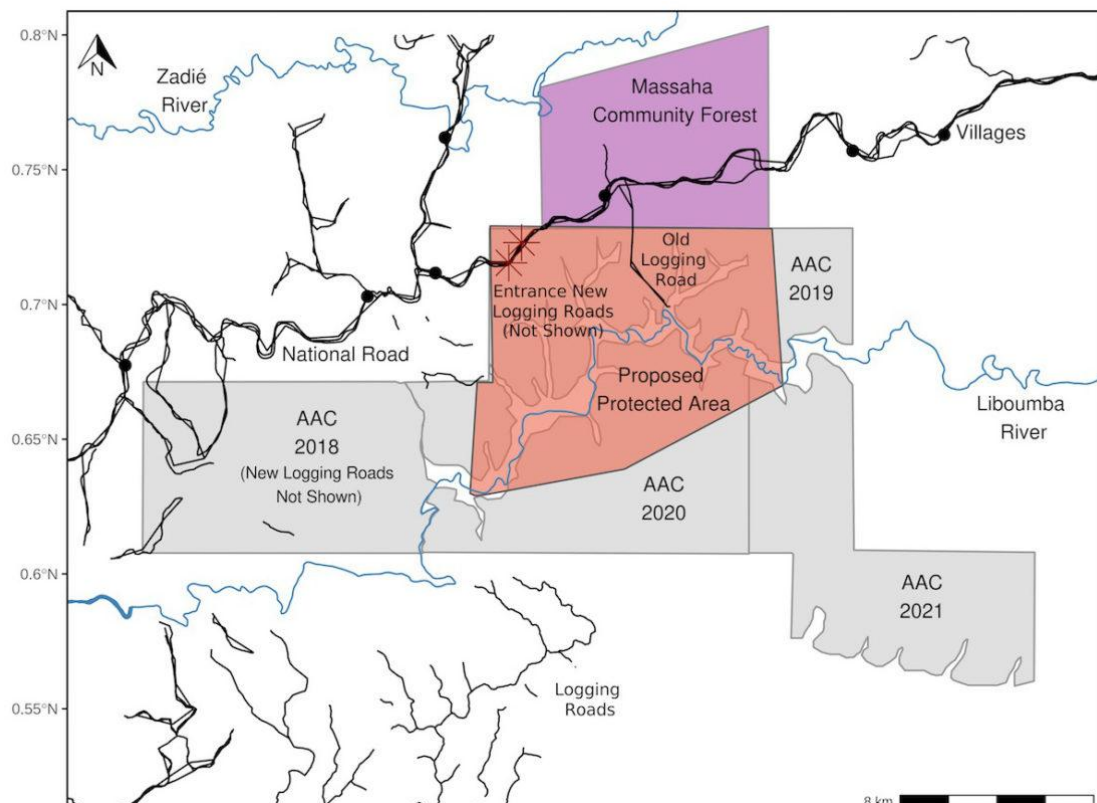
While both the environment minister and Massoukou, the senior official for wildlife and protected areas, have responded positively on the bid for reclassification, a different ministry official is directly in charge of Massaha's reclassification request. Ghislain Moussavou, the director-general of forests (DGF), sees the situation differently.

Speaking in May, Moussavou said: "Today, the people who used to complain that we were doing a little too much, conserving too much, too many national parks, too many protected areas, want to create a new one in a place which, at least in relation to the documents that we have, does not present an exceptional case of biodiversity which would merit the urgent creation of an exceptional protected area."

For Moussavou, there are no valid reasons for creating a protected area here in a logging concession that generates revenue for the government. "TBNi's operations are perfectly legal. In accordance with Gabon's forest code, conservation can very well be carried out in a concession by the company itself, as they have the means to do it," he said.

In an email dated Aug. 5, Moussavou told Mongabay that “The Director General of Wildlife and Protected Areas himself went to Massaha to explain to the locals that their request for a new protected area was not possible.”

This, despite his colleague having welcomed the community’s proposal during his visit in May.



Logging operations start despite compliance doubts

While Massaha residents await a response to their request, TBNI has opened up dozens of kilometers of roads into the AAC 2019 portion of the forest and begun logging. It’s about to build a wooden bridge to access the other bank of the Liboumba River, where teams are now conducting a timber inventory of areas of intact forest in the AAC 2020 portion of the concession.

TBNI is operating without a wildlife protection plan (WPP), which is meant to reduce the impacts of logging on wildlife, but Moussavou told Mongabay the company doesn’t need it.

“Since last year, the approval of Wildlife Protection Plans has been suspended by the Minister via the Directorate General of Forests and Protected Areas,” he wrote in the email. “The company had initiated the process, but it is on hold. Once the suspended approvals process resumes, the company will be obliged to engage with the local communities.”

Regarding their contract and purported commitment to bringing socioeconomic benefits to the villages affected by the logging, he said, “At the moment, all companies are in the process of drawing up contracts for the logging exploitations in the AAC 2019, authorized in 2020.”

Moussavou added that an environmental impact study is not, at this point, a legal obligation for companies operating forest concessions. “However, as part of preparing a Development Plan, there is a socio-economic and participatory mapping study and there is a management plan, which takes care of the demarcation of the villages including agricultural projects which take into account the rights of locals. Environmental impact studies will be a legal obligation in the next Forest Code.”

If any of these studies exist, they have not been shown to village residents or to Mongabay. The community says the company has offered no benefits to the village. The villagers have repeatedly challenged TBNI’s conduct, only to be ignored.

Moussavou’s statements are in stark contradiction to recent official communication about environmental impact studies, signed by Stéssy Medi Moudinguela, director-general of environmental protection, and sent to logging operators in June.

The circular says, “The opening of a new felling area may involve other impacts, to be documented in the EIA or an Environmental Impact Statement. In other words, each new felling area must be the subject of an Environmental Impact Statement in cases where the felling permit already has an EIA, and is subject to a full EIA if the permit in question has never been subject of a study.”



Logs from TBNI's UFG-2 concession. Image courtesy of Ivindo FM.

Source: <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/10/mixed-signals-from-gabon-officials-to-villagers-fighting-to-save-a-forest/>