

CASE STUDY 1

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DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC)

Organization: Environnement, Ressources Naturelles et Développement (ERND)
Region: Africa

In the Lokolama and Penzele regions of Équateur Province, ERND works with Indigenous Peoples, fishermen, and farmers to safeguard peat-lands and primary forests that constitute over 90% of the territory. These ecosystems are home to *bonobos*, small primates, and a rich diversity of plant species. The area represents ancestral lands, managed through traditional ecological knowledge passed down across generations that navigates sustainable land management practices such as crop rotation, peat-land monitoring and seeds adapted to local conditions. Decisions regarding resources are made jointly by all members of the village, which strengthens mutual aid and a sense of responsibility. They have rules and customs, passed down from generation to generation, to protect certain areas and control the use of local resources.

The communities face multiple pressures, large scale logging is the most pressing. The DRC's 2002 Forest Law seeks to ensure sustainable forest management and exploitation, and the 2021 law in the Equateur Province recognizes the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their lands and resources according to their traditions. However, local authorities lack the financial and technical capacity to enforce them and cope with the influx of logging companies.

As a result, logging companies operate largely unchecked, leaving ecologically rich and carbon storage peat swamp forests highly vulnerable to land grabbing and deforestation, despite their critical role as carbon sinks in climate change mitigation. Insecure tenure compounds these challenges: Indigenous Peoples often hold only secondary rights tied to local communities' systems and lack formal recognition of customary ownership rights, leaving them vulnerable to exclusion, discrimination, and exploitation in the absence of formal legal recognition. This is particularly marginalizing Indigenous women that lack inheritance right despite their important role in sustainable management, agriculture and traditional ecological knowledge.

The quantitative impact of these pressures is significant. Between 2001 and 2024, 495 hectares, or 39%, of forest in Lokolama and Penzele were lost, most of it after 2016.[28] This deforestation has generated net annual carbon emissions of approximately 5.78 ktCO2e, illustrating the global importance of local forest custodianship.[29]

Despite these threats, traditional practices continue to sustain biodiversity and cultural continuity. Communities maintain farming, hunting, and fishing systems adapted to local conditions, while knowledge of animal behaviour, cultivation techniques, and medicinal plants is transmitted across generations. Ecological understanding is reinforced through stories, songs, rituals, and ceremonies, which also strengthen spiritual ties to the land. Seasonal harvesting and natural regeneration underpin the sustainable use of peat-lands and medicinal plants.

ERND has worked to consolidate these practices by establishing over 140 local development committees, organized around community huts. These committees document Indigenous pharmacopoeia, reinforce cultural ties to history and territory, and promote biodiversity conservation through sustainable forest management. At the same time, ERND engages in advocacy to ensure that Indigenous custodianship of natural resources is formally recognized. By pressing for the implementation of sustainable management policies and alignment of national legislation with international commitments, ERND supports both local resilience and global environmental goals.

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