



CONSERVING BIODIVERSITY IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: A BRIEF HISTORY, CURRENT TRENDS AND INSIGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

The history of biodiversity conservation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) runs in parallel with the story of alienation of land and natural resources which began in early colonial times. There is a legacy of undemocratic laws promulgated in the time of Leopold II that still govern land rights and the conservation of biodiversity. Numerous conflicting pressures are currently exerted on the DRC Government to lease more lands and create more protected areas. I argue that while conserving biological diversity is good, there is a need to reflect deeply on how to make the management of protected areas effective and reconciled with the needs expressed by communities. I also argue that preserving biodiversity is not and should not be equated with creating more new state-owned protected areas. There are other ways to conserve biodiversity, including privately protected areas, devolution of law enforcement to local communities, and downgrading some protected areas to IUCN Category VI, with proper zoning to reflect the reality of management. This is a complex process and involves strong political decisions and should be supported by a thorough assessment of the entire protected area network. I suggest that the key to success in preserving biodiversity in DRC is a proper land rights system and local law enforcement, which will make local communities allies rather than opponents to conservation.

Key words: Democratic Republic of Congo, protected areas, local communities, land rights

INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the second largest country in Africa, harbours a variety of ecosystems: including nearly half the African rainforests (IUCN, 1992), forest-savannah ecotones, savannahs, afro-mountainous forests, large and small lakes, rivers and swampy forests (Inogwabini et al., 2005a). Since the colonial era, efforts to preserve this biological diversity have been concentrated on protected areas. However, methods used to create these protected areas have been essentially top-down. Protected areas were created without the local communities' consent and their management has been more enforcement-oriented than inclusive of stakeholders. Because of this paradigm, protected areas are often not accepted by local communities and symbolise the ruling elite. Viewed as political institutions, the foundations on which protected areas rest are fragile for long-term survival. In the early 1990s, conservationists (Hart & Hall, 1996) felt that those fragile foundations were crumbling as the political regime that led the country for three decades was ending.

The persistent political instability in DRC since 1996 increased fears of dismantling protected areas. The ability of central government to assert its authority decreased in large parts of DRC; the delivery of public services greatly diminished and it was difficult for DRC to honour its commitments. Insecurity and changes in the political system since the 1990s affected conservation activities and strategies. However, the DRC government pledged that 15 per cent of its territory would become protected areas. There is a need to strategically address that pledge. Only an examination of available knowledge on demographic, economic, political, social and cultural trends combined with knowledge on biodiversity will provide an effective strategy for conservation in DRC. Setting the framework for such a broad reflection is the intent of this essay, which examines these changes to determine their impacts on biodiversity and how to address the long-ignored local community problem. The essay also discusses elements of the conservation law promulgated on 11 February 2014, for which the proclaimed main aim is to correct issues related to the



Mountain gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringei*), Virunga National Park © Martin Harvey / WWF-Canon

definition, creation and management of protected areas in the country (Government of DRC, 2014). The new law will be used to support the argument being developed here because a in depth analysis of this law deserves its own paper.

DRC CONSERVATION 1925 – 1960: LAND GRABBING BY KING LEOPOLD II FOR PROTECTED AREAS

Congolese elites are proud to proclaim that the first African Park was created in DRC. The Virunga National Park (NP) was created in 1925 in eastern Belgian Congo. The creation of Virunga NP confirmed the new land tenure system, which broke down the local traditional tenure. It epitomised the emerging land tenure law of February 1885 when DRC became the dominion of King Leopold II. On 1 July 1885 a land tenure ordinance was passed to confirm that lands acquired by Stanley on behalf of King Leopold II would be used by the Belgian Crown but indigenous people would continue to own their properties (Jeal, 2008). Before this, the land tenure system was that communities communally owned lands that were used by their members. Despite the fact that there were physically unoccupied lands, these were not legally empty or vacant lands since they were owned one way or another by communities. However, decrees of 22 August 1885, 14 September 1886 and that of 3 June 1906 unilaterally ended the agreements with indigenous people. These three decrees instituted the *registration* of all lands, which meant that non-registered land became

vacant though indigenous people would continue using lands they collectively owned. These decrees confused physically unoccupied lands with vacant (or ownerless) lands, a notion that continued to be used throughout the history of the country. The royal decree of 1 August 1906 nullified preceding decrees (Musafiri, 2008), and injected the notion of *empty land*, which meant unused land. All empty lands became the property of the Crown (Musafiri, 2008). This decree enforced the ascendance of the state over communities. This situation was maintained throughout the colonial period by the decree of 11 April 1949, which governed land tenure until 2002 (Tshikengela, 2009). The tenure also favoured traditional political elites and encouraged forms of patrimony policies that held the majority dependent on the elite (Bruce, 1988) but *de facto* lands were commonly owned (Tshikengela, 2009). These decrees set the precedent for all that followed regarding land rights and the creation of protected areas in DRC.

In 1889 King Leopold II created the first African reserve: the Albert NP later renamed Virunga NP (Rorison, 2012). It is through the denial of land rights to local communities that the celebrated creation of the Virunga NP has to be viewed despite the fact that this event appears laudable given the sobering trends of biodiversity losses worldwide. As in other countries (Jepson & Whittekar, 2002), the denial of land rights for creating protected areas proceeded unchallenged over a long period; in the case of DRC until 1960 when the country became independent.

DRC CONSERVATION 1960 – 1995: THE LEGACY OF LAND GRABBING BY KING LEOPOLD II

Land law reforms were needed in the early 1960s because the 1960 constitution did not clarify land laws. Efforts began with the 1964 constitution, but this was vague on land tenure as it deferred land tenure to a national law to rule on land attributions and concessions acquired before 30 June 1960. The most important reform was the Bakajika law of 1968, which was modified in 1970, 1997 and 1980 (Leisz, 1998; Musafiri, 2008). The political objectives of the Bakajika law were to change the colonial land laws that gave the best cultivable lands to colonists (Leisz, 1998; Musafiri, 2008) and to provide the land tenure regime instituted by the 1964 constitution. Socially, the Bakajika law aimed to repair the injustices felt by traditional communities. Ironically, the Bakajika law confirmed that *'the soil and anything beneath it belong to the state'*; the 11 April 1949 decree remained unabrogated (Tshikengela, 2009), maintaining land denial for communities.

It is against this background that all DRC's protected areas created in 1960 – 1995 were born. It is also this history that in 1960 first led politicians seeking election to argue that protected areas were colonial relics (IUCN, 1992); and yet successive Congolese regimes continued to dichotomously pledge increasing protected areas to preserve the biodiversity of the DRC. The position of the Congolese leadership on protected areas is not uncommon in the history of protected areas across the world; politicians seeking election will say one thing, but once elected, they feel compelled to please the international community for their own prestige (Jepson & Whittekar, 2002). The 15 per cent pledge, confirmed by the provisions of article 26 of the new conservation law, has been active for several decades without a critical analysis of its impact on the growing population and need for land.

DRC CONSERVATION: LACK OF PARTICIPATION HEIGHTENED COMMUNITY REACTIONS AGAINST PROTECTED AREAS

Lack of local community's participation in the process of creating protected areas resulted in the lack of acceptance of the existence of protected areas. Poaching has many correlates that may seem tricky to disentangle, including commercial pressures, banditry and lawlessness; but lack of acceptance of protected areas clearly contributed to intensifying hunting within protected areas as a measure of defiance. Hunting as an expression of defiance happens in almost all protected areas, though all poaching cannot be attributable to this single factor. The Bakumu Faunal Reserve (FR) was

established in 1949 (becoming the Maiko NP in 1970) and included the homelands of the Bakumu (Hart & Kiyengo, 1994). In 1994 the Bakumu were still within Maiko and intensive hunting continued with the support of the Bakumu despite its legal conservation status (Hart & Kiyengo, 1994). In the 1970s people were evacuated from the Salonga National Park (NP) (Marcot & Sidle, 2007) but the Yaelima people refused and remained within the park despite its fully protected status (IUCN, 2010). Since then, claims over land rights by evacuated communities abound (D'Huart, 1988); most communities refused the compensation that the government gave for loss of lands (Tshikengela, 2009); they keep returning to their lands (Colom & Steel, 2006) and rivers (Monsembula, 2007). These claims make any surveillance effort for Salonga very tenuous. In 1996, unresolved land use issues precluded any practical solution on the fate of the corridor that once linked the mountain sector and the lowland part of the Kahuzi-Biega NP (Inogwabini, 1997) and human activities due to high population densities and claims over land rights isolated the mountain sector (Inogwabini et al., 2000b).

Garamba NP and Okapi Wildlife Reserve (WR) show, at some points in their history, that acceptance of protected areas by communities increases protection. In these two areas wildlife populations increased while hunting diminished as a consequence of increased acceptance of conservation boosted by international investment in improved livelihood of community villages adjacent to the protected areas (Tshombe et al., 2000). Similar patterns emerge from other African countries (Roe & Jack, 2001), including CAMPFIRE (Zimbabwe) that demonstrated the potential for community acceptance and involvement in the management of protected areas to improve protection of wildlife. Direct causality between wildlife conservation and incentives given to local communities is difficult to establish (Oates, 1999; Roe et al., 2000; De Merode et al., 2004) but these examples indicate that acceptance of protected areas has the potential to make them work better.

DRC CONSERVATION 1995 – 2013: THE WAR'S TOLL AND THE ROLE OF THE DRC GOVERNMENT

With a population density of ca. 700 individuals/km², Eastern DRC where war broke out in October 1996 ranks among the most densely inhabited areas of the world (Hart, 1997). This region in the Western Albertine Rift, has high biological diversity (Plumptre, 2004; Brooks et al., 2004; Plumptre et al., 2009). The area has four NPs (Kahuzi-Biega, Virunga, Garamba and Maiko) and several reserves such as the Itombwe Natural Reserve and Luama-Kivu. Kahuzi-Biega, Virunga, Garamba,



A graveyard for fallen Rangers at the Mutsora Ranger station in Ruwenzori, Virunga National Park. © Brent Stirton / Reportage by Getty Images / WWF-Canon

Maiko and Itombwe put together total 4,105,800 ha, nearly the size of Switzerland (4,128,500 ha). Resident species include the eastern lowland gorillas (*Gorilla berengei graueri*), mountain gorillas (*Gorilla berengei berengei*), okapi (*Okapia johnstoni*) and Congo peacocks (*Afropavo congensis*), striped hyenas (*Hyaena hyaena*), and Prigogine's owls (*Glaucidium albertinum*). Until recently, Garamba held the last wild population of the northern white rhinoceros.

Following the 1994 war in Rwanda, thousands of refugees crossed to DRC aided by international agencies. The refugees settled in different camps along the eastern border of DRC for several months before the first invasion of DRC by an international coalition led by the regular Rwandan Army, which destroyed refugee camps and sent millions of people into the forest to seek refuge. Four protected areas suffered from their proximity to the Rwandan border; refugee camps provided space for more than two million refugees between July 1994 and October 1997 (Hart & Hart, 1997; Inogwabini et al., 2000b). An indication of the effects of the war is shown by the fact that the four World Heritage Sites in DRC were included in the category of World Heritage Sites in Danger by 2002.

Chronicles describing the side-effects of the war on DRC's protected areas abound (Biswas & Tortajada-Quiroz, 1996; Saegusa, 2000; Sato et al., 2000; Kalpers, 2001; Draulans & Van Krunkelsven, 2002) but a snapshot of events is worth emphasising. All the areas

suffered in one way or another during the period 1994 – 2013. The eastern belt of the DRC protected areas network, ranging from the sources of the Nile down to the sources of the Zambezi, was the most seriously devastated. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees invaded Garamba NP; they lived within the game reserves adjacent to the core park (Farmer & Nicholson, 1996), and armed groups decimated the herds of large mammals (De Merode et al., 2007). Refugee camps were also located within and adjacent to Virunga and Kahuzi-Biega. In the neighbourhood of Kahuzi-Biega refugee camps housed 1,000,000 residents who fetched wood directly from the park for fuel; 50 per cent of the western lowland gorillas inventoried by Hall et al. (1998) before the war were reported missing by 2003 (Yamagiwa, 2003; McNeely, 2003). In 1994 about 850,000 refugees lived around Virunga deforesting some 300 km² of the park in search of food and firewood; up to 40,000 people entered the park and took out 410 – 770 tonnes of forest products daily (McNeely, 2003). After the official end of the 1996 war, confrontations between park wardens and rebellious factions continued in forests of the eastern DRC, including in protected areas. The price to preserve biodiversity was high; between 1996 and 2003, 80 park staff were killed in Virunga alone (McNeely, 2003) and gorillas were slaughtered in Virunga for no apparent reason (Jenkins, 2008).

Between 1995 and 2013, the role of the DRC Government in biodiversity conservation was seriously weakened both politically and financially. The governmental budget for

biodiversity conservation declined sharply (Inogwabini et al., 2005a); biodiversity conservation resources came from bilateral and multilateral international donors such as the UNF, UNESCO, FAO, EU and GTZ. International conservation NGOs such as the Wildlife Conservation Society, Gillman Investment, African Wildlife Foundation, Zoological Society of Milwaukee, Zoological Society of Frankfurt, and World Wide Fund for Nature also contributed (Draulans & Van Krunkeslven, 2002; Inogwabini et al., 2005a). Low government budgets for biodiversity conservation during this period were understandable as priority was given to ending the war. However, this shift in priorities despite the pledge to increase protected areas highlights the conflicting policies in DRC.

Nevertheless, after 2002 DRC created new reserves because of its over-dependence on donors for biodiversity conservation. These include Itombwe (South Kivu), Lomako and Ngiri (both in Equateur) and Tumba-Lediima (between Equateur and Bandundu). An advanced project to create the Lomami-Lualaba NP (Maniema and Province orientale) also exists. These new protected areas are mainly reserves, a sign that even conservation organisations are aware that strict protected areas (i.e. NPs) are accepted only with difficulty by Congolese communities. Some genuine work to get informed consent from local people was done in the creation of these new protected areas, but the gazetting processes were plagued by the reality of the traditional land tenure, which gives more power to chiefs. The informed consent received was only of those chiefs who had received token rewards; thus consents did not necessarily reflect the views of communities as they emerged from processes that were far from democratic. Recently gazetted protected areas thus suffer from the same deficiencies as the old ones. In Itombwe, local communities rejected the creation of the natural reserve (De Faily & Bantu, 2010) and increased hunting within the reserve (UICN, 2010). In Lomako Reserve the northern communities hardly accepted the reserve and resorted to violent conflicts with wardens (Bourgeois, 2009).

In Tumba-Lediima a different type of conflict emerged; logging companies opposed the reserve. Logging companies went against the will of communities, who in this case wanted to create the reserve, they opposed its presence and used subterfuge to gain political support and influence the conservation organisations to maintain their concessions in the reserve. The Tumba-Lediima case shows how daunting it is to get all stakeholders to agree.

DRC CONSERVATION AFTER 2013: LEOPOLD II, MOBUTU AND KABILA OR MORE LAND STILL TO BE LOST?

Local populations ask about the material benefits yielded by conserving biodiversity. In response to this sensible question, conservationists need to clarify that preserving forest does not necessarily mean locking all forests within protected areas. There are other conservation paradigms that need to be explored, including agro-forestry, low impact logging, intensified conservation agriculture, multiple use forests, community-managed areas, etc. These concepts have been poorly examined in DRC; the push for the classical type of protected areas is enshrined in the promise by DRC Governments to set aside 15 per cent of the country for its protected area network. Leopold II, Albert I and Mobutu thought that protected areas were the best way to preserve forests. They held no consultations with local communities; laws creating protected areas were passed without informed consent of even parliamentary representatives. By promising to expand the network without a general consultation of the nation, current politicians are following a similar path.

While increasing the protected area network seems to be a laudable goal in itself, the reality of making that network function properly is daunting given the insufficient resources to maintain it. Classifying forests as protected areas does not necessarily mean protecting the biodiversity they shelter; the empty forest syndrome across Africa speaks against that view (Nasi et al., 2011). The cost of preserving biodiversity in the context of increasing human populations, deepening underdevelopment, wars and other social difficulties is the most important determinant among diverse factors. Extending the protected area network is a global good but benefits the interests of others rather than the people residing in areas being proposed for protection. Non-acceptance of protection represents the greatest risk for protected areas in DRC, so it follows that extending the network without proper general consensus will jeopardise the protected areas at their very inception.

WAYS FORWARD?

The time has come to reflect on how conservation can be undertaken sustainably and without being adversarial to local communities; other conservation models have to be looked at and tried. Firstly, to make conservation sustainable DRC needs to solve the long-standing issue of land use and tenure. This will be a long and difficult process but, as was demonstrated in Kenya (Kameri-Mbote, 2005), it can be done if genuine effort is invested. Secured property rights will give more incentives to



Women and children fetch water from a newly constructed tap system on the outskirts of Virunga National Park © Brent Stirton / Reportage by Getty Images / WWF-Canon

people to protect the land of their ancestors (Wells et al., 1992). Conservationists should help with this process rather than narrowly focusing on requesting more protected areas. Land tenure in DRC has traditionally been through common tenure whereby tribes had a common space that was used by different tribe members. This system prevailed *de facto* throughout the history of DRC even though *de jure* land and everything it contains belongs to the state. The consideration here is to identify options for people to acquire legal ownership over lands they possess *de facto*. Reviewing land tenure is essential now that competing interests are emerging and most cultivable land is likely to be allocated to commercial agriculture. Land acquisition by multinationals will push communities to exert further pressures on existing protected areas. Hence, sorting out the global issue of land tenure is a crucial step in ensuring sustainable protected areas in the long run. Also, to secure cultivable land, multinationals will want to invest only if land rights are legally affirmed and enforced; hence there is a shared interest here.

The quest for an inclusive process for creating new protected areas has been debated over many years and has culminated in the inclusion of several concerns raised above throughout the DRC into a new conservation law passed early in 2014 whereby local

communities are not only to provide their informed consent prior to creating new protected areas (preamble point 3 and article 32) but also are allowed to sustainably use resources located within protected areas for food security (article 20 (2)).

Secondly, DRC should look constructively at alternative ways of conserving biodiversity (Salafsky et al., 2001), such as allowing people to create privately protected areas. The sustainability and effective protection of protected areas in the DRC should be analyzed using national strategic interests, cultural values and other economic tools. DRC should consider the cost of maintaining protected areas under the current regime (state-owned) versus the cost of fully protecting these areas through a different regime. The private sector should be allowed to supply conservation activities, including making income from conserving biodiversity. This can be done either by putting some protected areas under private management or by allowing those who can afford to buy land to create their own protected areas. In order for that to happen, as suggested by proponents of effectiveness and the efficiency of protecting biological diversity (Balmford et al., 2002; Stem et al., 2005) the current legal framework will need to be challenged. This has been done, to some extent by the new conservation law. The provisions of articles 24 and 38 of this law

introduced the notion of private and public-private joint ventures for management of protected areas though this transfer is limited to a 25 year renewable period (article 24). This can work only within a stable and democratic state, that has the means to enforce the law (Inogwabini, 2007) and to ensure that all the implementation decrees (articles 13, 16, 23, 24, 31, 33, 52, 59, 60 and 67) that are indicated in the law are produced and implemented. The success of the conservation project for the periphery of Noubalé-Ndoki NP in Congo (Stokes et al., 2010) testifies to the potential of achieving biodiversity conservation using other models. The conservation success story of the gorillas of Tayna Gorilla Reserve in Kivu (Mehlman, 2008) shows that conservation activities can be implemented by local communities and benefit biodiversity. Tayna succeeded while Kahuzi-Biega lost its gorillas, indicating that conservation can be done in different ways and that state-owned protected areas are not necessarily the best option to preserve biodiversity.

Thirdly, it must be acknowledged that DRC protected areas are already illegally and extensively used by adjacent communities and other stakeholders. Law enforcement alone is unable to provide the protection needed for biodiversity to sustainably persist over the long term. Even the smallest protected areas such as N'sele NP (34.4 km²) and Mabali Scientific Reserve (1,900 ha), for example (Inogwabini et al., 2005b; Twagirashyaka & Inogwabini, 2009) have suffered. DRC has to become realistic in its approach to conservation, which would imply adjusting the law to the reality existing in most areas: that they are all already multiple use areas. No DRC park can claim to be fully protected; each of them is exploited in one way or the other. Chief Wardens allow communities to enter the parks to fish at their own will in Salonga NP (Inogwabini et al., 2000b) and in Virunga NP (UNESCO, 2010); hunting is widespread in Salonga NP (Reinartz et al., 2006), in Virunga NP (Kenfack, 2013) and in both Kahuzi-Biega and Maiko (IUCN, 2010); collecting wood for fuel by local communities in all of these areas is widely acknowledged (Crawford & Bernstein, 2008). These few illustrations among many call for a review of the legal categorisation in order to adapt to the reality. Given the certainty that there will be insufficient means to ensure an optimum level of conservation in most protected areas, it would be wise to downgrade most protected areas in DRC to IUCN Category VI, which they are *de facto*. It was very courageous of the DRC Government to introduce the possibility of declassifying protected areas (article 35), which is an extreme end of the process being proposed here. The protected area downgrading exercise has to be combined with other tools, including participatory land use planning for zoning of protected

areas to delineate different functional areas and the devolution of legal law enforcement instruments to local leadership. This process requires the emergence of an effective democracy in DRC (Inogwabini, 2007) and should be encouraged because DRC does not have the means to fence all protected areas and its population is still very poor yet burgeoning with increasing need for land. These steps are also needed because the struggle over land and natural resources in DRC is evident through the intensive lobbying of DRC by large economic multilateral actors (Trefon, 2007); the sword of Damocles is hanging over biodiversity but more dramatically over human communities. As the case in Tumba-Lediima testifies, the best conservation allies in the current context of DRC might be local communities (Inogwabini & Leader-Williams, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Inogwabini et al. (2005a) advised that to increase protected areas in DRC, an assessment of the entire network was necessary before making political decisions. The biological viability analysis is currently ongoing yet that alone is not sufficient and would need cultural, economic, political, social and strategic analyses of protected areas to make decisions that would serve as foundations for the global good. The economic analysis of protected areas will lead to the establishment of privately protected areas as one efficient way to ensure both economic benefits and biodiversity conservation. For those protected areas that will remain state-managed, their legal category should be reassigned to IUCN category VI, there should be properly zoned core conservation areas, seasonal use areas and controlled use areas; and part of their legal management should be devolved to local community leadership. This combination will ensure a more coherent and tangible law enforcement that will be both economically and ethically justifiable. People are part of the conservation equation and must own it to succeed (Adams & McShane, 1997; Bawa et al., 2004); success in conservation will not endure unless there are institutional capacities to democratically manage DRC natural resources (Inogwabini, 2007). In turn, this will have to be reconciled with people's interest in development to produce desired conservation outcomes. This requires proper transfers of rights and obligations to local people to conserve biodiversity through local authorities.

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RESUMEN

La historia de la conservación de la biodiversidad en la República Democrática del Congo (RDC) se desarrolla en paralelo con la historia de la enajenación de tierras y recursos naturales que se inició en la época colonial. Hay un legado de leyes antidemocráticas promulgadas en la época de Leopoldo II que todavía rigen los derechos sobre la tierra y la conservación de la biodiversidad. El Gobierno de la RDC está siendo objeto de numerosas presiones contrapuestas para arrendar más tierras y crear más áreas protegidas. Aduzco que, si bien la conservación de la diversidad biológica es buena, es preciso reflexionar profundamente sobre la manera de hacer que la gestión de las áreas protegidas sea eficaz y acorde a las necesidades expresadas por las comunidades. También alego que la protección de la biodiversidad no debe interpretarse como la creación de más nuevas áreas protegidas de propiedad estatal. Hay otras maneras de conservar la biodiversidad, incluyendo las áreas protegidas privadas, la devolución de la aplicación de la ley a las comunidades locales y la reclasificación de algunas áreas protegidas en la categoría VI de la UICN, con una zonificación adecuada que refleje la realidad de la gestión. Este es un proceso complejo que supone decisiones políticas enérgicas y debe sustentarse en una evaluación a fondo de toda la red de áreas protegidas. Sugiero que la clave del éxito en la conservación de la biodiversidad en la República Democrática del Congo descansa sobre un adecuado sistema de derechos sobre la tierra y el cumplimiento local de la ley, lo que convertirá a las comunidades locales en aliados en vez de adversarios de la conservación.

RESUME

L'histoire de la conservation de la biodiversité en République démocratique du Congo (RDC) se déroule en parallèle avec l'histoire de l'aliénation des ressources naturelles, qui a commencé au début de l'époque coloniale. Il existe un héritage de lois anti-démocratiques promulguées à l'époque de Léopold II qui régissent encore les droits fonciers et la conservation de la biodiversité. De nombreuses pressions contradictoires sont actuellement exercées sur le gouvernement de la RDC en vue de louer plus de terres et de créer davantage d'aires protégées. Bien qu'en faveur de la conservation de la diversité biologique, je soutiens que l'on doit réfléchir en profondeur sur la façon de rendre plus efficace la gestion des aires protégées et de la réconcilier avec les besoins exprimés par les communautés locales. Je soutiens également que la préservation de la biodiversité n'est pas et ne doit pas être assimilée à la création de nouvelles aires protégées appartenant à l'Etat. Il existe d'autres façons de conserver la biodiversité, telles la création d'aires protégées privées, la dévolution aux communautés locales de l'application de la loi, et le déclassement des aires protégées en Catégorie VI de UICN, avec un zonage approprié pour tenir compte de la réalité de la gestion. Il s'agit d'un processus complexe impliquant des décisions politiques fermes, qui doit être appuyé par une évaluation approfondie de l'ensemble du réseau des aires protégées. Je suggère que la clé du succès pour la préservation de la biodiversité en RDC réside dans un système juste de droits fonciers et une bonne application de la loi locale, qui feront des communautés locales des alliés plutôt que des adversaires de la conservation.