



## Forest peoples in the central African rain forest: focus on the pygmies

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**Note:** The material for this article is drawn from two papers by R.C. Bailey, S Bahuchet, B. Hewlett and M. Dyson, published in K Cleaver, M. Munasinghe, M. Dyson, N Egli, A. Peuker and F. Wencélius, eds. 1992. *Conservation of West and central African rainforests*. Washington, DC, World Bank.

*This article describes the life of the central African pygmy people and highlights their relationship with neighbouring farmers as being valuable for the economic, social and sustainable use of the rain forests. It points out that the nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous peoples is potentially compatible with the sustainable exploitation of the forest, often more so than are "sedentarization" programmes. The authors affirm that biological diversity exists in central Africa because of human habitation and that excluding human beings from large areas of forest will not conserve the present biological diversity.*

Approximately 200 million ha of forest lie within the boundaries of six central African countries (Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda and Zaire). This area of forest represents 20 percent of the world's tropical moist forest, second in size only to Amazonia, and contains a wide diversity of flora, fauna and human cultures. The most prominent geomorphological feature of the central African rain forest is the Zaire River basin, which tones a vast depression in the centre of the African continent. The lower and central part of this river basin, which varies from 200 to 500 m above sea level, contains vast areas of forest that are seasonally or permanently inundated. On its eastern lip, the basin is rimmed by a chain of volcanic mountains that mark the Western Rift Valley with its highly fertile soils on which depend some of the highest population densities in Africa. Moving northwards and southwards from the central basin, the forest gradually gives way to gallery forest interspersed with savannah and then, finally, savannah alone. These areas around the lip of the basin at the forest-savannah ecotone have richer soils and experience greater rainfall seasonality. They also have higher population densities and are the source of most immigration into the forest.

Compared with other areas south of the Sahara, population densities in central African countries are low. In Gabon and the Congo, for example, there are fewer than six inhabitants per square kilometre, and in Equatorial Guinea and Zaire fewer than 20 inhabitants per square kilometre. Moreover, the populations are unevenly distributed more than 30 percent of the people are concentrated in urban areas. In Zaire, which contains 1(X) million ha of closed forest, or about one-half of Africa's total rain forest, approximately 40 percent of the population is urbanized. Despite the fact that the region is sparsely populated, more people live in and rely on the forests of central Africa than in any other tropical forest area in the world.

## African pygmies

Genetically, there is no evidence that pygmies are distinct from other Africans: there is no "pygmy marker" that is common to all pygmies and exclusive of all other Africans (Cavalli-Sforza, 1986). Similarly, linguistically and culturally, pygmies cannot be considered distinctive from other central Africans; there is no distinctive "pygmy language family", and pygmies across central Africa exhibit a broad range of cultural adaptations, many similar to those of Bantu- and Sudanic-speaking African farmers.

### A pygmy village in Cameroon

Pygmies are distributed discontinuously across nine different African countries Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Zaire, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Congo and live in innumerable distinct ethnic groups that are separated by geography, language, customs and technology. The one characteristic that is common to them all, regardless of their location or degree of acculturation, is their disdain for the term "pygmy". Without exception, they prefer to be called by their appropriate ethnic name, such as Mbuti, Efe, Aka, Asua, and consider the term "pygmy" as pejorative.

None the less, this article refers as "pygmies" to those peoples distributed across the forested regions of central Africa who are particularly short in stature and who have traditionally lived by specializing in hunting and gathering wild forest resources, which they consume themselves or trade to neighbouring Bantu- and Sudanic-speaking farmers in exchange for cultivated foods.

Contrary to many romanticized accounts of pygmy life, there are no people living today in central Africa independently of agriculture as pure hunter-gatherers, and all evidence suggests that this has been true for many hundreds of years (Bahuchet and Guillaume, 1982) - if indeed pygmies ever lived in the forest without access to agricultural foods (Bailey and Peacock, 1988; Bailey et al., 1989).

Nowadays, most pygmies are what we call specialized hunter-gatherers. They specialize in extracting resources from the forest and thus are nomadic in habit. They consume some of those resources themselves and they trade some with neighbouring farmers to acquire cultivated foods, iron implements and other material items. Wherever pygmies have been carefully studied, including the most remote corners of their geographic distribution, researchers have found them relying on cultivated foods for at least 50 percent of their diet (Bahuchet, 1985; Bailey and Peacock, 1988). Moreover, pygmies everywhere have extensive relations with neighbouring Bantu- and Sudanic-speaking farmers that extend beyond economic trade to include all aspects of political, religious and social life. Indeed, it is not possible to consider pygmy culture and subsistence in isolation from the African farmers with whom they trade and live.

In many areas of central Africa, specific pygmy clans have traditional relationships with specific groups of farmers which are passed from one generation to the next, creating a complex web of economic and social exchange that leads to high levels of cooperation and support. Pygmies provide forest products protein-rich meat, in particular - to farmers, while the farmers provide much-needed starch to pygmy foragers. The meat, honey and medicinal products from the forest are significant contributions to the farmers' survival, while pygmies would be hard-pressed to do without the iron implements and the political representation provided by the farmers. In most areas, pygmies are viewed by farmers as essential to successful ceremonies, while the farmers can have considerable control over many crucial pygmy events, including marriage, circumcision and burial. Relationships between pygmies and farmers are so extensive that elaborate fictive systems tie the two groups together in a web of kinship that ensures social and economic interdependency.

Close relationships between pygmies and farmers extend to their perception of rights to land. Each farmer clan has rights which are recognized by all neighbouring farmer clans to a specific area of forest, which they may clear for crop cultivation or where they may hunt, fish, gather and extract the materials required. The clan of pygmies traditionally associated with that same farmer clan also has recognized rights to exploit the same area of forest. The farmers assist their pygmy partners in maintaining exclusive rights to this area, and violations by either pygmies or other farmers are contested through negotiation, or sometimes violence. In this way, most, if not all, areas of forest in central Africa are claimed by indigenous people and elaborate informal mechanisms exist to guarantee specific land rights.

### [Pygmy children in the Congo](#)

It should be clear that, for the purposes of designing programmes for development or conservation, pygmies cannot be considered in isolation from forest farmers. Central African farmers and pygmies exist together, are interdependent and should be considered as an integrated economic and social system.

## **Patterns of adaptation, acculturation and development**

While most pygmies in central Africa still live within the traditional farmer-pygmy relationship, most also engage in activities outside that relationship and, like their farming partners, have managed to adapt in myriad ways to changes caused by development and commercialization. This is true not just in individual localities where development has been more extensive, but in every area of central Africa. Any one population of pygmies spans the full range of acculturation and adaptation to changing conditions.

### **Commercial hunting**

Because of the growing populations around the edges of the Zaire River basin, there is a growing demand for meat from the forest. Increasingly, pygmies are becoming commercial hunters, spending a greater proportion of their time hunting forest game and selling larger quantities of meat to traders who travel great distances from towns and cities located at the edge of the forest. These traders bypass the traditional farmer-pygmy relationship and pay cash or trade starch for meat to induce pygmies to intensify their hunting. The effect is to break down the traditional farmer-pygmy relationship, to bring pygmies into the money economy and, inevitably, to cause the depletion of wild game' thus endangering not only the forest fauna but also the subsistence base and basic way of life of the pygmies and their farmer partners (Bailey, 1982; Hart, 1979).

### **Employment**

Many pygmies also work on a casual, sporadic basis for commercial coffee, rubber or palm plantations or for logging companies. They usually work seasonally planting, weeding or harvesting on plantations or identifying trees and supplying other workers on logging operations with meat. Pygmies generally do not hold positions of authority or receive high salaries.

### **Farming and "sedentarization"**

In recent years, and for various reasons, some pygmies have become sedentary, village-living farmers. In some regions, insufficient areas of forest remain to support the pygmies' specialized hunting and gathering life; in others, overhunting has depleted forest game. Moreover, in every region there have been periodic formal campaigns by national governments to force pygmies, or induce them with gifts, to settle in villages and become sedentary farmers.

Those who design and implement sedentarization programmes do not recognize the economic or social value of the traditional farmer-pygmy relationship, nor do they appreciate the contribution that forest nomads make to the national economy by efficiently exploiting forest resources on a sustainable basis. The pygmies themselves are seldom, if ever, consulted or given a decision-making role in the design and implementation of these programmes. Most sedentarization programmes have tailed, as the pygmies return to the forest when the gifts run out or they abandon their gardens when the first good honey season begins.

### [A pygmy honey gatherer preparing a tree-climbing strap from a liana](#)

There are pygmies who have voluntarily turned to farming and who live in villages along the roads. However, like traditional African farmers, they spend at least some time in the forest and depend on it for a significant supplement to their mixed farming subsistence. A few such sedentary farming pygmies, again like their farmer neighbours, grow some cash crops in addition to their subsistence crops. However, cash cropping by pygmies is far from common in any region.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

A number of conclusions and recommendations can be drawn for those engaged in planning and administering development projects in central Africa, particularly those affecting areas inhabited by pygmy peoples.

Few, if any, unoccupied lands exist in central Africa. For the purposes of planning the development or protection of any area of land, it should be assumed a priori that any forest is occupied or claimed by some person, or some clan, lineage or group. Even if there are no overt signs of occupation (e.g. houses or garden sites), the land is most likely to be occupied intermittently and exploited by people whose lifestyles depend on frequent movement.

The present diverse composition and distribution of plants and animals in the rain forest is the result of the introduction of exotic species, the creation of new habitats and the manipulation by the forest-dwelling people for thousands of years. No areas are what most proposals and reports refer to as "pristine", "untouched", "primary" or "mature" forest. Present-day biological diversity exists in central Africa, not in spite of human habitation but because of it.

The land rights of all indigenous forest dwellers must be recognized. In most central African countries, all land legally belongs to the state: however, even the state must recognize traditional rights. Traditional rights need to be articulated by these people themselves as the first step towards securing them.

The value of a nomadic lifestyle should be recognized as a potentially effective strategy for exploiting the tropical rain forest in a sustainable way and as being vital to the economic, social and psychological wellbeing of forest-dwelling people. While mobility creates difficulties for governments and agencies to provide education, health and other services to tribal people, there are means of accommodating mobile lifestyles and ensuring that such people are not denied appropriate opportunities.

The protection of forest areas (reserves and parks) is not incompatible with the continued presence of forest-dwelling people. The creation of protected areas should not necessitate the removal and resettlement of forest dwellers, nor should it require severe restrictions on their rights to forest resources. Frequently, indigenous groups are permitted to remain in protected areas as long as they remain "traditional" - a term usually defined by policy-makers without consultation with, or extensive historical knowledge of, the people themselves. Such restrictions lead to "enforced primitivism". The management policy for reserves should be general enough and flexible enough to allow for variation in management styles across local

groups and over time.

Planning the organization and management of biological reserves in central Africa will be most effective if it enlists the participation of indigenous people at levels below that of the regional government and even below that of tribal chief.

### [Cutting footholds In tree as part of honey gathering](#)

### [Increasingly, pygmies are engaging in seasonal employment for logging operations](#)

Pygmies should be assured equal rights as full citizens of the state and assured equal access to services offered to other citizens. As governments take action to rectify violations of such basic human rights, they must take care not to seek justification for resettlement, sedentarization or other mechanisms for forced acculturation.

For any development project, the relevant forest-dwelling people should be an integral and early part of the planning process. To increase forest people's input into development planning, local people's representatives (not necessarily "elite" members) should be asked to participate in the early stages of project planning, and planners and consultants who know either the local tribal language or the regional dialects should be sought.

In the forest areas of central Africa, tourism is only just beginning, but it is sure to grow with the creation of national parks and the growing popularity of eco and ethnotourism in the developed countries. If forest dwellers are made part of the formation of tourism strategies (rather than manipulated by those seeking profits), tourism can enhance cultural awareness and the knowledge of ethnic history while avoiding the "people in a zoo" phenomenon. The participation of indigenous people will be crucial for maintaining the region's cultural and environmental integrity.

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