

A group of experts in forest conservation convened from 27th September to 1 October by the Central Africa Forests Commission (COMIFAC) in the Rwandan Capital Kigali have cited significant progress in the implementation of roadmap to harmonize protected areas and wildlife management policies and legislations.

The main objective of this workshop which is slated from 27 Sept. to 1 Oct.2021 is to validate two studies, one on the harmonization and improvement of legislative and institutional frameworks relating to the management of Wildlife and Protected Areas (SGTAPFS) while the second focuses on the opportunities for the labeling of Protected Areas in Central African region.

Participants include Directors in charge of wildlife and / or protected areas and / or the heads of the national parks agencies of COMIFAC member countries, the Sub-Working Group on Protected Areas and Wildlife in Central Africa (SGTAPFS), experts from the COMIFAC Executive Secretariat, COMIFAC National Coordinators and representatives of development partners (European Union, GIZ, IUCN, WWF, and TRAFFIC).

The Central African region currently has 206 protected areas covering a total of 799 000 km². Across the 10 countries of the region, the number and size of protected areas have doubled in the last 20 years. According to the new report entitled “State of protected areas in Central Africa: 2020”, Central Africa is close to meeting the international targets for protected areas. However, these areas are often poorly run and their management could be improved.

“The forests of the Congo Basin are on the way to becoming the first green lung of planet earth after the heavy deforestation recorded in recent years in the Amazon basin”, said Chouaibou Nchoutpouen, the Deputy Executive Secretary of COMIFAC. He stressed that their role in storing carbon is therefore essential in a context of accelerated global warming.

Latest estimates by Global Forest Watch (GFW) researchers show that the forests of the Congo Basin sequester 600 million tonnes of CO₂ more than they emit per year. Their average emissions and absorption reach respectively 530 million and 1.1 billion tons of carbon.

Within the framework of the implementation of strategic lines of intervention N ° 1 and N ° 3 of the COMIFAC Convergence Plan, relating respectively to “Harmonization of forest and environmental policies” and to “biodiversity

conservation” , the Executive Secretariat of COMIFAC has undertaken with the assistance of IUCN through the BIOPAMA Program, two studies namely: (i) the study on the harmonization and improvement of legislative and institutional frameworks relating to the management of Fauna and Protected Areas in the 10 member countries of COMIFAC and (ii) the study on labeling opportunities for protected areas in Central Africa.

Commenting on the move, Mr. Martial Nkolo, Director of the Sustainable Forest Management Program of the Congo Basin of GIZ said: “The protected areas which today represent 15% of the Congo Basin, are essential to safeguard the most remarkable areas from the point of view of biodiversity. This conservation effort must be reinforced”. “Working together on these subjects’ means preventing future conflicts, pooling knowledge and resources. It is also promoting the stability of the region, “he said.

Welcoming the two studies commissioned by COMIFAC, the Rwandan Minister of the Environment, Dr Jeanne d’Arc Mujawamariya stressed that this work will not only improve legislation but also mobilize resources for the management of protected areas. “I would like to express our gratitude to those who have contributed to the realization of these studies”

Despite these achievements, experts recognize that Central African countries still face many challenges and threats of nature conservation in general and sustainable management of forest ecosystems in particular. This phenomenon manifests itself through the large poaching of flagship wildlife species such as large mammals, illegal logging of forests, abusive and informal logging for energy needs and land use conflicts which constitute serious threats on natural resources.

In a move to address these challenges, experts make use of several tools including in particular: the database of the Observatory of Forests of Central Africa, the sub-regional Action Plan of the countries of the COMIFAC area for the strengthening of the Application of National Laws on Wild Fauna (PAPELCAF), the Africa TWIX platform (internet tool for exchange and sharing of information in the fight against illegal trade in products of wild fauna and flora), the Tool for Protected Area Management Effectiveness Assessment (IMET), etc.