How Logging Is Affecting the Democratic Republic of Congo

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The vast rainforest of the Congo Basin, one of the most important in the world, has long been protected by its remoteness: In many places, roads are rare.

But there is a river.

A raft of logs is prepared for a trip down the Congo River.

Raft by Raft, a Rainforest Loses Its Trees

Dionne Searcey, a climate reporter at The New York Times, and photographer **Ashley Gilbertson** traveled 500 miles along the Congo River and its tributaries to explore the forces driving deforestation.

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The mighty Congo River has become a highway for sprawling flotillas of logs — African teak, wenge and bomanga in colors of licorice, candy bars and carrot sticks. For months at a time, crews in the Democratic Republic of Congo live aboard these perilous rafts, piloting the timber in pursuit of a sliver of profit from the dismantling of a crucial forest.

The biggest rafts are industrial-scale, serving mostly international companies that see riches in the rainforest. But puny versions also make their way downriver, tended by men and their families who work and sleep atop the floating logs.

Aboard one raft, Gracious Muteba cooked for the crew.

Forests like these pull huge amounts of carbon dioxide out of the air, making them essential to slow global warming. The expanded scale of illegal logging imperils their role in protecting humanity's future.

A riverside industrial logging port.

The Congo Basin rainforest, second in size only to the Amazon, is becoming increasingly vital as a defense against climate change as the Amazon is felled. However, the Democratic Republic of Congo for several years in a row has been losing more old-growth rainforest, research shows, than any country except for Brazil.

In this lawless trade, the river is the artery to the world. In some places, where once-towering trees are prepared for the journey, the water itself is stained caramel from the bleeding sap of felled trees.

A logging port near the capital, Kinshasa.

Small town, big dreams

Every day along the forested Congo River banks, rafts held together with little more than roping and optimism set out on the arduous voyage.

Our journey began not far from the community of Loaka.

School children gathered to sing the national anthem near their riverside school in Loaka.

Loaka is nestled along a tributary flowing into the Congo River. Dozens of wooden houses are perched on stilts. Canoes dug from tree trunks line the shore. Branches used for cooking fires smolder in piles nearby.

And on the water recently, a flotilla was taking shape.

Men were peeling switches of vines to tie together a raft of dozens of logs cut from the forest in their backyard. Their destination: the sprawling riverside lumber ports of the capital city, Kinshasa, hundreds of miles downriver.

It's a project involving almost everyone in Loaka, a growing community that simply cannot make enough money from fishing to expand its cramped school, let alone buy backpacks and other supplies.

None of the men were eager for the journey, though. The last time they tried it, the trip was a catastrophe.

“We had so many problems,” said Bosenga Kongamondo, the town’s top official.

Bosenga Kongamondo

Back then, they had set out with 120 logs, but disaster struck almost immediately.

The raft hit a sandbar, ripping loose dozens of logs, which floated away. Then, the men got stranded on another sandbar for days. While they were stuck, a violent rainstorm swept away even more logs.

Weeks later, when they finally reached Kinshasa, the men had only 37 left to sell. Yet the village today feels it has no choice but to try once more, even without proper cutting permits.

Alphonse Molosa wandered into the thicket recently and clambered atop a conquest: a giant African coralwood tree lying on the forest floor, its bright orange insides bared.

Felling such a tree doesn't give Mr. Molosa any sense of accomplishment, he said. In fact, he counts himself a lover of trees. He looks forward to the blooming of afromosia trees, also known as African teak, a rare species with reds so vibrant he can spot them from his boat in the middle of the river.

"Ah, it's beautiful," Mr. Molosa said. "I heard on the radio that trees help to give us oxygen that we breathe and for us to survive. But here there is no other way to survive without cutting trees."

In a few weeks, after they have collected enough logs, he and his neighbors planned to push them into the river and once again hop aboard.

Money and corruption

A few miles downriver, we stopped at a logging beach where a floating market catered to workers on a huge industrial raft that dwarfed the ones assembled by Mr. Molosa and his neighbors.

An industrial logging beach.

Here, some 250 giant logs with ragged, floppy bark were being strung with steel cables and readied for the river at a small beach used by an international logging company.

Industrial logging in Congo is laden with corruption, according to a recent government audit. Lucrative licenses have been handed out as political favors. In fact, the past six ministers of environment, the very people in charge of protecting the forest, are accused of illegally selling off huge swaths of it, according to the audit, which reviewed Congo's industrial logging as of 2020.

Nearly all the logging, Congolese officials say, today is in some fashion illegal.

"Fraud upon fraud," said Ève Bazaiba Masudi, Congo's environment minister, who was appointed in April 2021. A few months into the job, Ms. Bazaiba opened an investigation after saying her own signature had been forged on logging licenses.

Ève Bazaiba Masudi

Tracking trees in Congo can be a circuitous route, filled with shady characters and big money. The giant trees lining the beach downriver from Loaka belonged to a Chinese company, Castor, which workers and managers at the beach said was tied to "Tango Fort," the nickname of a Congolese general, Gabriel Amisi Kumba.

Over the years, General Amisi has been accused of involvement in illegal mining and arms trading and was sanctioned for human rights abuses by the American and European authorities. His logging concessions, which he sold to Chinese investors in 2018, were issued illegally, the government audit said. In a text message, General Amisi denied any connection to the company.

Neighboring countries such as Gabon have put tight controls on logging in recent years. Ms. Bazaiba, who is also deputy prime minister, is under great pressure to do the same and has begun an effort to rein in corruption that includes suspending logging licenses that were given out illegally. She and Congo's president in 2021 secured pledges of $500 million from international donors to fight deforestation.

During a March visit to her office in Kinshasa, timber industry lobbyists hovered outside her door. Leading them was Albert Yuma Mulimbi, the head of the nation's business lobby. Last year he was ousted as chairman of the state mining enterprise, Gécamines, amid corruption allegations. Mr. Yuma did not return a request for comment.

"I have so many pressures," Ms. Bazaiba said.

But the logging trade plays out in places far removed from global conferences and stuffy government offices in the capital city.

"And if we die"

Out on the river, where the silvery water is indiscernible from the sky, the perilous and haphazard nature of the trade becomes clear.

A tugboat was bobbing in the shallow water off Castor's beach, preparing to power a flotilla of logs downriver.

The giant rafts are too unwieldy for the tug's engine to handle, the crew said, making the work dangerous. They earn about $6 a day. If logs are lost, pay is docked, and "if we die, it's not the responsibility of the company," said Mbranda Makombo, the tugboat's mechanic, a veteran of five trips guiding logs to Kinshasa.

Just a few weeks before, Mr. Makombo said he did, in fact, nearly die. He and his wife and child were sleeping below deck when a larger boat rammed them. His family was saved only by men from the other boat who cut through the twisted metal.

Mbranda Makombo, right, in front of the tugboat.

As Mr. Makombo spoke, Jean-Louis Boonga Ifaso, an agricultural engineer for Castor, the logging company, sidled up in a dugout canoe, listening in.

Castor does the right things, he said. It operates a factory in Kinshasa where logs are transformed into planks used in construction, and it exports wood worldwide. (A country manager for Castor did not return requests for comment.)

But Mr. Boonga, who also works as an activist, said he knew well the problems of the trade. He sat in his shallow canoe, gently rocking on the river, and vented: About the power of money. About government inaction. About how Congo is a victim of pollution created by the industrialized nations that now want Congo's trees — the same trees that can help absorb carbon dioxide from the dirty world they made. About the rules that govern the forest that no one obeys.

International companies follow most laws, he said, but not all of them. "When it comes to human resources and their Congolese staff, they don't have any respect," he said.

Shakedown

On the water, disrespect takes many forms. Brutal rainstorms. Hidden sandbars. And demands for bribes.

"Push! Push!"

Across the water we heard a captain calling out to a dozen men in waist-deep water, toes wrinkled from a full day spent trying to break free their 46-log vessel, which was stuck on a sandbar.

On the other side of the raft, Clémentine Ekoba, the cook and cleaner for the crew, tended a small fire. "Every trip this happens," she sighed.

"The biggest problem is getting stuck in the sand. The second biggest problem is the navy." Officers along the river, underpaid themselves, are notorious for demanding bribes.

Already on this trip, Ms. Ekoba said, in just two weeks' time the crew had paid bribes of flour, beans and aspirin. "They come and they take everything — even this," she said, pointing to an oar.

Ms. Ekoba maintained a secret hiding place underneath the nylon bag stretched between sticks that serves as her tent where she had squirreled away $50 worth of Congolese francs. So far, officers hadn't found it.

"But we still have a long journey," she said.

“We import toothpicks”

Not all logs travel by raft. Some international companies operate immense steel barges heaped high with wood destined for overseas.

A jumble of huge logs rested atop one of the barges at a riverside beach operated by Sodefor, a subsidiary of a Liechtenstein-based company.

Nearby, a man squatted beside a freshly cut bilinga tree. He pulled out a measuring tape and stretched it across the sawed trunk, as gold as ripened wheat. It was more than six feet across.

Industrial barges like Sodefor’s aren’t immune to the loss of cargo from storms that blow across the river, though the big companies have sophisticated ways to recapture the logs that get away. Sodefor has even deployed sonar and divers to retrieve logs that spilled into the river during a storm.

In an interview, Sodefor’s general manager, José Trindade, said the company’s operations were “completely legal.”

“The government has to differentiate between the companies that respect the rules and those that don’t,” he said.

Sodefor also transforms its timber into plywood before export, Mr. Trindade said, a practice that Ms. Bazaiba, the environment minister, would like all international companies to adopt. Recently, she banned exports of uncut timber in the hope that the companies would hire more Congolese to shape the wood, rather than filling those jobs abroad.

“Can you imagine, we’ve been exporting our timber, but we import toothpicks from China?” she said. “It makes no sense.”

Waylaid by the wind

We pulled onto the shore of Bolobo, a bustling hamlet at a bend in the river that was littered with hundreds of planks scattered across the sand, remnants of a disaster still playing out.

Three months earlier, a crew of 20 men had set off with a raft of 6,000 perfect planks, precut in hopes of getting a higher price downriver in Kinshasa. They had pulled into Bolobo to restock on food when a storm blew in. In no time, 1,000 planks had slipped into the river and were swept away, along with a shelter they had built atop their raft.

For two weeks, workers had been slowly reassembling the craft. Men stood in chest-high water, heaving against a large branch they hoped would pry free a part of the raft, now half-buried in sand.

“The wind is not your brother,” said André Ezabela, one of the raft’s rowers.

Etienne Yaekela, the owner of the planks, had arrived from Kinshasa just days before to survey the damage. “Thank God no one died,” he told the men once he saw the extent of the damage.

Over what was left of the raft, the wind whipped a red and blue Congolese flag. Our motorboat broke down here, too, and so we waited two days for our own repairs, watching boys on the beach using a broken plank as a teeter-totter.

As we pulled out of Bolobo, we saw water lapping across another broken raft, this one abandoned. A few pieces of wood remained barely tethered, threatening to break loose into a river ready to claim them. A monument to defeat for those who would pass.

About 60 miles downstream from Bolobo, the river narrows significantly and deepens. Sandbars disappear. But there are other risks.

Crocodiles roam the banks. Navy patrols increase. Malaria is ever-present.

Nehemie Mokonjo and his raft of 137 logs had made it this far, losing only two.

But the mosquito netting that lashed them together was starting to fray. If the wind picked up, Mr. Mokonjo’s cargo would be in danger. “There is nothing else that scares us more,” he said.

Yet he had a more urgent problem: His little sister was sick.

Jeanne Nzambe, 6, was aboard with her mother, the raft’s cook. Wearing a poofy pink satin dress with white polka dots and sparkly belt, she lay drooped across the logs under a shelter of mosquito netting. She had been feverish for three days.

Jeanne Nzambe on her raft.

The closest hospital was in Kinshasa, 15 hours away by raft. But our vessel, a motorboat, could get there in three.

As much as the river leaves people in need, it also creates kinship. People help one another.

Mr. Mokonjo hopped aboard, cradling his sister, and the boat raced downriver to find a clinic.

School desks, superyachts

A crook in the river, and Kinshasa's sprawling port of Kinkole comes into view. It's the last stop for men and women who have spent weeks or months on the river. But not for the trees they have shepherded here.

Rafts line up by the dozens, tangled in the lily pads of a filthy marsh, waiting in the shallows in what is essentially a watery parking lot.

Along the shore, a cacophony of rumbling forklifts hauls tree trunks across knee-deep ruts in dried mud. Screaming chainsaws tear through wood, spitting splinters into the air. Barefoot laborers muscle logs up the riverbank where men shape them into plywood and planks. Women collect scraps of bark to sell for use in cooking fires.

All have found a way to profit from Congo's trees. For them, the forest is the only option for survival.

Disappointment awaits some of the rafts' captains who arrive to find their logs are too skinny and immature for purchase. All that way for nothing.

Logs that are sold here will end up in Kinshasa's classrooms, where students clamor for new desks. Others will be taken abroad for use as "exotic wood" flourishes in billionaires' yachts that line glittering ports. Many will end up in living rooms all over the world, formed into stylish tables and cabinets that began as towering trees in Congo before being crafted in the furniture factories of China or Vietnam.

And the appetite for these trees shows no signs of slowing.

Next door to Kinshasa's logging port, giant new logging barges are being forged as fast as possible, workers say two or three a month, to send back up the river to gather, all the more efficiently, even more precious logs.