



# Radical Anthropology

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## The scarcity myth

What hunter-gatherers can teach us about sharing



Jerome Lewis on abundance  
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# Managing abundance, not chasing scarcity: the real challenge for the 21st century

Humanity must move away from seeing natural resources as scarce commodities to be controlled by the most powerful, says Jerome Lewis

In Congo–Brazzaville in the 1990s it was striking that local people, and particularly the Mbendjele Yaka Pygmy hunter-gatherers with whom I lived<sup>1</sup>, did not distinguish between the activities of conservationists and those of logging companies. But they did distinguish between the Euro-Americans currently present in the forest and their colonial predecessors.

Whereas the colonial administrators and traders of the past are called ‘elephants of our fathers’ (*banjoku na batata*) in ordinary speech, today’s ‘white people’ (*mindele*) are referred to as ‘red river hogs’ (*bangwia*). During colonial times Europeans involved in this area mostly lived alone and travelled in the forest accompanied by Chadian or Senegalese soldiers. Today, whether loggers or conservationists, Euro-Americans live grouped together in substantial purpose-built settlements and travel around the forest in teams, locating and counting forest species using Yaka guidance and expertise.

The impressive wealth of Euro-Americans is picked out by these metaphors. Whereas large elephants had a high trade value in the past, today, with the development of the bush-meat trade, red river hogs have become more commercially valuable. The hogs’ habit of living in groups means that three or four may be killed at a time. Everyone lives in the same forest, yet all white *Mindele* appear to be incredibly wealthy, just as all red river hogs somehow grow surprisingly fat. There is a certain mystery in how pigs become so fat from the forest that all creatures share, which is also attributed to the way Euro-Americans generate huge wealth from Yaka forest using baffling technology.

The implications of this grouping together of loggers and conservationists led me to think harder about the way Euro-Americans engage with the forest and its resources in comparison to the Yaka. This article explores the cultural conceptions and observations that underpin their conflation of what seem to us opposed activities. The Yaka’s analysis challenges basic assumptions underpinning dominant western approaches to environmental conservation, particularly current attempts to assure the future of the flora and fauna of the Congo Basin by establishing protected areas. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the Yaka’s analysis accords with the principles behind the latest attempts to improve forest management through forestry certification schemes which allow for sustainable human exploitation of the forest.

Broadly speaking, people use two contradictory models to conceive and understand forest resources in Northern Congo-Brazzaville. In general, people coming from industrialised countries value forest resources because of their scarcity whereas those people living in or near the forest value them because of their abundance. Here it is argued that Yaka understanding of how people can maintain an abundant nature offers conservation organisations a new paradigm for conceptualising their role in the management of Central African forests, and establishes the basis for a meaningful dialogue with local people. Local conceptions of forest resources as abundant provide a more appropriate model for resource management in Central Africa than the continuing imposition of Euro-American derived models based on scarcity.

## The Mbendjele Yaka

The Yaka (*Mbendjele*) Pygmies<sup>2</sup> living in northern Congo are forest living hunter-gatherers who are considered the first inhabitants of the region by themselves and their farming neighbours, the Bilo<sup>3</sup>. Each Yaka associates her or himself with a hunting and gathering territory called ‘our forest’. Here, local groups of Yaka visit ancestral campsites in favoured places where they will gather, fish, hunt and cut honey from wild beehives depending on the season and opportunities available. Though many occasionally make small farms or work for money or goods, they value forest activities and foods as superior.

Yaka value travelling through the forest and camping in different places. Social organisation is based on a temporary camp generally containing at most some 60 people in ten or so quickly but skilfully built leaf and liana huts. Camps are able to expand or contract easily in response to changing conditions relating to the viability of hunting and gathering activities or social events and needs. If Yaka have difficulty finding game in one area of forest, they simply move to another area, allowing game to replenish. In general, Pygmy peoples use their mobility and flexibility to avoid or resolve problems like hunger, illness, conflict, political domination or disputes among themselves.

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Hunter-gatherers such as the Yaka have been characterised as ‘egalitarian societies’, where differences in power, wealth or authority are systematically avoided or undermined (Woodburn 1982). This characterisation is based on an analytical distinction between an ‘immediate-return’ hunter-gatherer economy and agricultural, herding or capitalist ‘delayed-return’ economies that is helpful for understanding the differences in approach to resource management and the environment.

**I**n delayed-return societies work is invested over extended periods of time before a yield is produced or consumed. This delay between labour investment and consumption results in political inequality because it becomes necessary to establish hierarchical structures of authority to distribute work, yields and control vital assets as labour matures into a yield. The majority of contemporary human societies are based upon delayed-return economies. Efforts by communist states to develop more egalitarian structures inevitably yielded to these fundamental forces, reasserting new types of hierarchies and inequalities to manage the delay between labour and yield.

‘Immediate-return’ hunter-gatherers such as the Yaka are strongly orientated to the present. People like to obtain a direct and immediate return for their labour – eating most of their production on the day they obtain it, as hunters, gatherers and sometimes as day labourers paid in food. They value consumption over accumulation and will share their food with all present on the day they acquire it. Without the authority and power derived from the ability to withhold vital resources, hierarchy has great difficulty establishing itself. Thus societies whose economies are based on immediate-returns tend to be egalitarian societies. These are common among hunter-gatherers such as Central African Pygmies, Southern African San and the Hadza of Tanzania, as well as among Orang Asli groups such as the Batek or Chewong in South East Asia.

Yaka, like other immediate-return societies, greatly stress obligatory, non-reciprocal sharing as a moral principle. A person who happens to have more of something, such as meat or honey, than they immediately need, is under a

moral obligation to share it without expectation of return. In this way resources taken from the forest are equitably distributed among all present, and accumulation is both unfeasible and impractical. Other camp members will, if necessary, vociferously demand their shares from someone with more than they can immediately consume.

Anthropologists have characterised this type of sharing as ‘demand-sharing’<sup>4</sup> and observe that it leads to a high degree of economic and social equality. There is a noticeable absence of social inequality between men and women and between elders and juniors. Any individual, man or woman, adult or child, has the opportunity to voice their opinion and resist the influence of others as they see fit.<sup>5</sup> Yaka actively shun status since it will attract jealousy that may ruin their success in valued activities. Thus, in contrast to western expectations, good hunters will refrain from hunting too often. They will avoid anything that could be interpreted as boasting about their skill or success, lest their colleagues become jealous and curse them (see Lewis 2003).

**T**he forest is idealised as the perfect place for people to live, in contrast to cleared spaces such as farms or rivers. Mbendjele Yaka women like to give birth to their children in the forest. Everyday conversations are obsessed with the forest, with the locations of desirable wild foods, with different tricks and techniques for finding and extracting them, with the intricacies of animal behaviour or plant botany, on stories of past hunting, fishing or gathering trips, or on great feasts and forest spirit performances. Yaka say that when they die they go to a forest where Komba (God) has a camp. They cannot conceive of their lives, or deaths and afterlife, without the frame of the forest around them. They express their dependency on and the intimacy of their relationship with the forest in the proverb, “A Yaka loves the forest as she loves her own body.”

The Yaka believe that Komba created the forest for them. It has always been, and will eternally be there for them. They, similar to many other forest hunter-gatherers, as Bird-David discusses (1990; 1992), have a faith that the forest will always provide them

with what they need. Abundance is taken as natural. Should people not experience abundance, it is not because resources are diminishing but due to improper sharing.

The emphasis on sharing as the means to maintain abundance is peculiar to egalitarian societies. Conceiving of resources as abundant can lead to a variety of approaches to them. To illustrate this I will describe divergences between the Yaka conceptions that inform my argument and those held by their Bilo neighbours<sup>6</sup>, and others.

### **Abundance**

Most local Congolese conceive of the forest and its resources as abundant. In the 1990s conservationists confirmed this by designating this area as one of rich biodiversity. But unlike Yaka hunter-gatherers, Bilo groups depend on subsistence farming that requires the felling of large trees and the clearing of forest to create fields for cultivation and dwellings. The forest bordering their clearings requires constant and energetic cutting if it is to be prevented from reclaiming domesticated land. From this perspective the abundant forest is a wild force that needs to be conquered for successful social life to occur. Bilo often justify claims to own forest areas in terms of conquest.

As the experience of Europeans and Americans attests, a ‘conquering’ relationship with an abundant nature can have disastrous consequences on natural systems, especially when combined with modern industrial technology. Only relatively recently, with the expansion of scientific research into industrialisation and capitalism’s impact on environmental systems, have Euro-American conceptions of an abundant nature been replaced by careful estimations of the value of individual resources in terms of their scarcity and human demand for them. A striking example of this is the planned launch of carbon trading on international stock markets in 2012, in which trees standing in Northern Congo can be traded by bankers as carbon stocks in environmentally ‘feel-good’ investment portfolios.

Bilo and earlier Euro-American views of an abundant and wild nature placed human society outside it, and emphasised metaphors of control and

conquest in describing human relations with natural environments. In contrast, the Yaka see themselves as part of a socially interacting and generous nature that provides abundantly to all so long as rules about sharing are respected.

### ***Ekila*<sup>7</sup> as a guide to proper sharing**

For Yaka, people should be successful in their activities because nature is abundant. If they are not, it is because they, or somebody else, has ruined their *ekila* by sharing inappropriately. Sharing is fundamental to sociality. Yaka share even when there would seem to be no need to share, for instance, when huge amounts of fish are captured by everyone in the dry season; and they still share even if this means the producer remains with almost nothing. They explain that if they didn't share, their *ekila* would be ruined and they would no longer catch fish or find food.

*Ekila* regulates Yaka environmental relations by defining what constitutes proper sharing. For example, by not sharing food, especially meat, properly among all present, a hunter's *ekila* may be ruined so that he is unsuccessful in future. A hunter who is too often successful may stop hunting for a while for fear that his successes will attract envy and ruin his *ekila*. If either a husband or wife inappropriately shares their sexuality with others outside their marriage, it is said that both partners have had their *ekila* ruined. A menstruating woman is said to be *ekila* and her smell will anger dangerous forest animals. She must share part of her menstrual blood with forest spirits in order that her male relatives continue to find food. Even laughter, a highly valued activity, should be properly shared. Whereas laughter shared between people in camp during the evening makes the forest rejoice, laughing at hunted animals ruins the *ekila* of the hunter.

If *ekila* has been ruined it causes men to miss when they shoot at animals, and for women it causes them to have difficulties in childbirth. If parents eat certain *ekila* animals when their children are still infants, this can provoke illness in their children and even death. Failure or difficulties in the food-quest or procreation are discussed in relation to *ekila* rather than to

inadequacies in human skill or the environment's ability to provide. People recognise each other's skills, but in this egalitarian society it is impolite to refer to them. Rather, success or failure may be discussed in terms of *ekila*.

A whole area of forest may become *ekila*. This becomes apparent when hunting is consistently unsuccessful, and successive misfortunes befall those who camp in or pass through a certain area. Yaka hunters from the clan responsible for that area will place leaf cones stuffed with earth on all foot paths leading into the *ekila* forest. This warns other Yaka that the forest is dangerous, and that they should not attempt to find food but turn back or simply pass through quickly. Despite a non-scientific reasoning, the effect of this allows degraded areas of forest to be left in order that their resources increase to sustainable levels again.

Although couched in unfamiliar idioms, *ekila* is a theory for maintaining abundance. Adherence to these practices, and their explanation, has established a relationship with resources that has assured Yaka people have experienced the forest as a place of abundance for the entirety of their cultural memory. *Ekila* teaches that by not sharing properly resources become scarce. By sharing properly, resources will be experienced as abundant.

### **From abundance to scarcity**

Even in the short time I have been visiting the forest, areas I stayed in during the 1990s are considerably less abundant now than they were then. While visiting in 2003 I found myself walking in wide elephant trails (*mbembo*) that were obviously becoming overgrown from lack of use. I remarked this to my companions. They responded that the elephants walk elsewhere now due to the noise of the loggers' bulldozers, not that elephants were becoming scarce.

Explained within the logic of *ekila*, outsiders coming into Yaka forest have not understood the importance of proper and equitable sharing as the means to guarantee the continuing abundance of its resources. Indeed, the opposite is occurring as outsiders, such as loggers, obtain exclusive rights to resources that they systematically remove without replacement for great

personal enrichment, and others such as conservationists, who obtain large grants to exclude all other people from areas of forest they occupy. This colonial-like expansion by loggers and conservationists is far advanced in forest belonging to another Yaka group, the Baka of Cameroon. When I visited Cameroon in November 2002 Lambombo, a Baka elder, explained:

*Before all this was our forest, our ancestors were all hunters who lived in the forest. Our fathers told us to live in this forest and to use what we needed. Komba [God] made the forest for all of us, but first of all for the Baka. When we see the forest we think, 'That is our forest'. But now we are told by the government and the conservationists that it is not our forest. But we are hunters and need the forest for our lives.*

*Of these others who say our forest is theirs, there is Ecofac [the conservationists], MINEF [the ministry for forests] and the loggers. When the loggers cut our trees we got nothing, and we still get nothing. We who are older notice that all that was in the forest before is getting less. We used to always find things – yams, pigs and many other things – we thought that would never end. Now when we try and look we can't find them anymore.*

*The government and the conservationists have messed up our forest. When we looked after the forest there was always plenty. Now that we are forbidden to enter our forest when we put out traps they remain empty. Before if we put out traps and nothing walked on them we would take them elsewhere to let the forest rest. We know how to look after the forest.'*

Lambombo describes the movement from abundance to scarcity that he has witnessed. His perceptive analysis of how this situation came about and the persecution they continue to experience is unfortunately marginalised by those, such as the government and the conservationists, which have been entrusted with responsibility for these areas.

Though it goes back further than Lambombo may realise, the increasing

scarcity of forest resources coincides with Euro-Americans' engagement with the Yaka. Since the Atlantic Trade Era and the arrival of Europeans in Central Africa the demand for forest products has been steadily increasing. The Atlantic Trade Era brought ivory, slaves, and cam wood onto international trade circuits. In the colonial period ivory, rubber, copal resin, duiker skins and red wood were the main exports. Since independence those resources that remain valuable, namely hard woods and minerals, have been increasingly intensively exploited using industrial technology combined with political and military strategising.

In practical terms, for local people their forests have been converted into floral and faunal assets that have been traded or rented out by the national government under pressure from international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, wishing to reclaim loans. It is this system of intensive and unsustainable exploitation of forest resources by outsiders, euphemistically called economic development, that is the root cause of the severe environmental problems facing the forests of the Congo basin.

By contrast, the sustainability and success of Yaka forest management over many centuries is portrayed as unrestrained and primitive by non-Yaka. Traditional subsistence activities such as hunting, petty trade in forest products or slash and burn agriculture are often depicted as destructive. Local people are stereotyped as careless about their environment, uneducated, easily corrupted and only interested in short-term gain. However, the majority of intensive commercial poaching is organised by local educated elites who manipulate their power to set up effective poaching and trafficking networks that are immune from prosecution. The weak majority is being scapegoated due to the activities of a powerful minority. Such misreading of local realities serves to justify international elites sending expatriate conservation managers to apply Euro-American ideas about wildlife management, developed in industrialised countries, to places such as Yaka forest. The result is militaristic management regimes that convert part

of the forest into an animal refuge for northern scientists to study forest ecology, and for northern tourists to watch forest animals, while the land around the park is 'developed'. In Congo, government and international attitudes perceive of hunting and gathering in areas around the park as primitive and wasteful, whereas industrial logging, extensive commercial tree plantations and similar activities are desirable developments.

Yet this view of development is bringing about the steady impoverishment of the world's resources to the benefit of rich nations and national elites. Forest resources are now so effectively destroyed throughout the rest of the world that they are increasingly scarce and the subject of guilt and intense anxiety from industrialised governments and their peoples. However, their commitment to globalising industrial capitalism overrides this realisation. The current fashion to promote protected areas legitimises this while condemning the Congo Basin to become just like European or American landscapes where nature is subjugated to the needs of people. Conservationists promoting protected areas seem to have already given up on the possibility of maintaining the forests of the Congo Basin intact. Without change this is likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Amazingly, the relationship between the intensification of industrial extraction and the increasing diminishment of natural resources continues to be ignored or glossed over. So a recent effort to impose more industrial exploitation on the Congo Basin was presented as a conservation initiative called the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP). In September 2002, the United States and South Africa joined 27 public and private partners to launch the CBFP at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. Its stated goal is to promote economic development, alleviate poverty, and improve governance and natural resource conservation through support for a network of protected areas and well-managed forestry concessions in the Congo Basin. These initiatives promote alliances between huge logging companies, national

governments and international conservation organisations to impose militarily enforced protected areas in small areas of forest while encouraging industrial development in remaining areas. At the time the CBFP was conceived, no forester in Central Africa had Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification<sup>8</sup> demonstrating that they could log sustainably and many loggers publicly claimed it would be impossible for FSC to work in Africa.

Enforcement of forestry regulations was, and continues to be, undermined by rampant corruption. Available documentation of illegality and abuse of cutting regulations<sup>9</sup> provides strong evidence of the profoundly unsustainable logging practiced by most companies in Central Africa. Yet, despite all this, conservation organisations have encouraged, facilitated and established numerous such partnerships. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) even created its own network called Central African Forest Trade Network (CAFTN) when substantial funds became available from USAID (the United States Agency for International Development) in 2002.

But the evidence suggests that many logging companies use the panda (the WWF logo) to shield themselves from criticism that could damage their image in high value European and American markets, and to facilitate getting public funds and cheap bank loans. In 2005 Greenpeace released a damning report on Danzer's illegal activities and urged a general boycott of Danzer products<sup>10</sup>. In spite of this WWF continued to support Danzer by facilitating access to markets to sell their goods through WWF's Global Forest Trade Network, and in 2007 WWF was actively lobbying a major German bank for a loan on Danzer's behalf.

There seems to be a significant risk that supporting such initiatives as the model for the future of forest conservation in the Congo Basin will condemn Central Africa to become an expanse of unsustainably logged and impoverished woodland surrounding small islands of militarily protected forest.

### **Red river hogs: loggers and conservationists**

A partnership between loggers and conservationists seems strange at first

sight. However, conservationists and loggers have been mutually dependent for some time already. Since the 1970s industrial logging has rapidly expanded with the importation of improved technology and skills to exploit the forest in ways that mostly earn money for international companies and local elites. This has had numerous consequences.

Industrial logging requires a substantial labour force and large infrastructural developments to sustain it. Regular wages create demands for goods and services from employees that attract other people to provide them. Employees' less well-off relatives come to live with them in town. These communities need feeding; intensive farming or hunting to supply the town with food offers an attractive income for traders and others. Roads used to evacuate logs also provide transport for bushmeat and other forest products. They also disenclave remote villages. People flock to the logging town out of curiosity, to seek employment and to enjoy the intense social life available there.

Urban developments suddenly emerge in areas of high biodiversity, changing the land for kilometres around and leading to the common problems associated with rapid urbanisation in a forest environment. Local elites see lucrative opportunities for gain by combining their political immunity with modern technologies and the access to the forest provided by the loggers' infrastructure.<sup>11</sup>

The consequences of opening up forest by loggers draws wider attention to it from international environmentalists who take an interest in logging's impact, and associated activities on forest resources. The impact is great. To date most environmentalists' reaction to this focuses on establishing small areas of protected forest for isolation from local people, and intensively policing them rather than seeking to ensure that industrial activities such as logging are only permitted if they are sustainable.

Despite this peculiar myopia, current trends are to establish even larger protected areas that cross national boundaries in what is being called a 'landscape management approach'.

Major international finance for this has been provided through the Central African Forest World Heritage Initiative (CAFWHI), whose focus, like most conservation projects in Central Africa, is policing the bushmeat trade – 84% of the budget is for this activity alone. The illegal bushmeat trade is cited as the single greatest threat to the Central African forests and used to justify the draconian imposition on local people of exclusion zones protected by armed 'eco-guards'. The activities of illegal and unsustainable logging companies are not addressed. Despite many millions of dollars, no funding is planned for community consultations, co-management initiatives or local capacity building.

Exclusion zones and protected areas displace the problem, they do not solve it. Elephant poachers I met near the Nouabale Ndoki National Park in 1996 in Congo explained that they simply crossed the river into Cameroon to hunt there for the local Congolese mayor. Corruption allows the biggest culprits of environmental crime to escape with impunity. Commercial bushmeat traders and farmers go elsewhere. But for Yaka hunter-gatherers it is much more difficult since each zone will have important seasonal wild resources not necessarily available elsewhere in the territory they normally live and travel in. The militaristic enforcement of hunting restrictions around protected areas does not address the root causes of the bushmeat trade. These are economic and political.

Using shocking images of dead apes, monkeys and other game, conservationists obtain funds in rich countries to support their activities. But this focus is acting as a diversion from addressing the root causes of the serious environmental problems facing Central Africa. Local people are being scapegoated unfairly, while the urgent need to reign in corruption and develop practices that ensure sustainable resource use continues to be neglected.

As international capital draws out more and more of the forest's resources, international environmentalists are seeking to isolate increasingly large areas of forest and exclude local people from them. The implications of this dual occupation of the forest by loggers

and conservationists are potentially very serious for Yaka and other Pygmy people. They are the easy victims of those outsiders extracting resources and those 'protecting' them.

From Yaka perspectives conservation, like logging, makes abundant forest scarce. By sealing off areas to all except the privileged (Euro-American scientists and tourists, important officials and project workers), conservationists claim to protect wildlife. This enforced preservation of forest in some areas serves to justify the forest's destruction elsewhere. International institutions such as the World Bank promote and finance conservation initiatives at the same time as promoting, funding, and even obliging governments to open their national resources to exploitation by foreign corporations.

Surprisingly, this contradictory behaviour only occasionally provokes outrage. In 2005, for instance, in a campaign spear-headed by the Rainforest Foundation and Greenpeace, the World Bank was widely criticised for appearing to have pushed through surreptitiously forest legislation that was advantageous to international logging interests and international conservation organisations but ignored civil society and local forest peoples' needs. The furore that followed resulted in a moratorium on new logging concessions in Democratic Republic of the Congo and a very critical World Bank Inspection Panel Report (2007).

Justifying the promotion of industrial exploitation by providing grants at the same time to conservation organisations is not a new strategy. Already in 1992 Polly Ghazi, writing in *The Guardian*, noted how the World Bank, despite a 'green forestry policy', offered commercial rate loans to boost Congo-Brazzaville's timber exports. 'To help tempt the government of the Congo, which already owes the West huge debts, the loan offer is being linked to a free UN grant for setting up protected conservation areas. The \$10 million grant will come from the new Global Environment Facility, raising fears that the much heralded green fund could be misused to damage rather than protect rainforests...'

Like the World Bank, loggers and conservationists are each using the

other to justify their actions and obtain funding to develop their activities. Loggers are able to divert attention from the harmful impact of their activities by pointing to efforts being made to protect conservation areas and by paying lip-service to the ideals of sustainable forestry. Conservationists justify the draconian repression of local peoples' traditional rights by referring to the destruction caused by activities associated with logging or that depend on the infrastructure created by loggers. As exclusion zones encompass more and more forest, logging companies use their existence to justify enlarging and accelerating their activities around the protected areas.

**W**hy conservation agencies focus activities on limiting local peoples' hunting or bushmeat trading activities rather than on the massive road building activities of multinational companies seems to be an issue of scale linked to what is achievable in a funding cycle – often just three years. It is less daunting to attempt to control local people than to address the underlying causes of environmental destruction – the obligatory capitalisation of resources imposed by the big international lenders on poor countries governed by corrupt political systems.

The dominance of protected-area thinking in conservation planning means that the economics of industrial forest exploitation are rarely challenged by national governments or conservationists working in Central Africa. Within the context of the debt arrears facing the Congo the value of the forest is calculated according to its value on international markets – ie, the commercial worth of its timber. The value of non-timber forest products to forest people, one of the most impoverished social groups, in addition to the ecological functions of watershed maintenance and biodiversity protection that a large forest provides, have been ignored. Promoters of industrialisation couch their arguments in terms of wealth generation and poverty reduction. However, the substantial profits generated by industrial exploitation are unequally distributed. The lion's share goes to a few, probably foreign, businessmen and members of the national elite.

The political economist Bayart (1993) characterised these political systems as based on 'the politics of the belly'; the principle that a person will use their position of authority and power to 'eat' whatever they can, and grow fat (wealthy). Indeed this tendency among civil servants and politicians has created a context of pervasive corruption that undermines the normal way that states redistribute wealth through taxation and local investment. Major social investments in infrastructure or in equipping buildings to serve the public interest, such as schools or hospitals, are undermined by corrupt individuals siphoning off money and equipment. This makes social planning subject to all kinds of unexpected problems that often cause actions to fail spectacularly.

Omitting these factors in conventional economic analysis undervalue the forest's resources and make industrial and commercial land use appear more attractive than they are. In one of the rare studies to quantify the alternative value of forest resources to local people, Camille Bann's (2000) 18-month study in Ratanakiri, Cambodia, estimated the value of harvesting non-timber forest products (NTFP) to yield US\$3,922 per hectare to local people in comparison to no more than US\$1,697 per hectare if harvested for timber.

NTFP are a very important source of subsistence for the poorest sectors of society. All households in the study relied on NTFP, but only 30% of households in the region have a family member engaged in the wage economy. Forest products provide an important natural mechanism for alleviating poverty without explicit government investment. Additionally forest must remain intact for local peoples' unique cultures, values and traditional knowledge to continue. Given the negative ecological impacts of timber harvesting on watershed maintenance and biodiversity conservation, then the net benefits from harvesting timber are diminished further.

Not calculating the value of the forest from local peoples' perspectives is condemning huge areas of Central Africa's forests to become resources for industrial activities, the great majority of which are not conducted in a sustainable way. Of the hundreds of logging companies operating in the

Congo Basin, not even a handful have achieved Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification, indicating that they are sustainable forest managers. And among those that have been certified, controversy often surrounds the legitimacy of the certificate, to such an extent that some founders of FSC militantly oppose the Council today.

### Scarcity

Euro-Americans, and people from capitalist countries more generally, are infatuated with goods that are scarce in their own countries. The discourse of endangered species is premised on this. Rarity is an explicit theme in media portrayals of Yaka forest. It is depicted as the last great wilderness of the Congo basin (Congo. Spirit of the Forest, 2000), or more dramatically in the National Geographic as 'Ndoki, Last Place on Earth' (Chadwick 1995). These sensational portrayals are promoted by documentaries glamorising their material and underpin conservationists' funding applications.

Both loggers and conservationists are monopolising what they conceive of as scarce resources; loggers want control of precious trees, conservationists of rare animals and undisturbed forest areas. The perception of scarcity is the ideological bedrock of both these activities, and a driving force in the industrialisation and capitalisation of the world's resources. The Yaka's conflation of loggers and conservationists is more perceptive than most people realise.

Most conservationists come from industrialised nations where the awesome power of industrial exploitation has devastated the original environment and turned it into patchworks of spaces in use by people in different ways, with the occasional token to the original appearance of the land in the form of well-managed parks. Industrialised-nation conservationists then go out to non-industrialised nations like Congo and apply the same model of development, focusing themselves on delimiting and protecting small pockets of faunal and floral resources from local and industrial exploitation.

The competition for scarce funding puts pressure on conservation to

appear to be effective; to be seen to achieve goals and be successful. Indeed, these pressures are so great that most conservation organisations need to be more concerned with appearances to the rich north than to the local area where work is being done. The quickest way of appearing to be doing something in this context is to take the protectionist approach and isolate an area of forest, exclude locals and enforce protection.

The enforcement and protection of protected areas becomes a military-like operation, sometimes described by conservationist field-workers as a 'war on poaching'. Since the mid 1990s when Eco-guard militias became a popular conservation tool, I have recorded a number of cases of serious human rights abuses, including murder, by Wildlife Conservation Society Eco-guards in northern Congo, and complained to those responsible. I have also been told by victims of very serious abuses by WWF Eco-guards in south-eastern Cameroon ranging from torture and public humiliation to the burning down of an entire village.

This aggressive and colonial-like imposition of protected areas on local people understandably antagonises many and establishes their relationship to conservation as involuntary and based on force. This is the basis for most of the conflicts conservation faces and is likely to face in Central Africa.

From local perspectives, rich and powerful outsiders are denying poor people access to their basic needs. This is seen as a grave abuse of basic human rights by many. Local people may rarely protest in front of powerful white people, but the resentment they feel may (and does) lead to serious problems for conservationists. In this context it is very difficult for conservationists to convince local people that they are concerned with their best interests. Protected areas in the Congo basin have been imposed on local people by international organisations pressurising national governments. Many contemporary conservationists' narrow view of their task in Central Africa is resulting in the acceleration of the industrialisation of forest resources, the very process underlying the problems conservation seeks to remedy.

In Central Africa, rather than grasp what local conceptions can offer, conservationists constantly seek to transform how locals understand their environment. The very notion of 'endangered species' judges resources according to their scarcity. For people such as Mbendjele, this is contradicted by their experience. To understand current conservation discourse requires a dramatic reformulation of their thinking based on counter-intuitive claims that they have little reason to do.

The current dominance of the scarcity model precludes the idea of sharing, it even encourages voracious consumption. Conservation needs to get away from the paranoid thinking that informs the hoarding mentality underpinning industrial capitalism and much conservation activity, and cease to be enslaved to market economics. The economic considerations of multinational corporations and institutions presently dominate too much decision-making. Instead decisions should be based on the understanding that nature is indeed abundant and capable of sustaining all life, if it is shared properly.

### **Making the Yaka lifestyle scarce**

Yaka forest knowledge and practice have ensured that large areas of forest thrive and endure. Later-comers, such as conservationists, are benefiting hugely from this good custodianship of forest resources. While conservationists depend on Yaka forest knowledge and skills to identify, explore, and understand the environments they come to control, the exclusionary policies they impose on Yaka people threaten the very relationship with the forest that permitted the transmission and development of the forest skills and knowledge conservationists need.

When access to good forest is denied or made dangerous for Yaka, it becomes difficult to transmit forest knowledge adequately to succeeding generations. Over time forest knowledge will become rarer among young Yaka people as resources are impoverished or access denied. Eventually Yaka knowledge may only remain in the notebooks and publications of anthropologists, ecologists and other scientists. The ultimate disenfranchisement of the hunter-

gatherers will thus be complete. Their forest land and resources are denied them or destroyed, and they no longer have the knowledge necessary to return into the forest if ever their rights were to be recognised. This process is occurring to varying extents throughout the region. It is probably most advanced among the Twa Pygmies in the Great Lakes Region, most of who have become landless potters and beggars (Lewis 2000).

**F**orest knowledge, like forest resources, has been transformed from being abundant and widely available into a scarce and controlled expertise, only recorded in formats available to those with a northern-style education – a format that so far excludes access by Yaka forest people.

If current activities continue in the Central African forests, the hunter-gatherers' fate will be sealed by the continued imposition and dominance of an ideology of scarcity. Whether forest resources are over-exploited and depleted as a consequence of industrial capitalist extraction methods or sealed off from local people by zealous animal protectionists from rich countries, the result for local people is the same. There will be no space in the forest for forest people unless they become involved in the activities of the foresters or the animal protectionists. Their livelihood and resource base have been swept away from them and control over it given to multinational companies and Euro-American animal protection agencies.

While the forest was in local people's control it was considered abundant, and actually was so. Since Euro-Americans arrived and began to perceive of forest resources as scarce, desirable and valuable, so they have become. Now control over the future of the forest is vested in the hands of people with little or no genuine long-term or generational interest in preserving it beyond their limited engagement with it, often for just a fiscal year or two, or a project funding cycle.

This tradition of natural resource use that is based on what was done in rich countries, if widely applied through the process of globalisation to other parts of the world, will result in massive



areas of farmland, urban dwellings and industrial areas, surrounding the occasional token to the original appearance of the land in small and insignificant protected areas. This is not a viable model for the future of the tropical forests of the Congo Basin.

Nor is it a model for long-term environmental conservation more generally in non-industrialised areas. How long will small islands of protected resources be able to survive when surrounded by extensive urban sprawls with subsistence slash and burn agriculture supporting impoverished populations, or when surrounded by industrially exploited or otherwise transformed areas from which all valuable resources have been intensively removed, and most of the profits from their exploitation successfully exported to rich countries?

### Abundance as the basis for environmental management

Rather than attempt to change the conception of abundance common among local people, maybe the onus is on conservation to change its point of view from one that endlessly chases and protects scarce natural resources to one that sees natural resources as adequate, even abundant. Seeing that there is enough for everybody, but it just needs to be shared properly, is the lesson that we can learn from the Yaka and *ekila*.

The Yaka are offering conservation a model for the future. Rather than repressing them and disregarding their basic human rights, conservationists need to learn from them. Taking abundance as the starting point for a meaningful dialogue with local people conservationists could create the conditions necessary for effective long-term conservation of Congo Basin environments. For conservationists *ekila* is a metaphor for the need for political engagement in decisions about how resources are distributed and used.

This would result in conservation taking the maintenance of abundance as its goal, rather than the protection of scarcity. Following *ekila* logic, the key to abundance is equitable sharing. This translates in the language of modern environmentalism as assuring effective resource management and benefit sharing – a movement away from seeing conservation as a series of

protected areas surrounded by industrial zones, to a process of equitably managing resources for all. This is clearly not happening within the currently popular paradigm of scarcity.

However, there are indications that when the Forest Stewardship Council's Principles are applied rigorously the hunter-gatherers' model is being adopted. The Forest Stewardship Council approach, although expressed in very different language, has adopted similar principles to those of Yaka forest stewardship. When taken seriously, the FSC management model is based on maintaining the forest's abundance through socially just and ecologically sustainable harvesting of forest resources. This is a modern idiom for talking about the same issues that concern *ekila*.

Unfettered industrial capitalism is the real menace to the key world environments that we all depend upon, not Yaka hunters seeking food for their families. While happy to impose hunting bans on traditional hunter-gatherers such as Pygmies, conservationists are surprisingly reluctant to impose logging bans on international logging companies. Unless industrialists can show their methods to be both environmentally and socially sustainable they should be prevented from continuing to exploit the forests of the Congo Basin. The reluctance to apply the same standards to rich northerners as are applied to local people is the downfall of conservation efforts in the Congo Basin.

Environmentalists can only expect non-industrialised nations to stand up to the forces of capitalism if they do so themselves, and apply greater pressure to counter the imperatives of global capital in the places from where it originates – in Europe, Asia and America. There can be no effective conservation of our planet without committed political engagement and a willingness to question the assumptions that underpin dominant attitudes to our environment. As is self-evident to the Yaka, but seemingly not to many conservationists, humanity is part of nature, not something that it is possible to isolate from nature. We need to move away from seeing natural resources as scarce commodities to be controlled by the most powerful and

follow the Yaka lead to realise that nature can be an abundant provider and home for all creatures if we share whatever we take properly, and behave with consideration and respect to each other, and the planet that we all depend upon. This is the real challenge facing us all in the 21st century. ■

### References

For a full list of references, see [www.radicalanthropology.org/journal.htm](http://www.radicalanthropology.org/journal.htm)

### Notes

1. Field research was undertaken in the Northern Republic of Congo, in 1994-1997, with generous support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, an Emslie Horniman Anthropological Scholarship and a Swan Fund Scholarship. I am grateful for an Alfred Gell Memorial Scholarship. Annual visits have been made since 2000.
2. Mbendjele claim shared ancestry with other forest hunter-gatherer groups in the region such as the Baka, Mikaya, Luma or Gyeli. All these groups are called Ba.Yaka (Ba'aka) people by the Mbendjele. The academic name for these diverse groups is 'Pygmies'. The term can be objectionable outside this context.
3. The Yaka term 'Bilo' refers to any non-Yaka, village-dwelling African people who live near Yaka people. Although growing urban populations are also called Bilo, typical Bilo are village dwelling, agriculturalists, and fishing or trapping peoples, who speak Bantu or Ubangian languages.
4. Woodburn 1998.
5. Lewis 2002 elaborates on this in Yaka society. Gender relations in immediate-return hunting and gathering societies are the most egalitarian anthropologists have observed (Endicott and Endicott 2006, Woodburn 1982).
6. The Yaka describe Bilo village people as recent arrivals to the forest who discriminate against them, attempt to exploit them, claim rights over their land and labour, and make aggressive claims to own farmland, rivers, forest and even other people. Yaka elders often emphasised that it is their transience that makes Bilo claims vacuous and therefore not to be taken too seriously. Rural migration to urban centres is the latest migratory movement of the Bilo. Currently 80% of Congo's population lives in two cities.
7. *Ekila* is a fascinating cultural category that I discuss in Lewis 2008 and 2002: 103-120.
8. Forest Stewardship Council certification is widely considered the least controversial criteria for establishing sustainable forestry practices.
9. Forest Monitor 2001 provides examples.
10. <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/forests/forests.cfm?ucidparam=20041201143538>
11. In northern Congo in the mid-1990s members of the local elite were responsible for organising some of the most damaging environmental practices. These included large-scale elephant massacres using high powered military machine guns (the remains of over 300 corpses were found in one forest clearing in 1997), large-scale wood theft from logging companies and the extensive clearance of forest for commercial plantations and farms. Anecdotal evidence of extensive poaching being organised by the highest political powers continues to emerge.

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Archaeoastronomy and the Socialist Workers Party.

**On the cover:**

The journal's logo represents the emergence of culture (dragons feature in myths and legends from around the world) from nature (the DNA double-helix, or selfish gene). The dragon is a symbol of solidarity, especially the blood solidarity that was a necessary precondition for the social revolution that made us human. For more on this, see our website at [www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org).

The cover picture features Baka Pygmies using software to precisely map a valuable moabi tree so that it can continue to provide them with fruit, oil and medicines for generations to come. See Jerome Lewis's article on page 11 for details.

# Who we are and what we do

*Radical Anthropology* is the journal of the Radical Anthropology Group.

**Radical:** about the inherent, fundamental roots of an issue.

**Anthropology:** the scientific study of the origin, behaviour, and physical, social, and cultural development of humans.

Anthropology asks one big question: what does it mean to be human? To answer this, we cannot rely on common sense or on philosophical arguments. We must study how humans actually live – and the many different ways in which they have lived. This means learning, for example, how people in non-capitalist societies live, how they organise themselves and resolve conflict in the absence of a state, the different ways in which a 'family' can be run, and so on.

Additionally, it means studying other species and other times. What might it mean to be almost – but not quite – human? How socially self-aware, for example, is a chimpanzee? Do non-human primates have a sense of morality? Do they have language? And what about distant times? Who were the Australopithecines and why had they begun walking upright? Where did the Neanderthals come from and why did they become extinct? How, when and why did human art, religion, language and culture first evolve?

The Radical Anthropology Group started in 1984 when Chris Knight's popular 'Introduction to Anthropology'

course at Morley College, London, was closed down, supposedly for budgetary reasons. Within a few weeks, the students got organised, electing a treasurer, secretary and other officers. They booked a library in Camden – and invited Chris to continue teaching next year. In this way, the Radical Anthropology Group was born.

Later, Lionel Sims, who since the 1960s had been lecturing in sociology at the University of East London, came across Chris's PhD on human origins and – excited by the backing it provided for the anthropology of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, particularly on the subject of 'primitive communism' – invited Chris to help set up Anthropology at UEL. Since its establishment in 1990, Anthropology at UEL has retained close ties with the Radical Anthropology Group.

RAG has never defined itself as a political organisation. But the implications of some forms of science are intrinsically radical, and this applies in particular to the theory that humanity was born in a social revolution. Many RAG members choose to be active in Survival International and/or other indigenous rights movements to defend the land rights and cultural survival of hunter-gatherers. Additionally, some RAG members combine academic research with activist involvement in environmentalist, anti-capitalist and other campaigns. For more, see [www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org).

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