

# Infrastructure expansion and the fate of Central African forests

by William F. Laurance<sup>1</sup>, Mahmoud I. Mahmoud<sup>2</sup>, Fritz Kleinschroth<sup>3</sup>

**The tropical forests of Central Africa sustain exceptionally high biodiversity and environmental services such as forest hydrology and carbon storage. These forests span the Congo Basin and equatorial forests adjoining it. Like much of sub-Saharan Africa, this region is facing dramatic changes in the number, extent and environmental impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects. A particular concern is how such projects will affect important wildlife habitats, protected areas, and environmental services.**

Across Africa, infrastructure projects are expanding at an unprecedented pace. These projects include a large number of industrial mining projects; over 50,000 km of proposed ‘development corridors’ that would crisscross much of the continent; the world’s largest hydropower dam complex, at Inga Falls on the Congo River; ambitious plans to increase industrial and smallholder agriculture; widespread industrial logging; and a variety of other transportation, energy, and mining ventures.

Although African infrastructure expansion is largely driven by foreign investments to exploit natural resources such as minerals, timber, and fossil fuels, major infrastructure projects are also being advocated because of concerns about Africa’s booming population, which is projected roughly to quadruple this century. This creates serious concerns about food security and human-development challenges, and broader anxieties about the potential for social and political instability.

**AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT CORRIDORS** A true game-changer for African nature conservation is at least 33 ongoing and proposed “development corridors” that will crisscross sub-Saharan Africa. If completed in their entirety, the corridors would collectively span more than 53,000 km in length.

The development corridors would have a range of environmental effects, including major impacts on existing protected areas. First, they could bisect reserves, fragmenting them and opening them up to illegal

Rainforest clearing for a Chinese-operated road-construction camp in the northwest of the Republic of Congo.  
Photo © William Laurance





## Development corridors could affect approximately 2,200 protected areas in Central Africa.



Bill Laurance with the skull of a forest elephant, slaughtered by poachers for its valuable tusks in Nouabale-Ndoki National Park in the Republic of Congo.



Mahmoud I. Mahmoud



Fritz Kleinschroth

encroachment and poaching. Second, by promoting colonization, habitat loss, and intensified land uses around reserves, they could decrease the ecological connectivity of the reserves to other nearby habitats. Finally, environmental changes in the lands immediately surrounding a nature reserve tend to infiltrate into the reserve itself. So, for example, a reserve with extensive logging and hunting in its surrounding lands and weak reserve management will also tend to have those same threats occurring, to some degree, within the reserve itself.

A detailed analysis of the proposed and ongoing development corridors suggests that (1) many corridors as planned would occur in areas that have high environmental values and are only sparsely populated by people (Fig. 1); (2) as presently planned, the corridors would bisect over 400 existing nature reserves; and (3) assuming that land-use changes intensify only within a 25 km-wide zone around each corridor, more than 1,800 additional reserves could experience deterioration in their ecological integrity and connectivity as well as increased human encroachment.

In total, the 33 development corridors could bisect or degrade about one third of all existing protected areas in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, the 23 corridors that are still in the early planning or upgrading phases would

be in particular dangerous for nature. If completed, these corridors would bisect a higher proportion of high-priority reserves, such as World Heritage Sites, Ramsar Wetlands, and UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserves, than existing development corridors. Collectively, the 23 planned corridors would slice through more than 3,600 km of protected-area habitat. A number of the approximately 2,200 African protected areas that could be affected by development corridors are located in Central Africa. For example, two epicentres of bisected reserves – located in the mineral-rich belt spanning southern Cameroon and the northern Republic of Congo, and the Great Lakes region of East Africa – harbour vital habitats for wildlife, including great apes. There would also be considerable losses and deterioration of important habitats outside of protected areas. The World Bank projects that expanding roads and transportation infrastructure will be the biggest drivers of deforestation in Central Africa in the next 1-2 decades.

**THE CROSS RIVER SUPERHIGHWAY** One example of the large-scale infrastructure being planned for Central Africa is the Cross River Superhighway in Nigeria. This 260 km-long highway would run from the country's far south-eastern coast to Abuja, the national capital (Fig. 2). As currently planned,

FIGURE 1

Estimated conservation values (based on biodiversity, threatened species, critical ecosystems, wilderness attributes, and environmental services) of habitats within a 25 km-wide buffer zone around 33 proposed or existing development corridors in sub-Saharan Africa. © William Laurance and Sean Sloan.

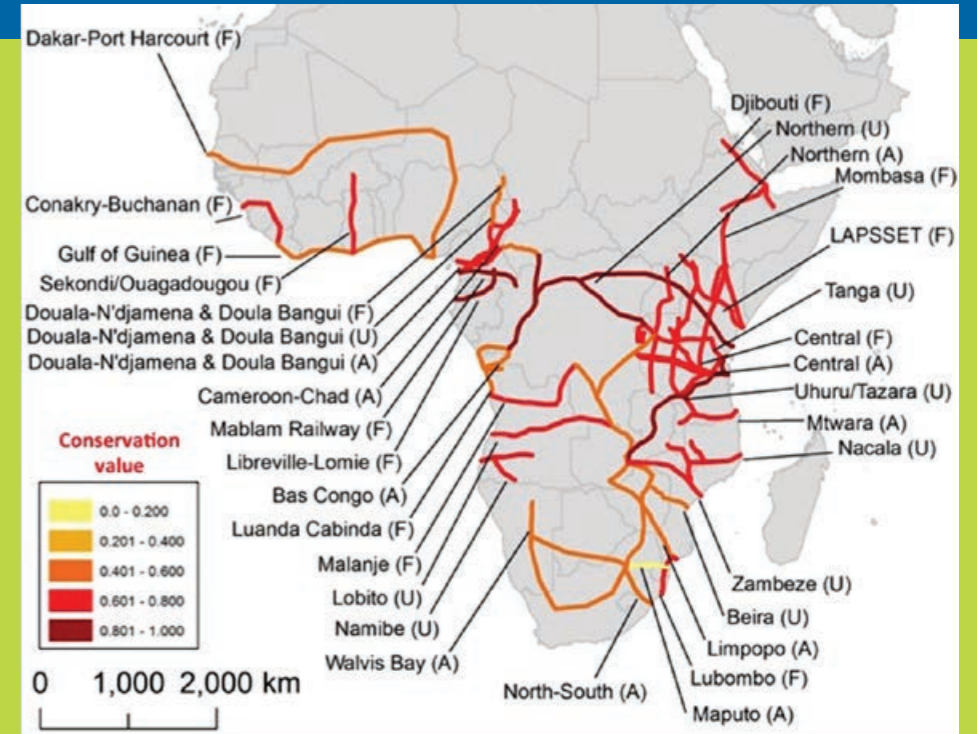
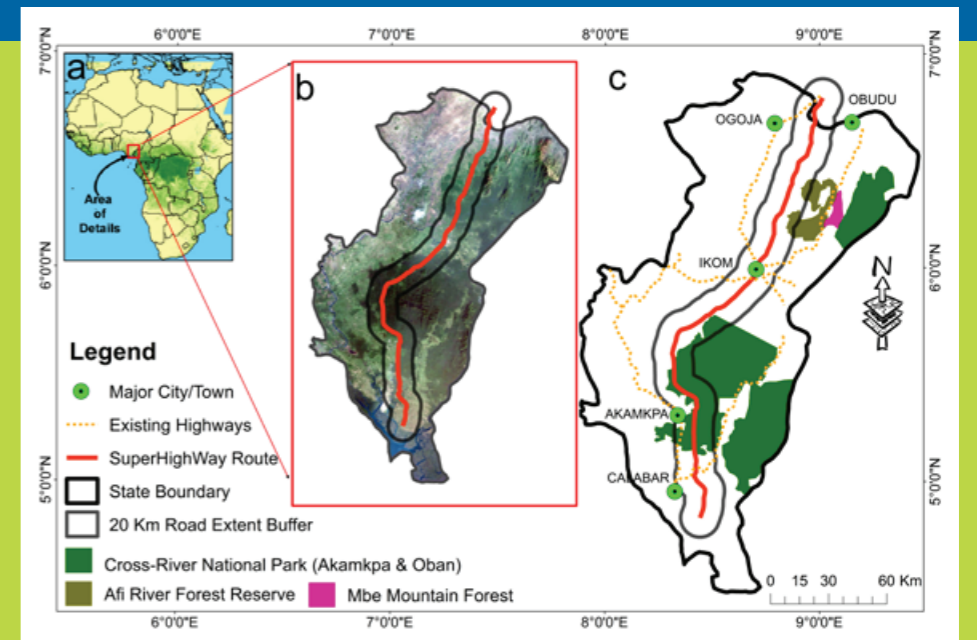


FIGURE 2

(a) An inset of the proposed Cross River Superhighway in Nigeria; (b) the 260 km-long highway route with its 20 km-wide exclusion zone; and (c) spatial overlap between the highway's exclusion zone and current protected areas (green) in southern Nigeria. © William Laurance and Mahmoud Mahmoud.





**If completed in their entirety, the development corridors would collectively span more than 53,000 km in length.**

the highway will cut through the most important forested regions in the country and skirt the border of Cross River National Park, which has, amongst others, the highest numbers of primate species in the world as well as Nigeria's greatest plant and animal biodiversity.

The superhighway project has raised widespread alarm, both nationally and internationally because Cross River National Park sustains two-thirds of Nigeria's surviving tropical rainforest – about 90 percent of which has previously been destroyed. In this context, Cross River National Park is irreplaceable. It sustains 18 species of primate, which is amongst the highest primate diversity in the world. Among these is the critically endangered and locally endemic Cross River Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*), which like other primates in the region is highly sensitive to hunting. It also sustains a great plant diversity and a variety of other imperilled wildlife species, such as forest elephants and leopards.

In addition to its major environmental effects, the Cross River Superhighway would have serious social consequences. Traditional land titles have been revoked within a 20 km-wide zone around the highway, affecting at least 42 forest communities within 13 Local Government Areas, especially of the Ekuri people. Leases to these traditional lands and wildlife habitats are being auctioned off by the Cross River State government, whose present governor, Ben Ayade, is a key proponent of the highway. Most leases are reportedly being sold to foreign timber and mining firms, in what have been described as abuses of Nigerian land-use laws.

Already, millions of trees have been bulldozed along the proposed road route. The environmental impact assessment conducted for the project has been widely derided, with the superhighway project temporarily halted by the federal Minister for Environment, Amina Mohammed. The project is also challenged by a lawsuit brought by nongovernmental groups in Nigeria, who claim its environmental impact assessment is farcical.

**EXPANSION OF CONGO LOGGING** An expanding network of large-scale African development corridors, such as the Ouesso-Bangui-N'Djamena, Libreville-Lomie, Cameroon-Chad, and Northern Upgrade, will soon traverse large areas of Central Africa. These development corridors will span parts of Cameroon, Gabon, Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic. At present, many forests in these nations are still remote and only partially accessible through logging roads and existing timber concessions. Unless environmental safeguards are rapidly implemented, the spate of new infrastructure projects will open up large tracts of Central Africa to further pressures, such as mining, hunting and deforestation for agriculture. A key priority is retaining the large areas of the region affected by selective logging as native forests for biodiversity and ecosystem services, rather than seeing them cleared or depleted of wildlife by commercial and subsistence hunting and ivory poaching.

In temperate forests, a permanently accessible and maintained road network is usually considered an essential part of sustainable forestry to enable timber harvesting, ecological monitoring, hunting, and recreation. In the tropics, however, road networks built for selective logging are considered a high risk for native forests by opening the door for uncontrolled land use, forest degradation and wildlife exploitation.

**ACCESS** Human encroachment into unexploited rainforests generally follows a trajectory of land uses. Logging companies are often the first to build new frontier roads into continuous blocks of intact forests to access commercial timber. After abandonment, former logging roads – at least in Cameroon and the Republic of Congo – are frequently used by hunters to access an extensive network of footpaths and motorcycle routes. Such access allows market-oriented hunting, leading to severely reduced wildlife populations, even to the extent of depleting the forest of many species. Motorcycle paths required for commercial hunting activities can only be found on logging roads abandoned less than 10



A skidder carrying a log along a forestry road in the north of the Republic of Congo. Photo © Fritz Kleinschroth



years ago. That means rapid forest recovery impedes access after a while and hunters move on to more recently logged areas.

Some of the hunting camps may serve as nuclei for more permanent settlements, predominantly using slash-and-burn agriculture. This shifting cultivation on a small scale has taken place in tropical forests for millennia without causing permanent damage. However, once connections are established from these settlements to main roads and markets, they can sustain growing human populations, potentially exhausting timber supplies and other forest values. As such areas become increasingly accessible and their forests depleted of economic value, decision makers often find it increasingly difficult to resist the allure of foreign and domestic investors or land speculators. Such changes can drive large-scale forest clearing for intensive uses such as oil palm and rubber plantations.

Not all of the immense number of logging roads in Central Africa follow this same fate. In the northern Congo Basin, less than 20 percent of all logging roads actually remain permanently open. However, if local population pressures or lax law enforcement permit the commercial bushmeat trade to thrive, then logging roads and the poaching they facilitate can be highly detrimental to forest ecosystems and wildlife. Limiting the number and spatial footprint of permanent forest roads constructed for timber-harvest operations, and closing roads after harvests are completed, are vital priorities.

**CONCLUSIONS** Clearly, those seeking to manage the forests of Central Africa sustainably must grapple with serious and immediate challenges regarding (1) effectively designing, assessing, and mitigating new infrastructure projects to limit their environmental and social impacts, (2) providing good governance for nations experiencing unprecedented foreign investments for infrastructure and natural-resource extraction, and (3) managing the economic and social instabilities that can plague nations largely reliant on just a few natural resources or commodities for export income, avoiding the so-called “natural-resource curse” or “Dutch Disease”.



PHOTO © WILLIAM LAURANCE

A pangolin for sale as bushmeat along a highway in south-central Cameroon.

An array of solutions is needed to meet these serious challenges, ranging from an increased focus on proactive land-use planning, sustainable agriculture, and forest management; to improving environmental impact assessments for new infrastructure projects, to better managing protected areas, and finally to addressing deficiencies in forest governance and law enforcement. None of these goals will be easy to advance, but the fate of Central Africa’s forests and societies will suffer even more if we fail to try.

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Unless environmental safeguards are rapidly implemented, the spate of new infrastructure projects will open up large tracts of Central Africa to further pressures, such as mining, hunting and deforestation for agriculture.

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