



## Can Rattan Help Save Wildlife?

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AND LOUIS DEFO

*ABSTRACT Theodore Trefon and Louis Defo argue that rattan harvesting and the commercialization of wildlife are complementary and mutually supportive activities for villagers in the Cameroon.*

### **Non-timber forest products meeting nature's and people's needs**

Non-Timber Forest Products from tropical forests (NTFP as they have now generically come to be known) were understudied by researchers and poorly understood by foresters and conservationists until the early 1980s. Considered until then as 'minor' forest products (Falconner, 1990), today they are worth millions, perhaps billions of dollars in the food, fragrance and pharmaceutical sectors. In tropical forest areas where they are harvested, they contribute to the daily subsistence of local rural and urban populations who rely on them for a host of social, economic and cultural reasons.

As the focus on NTFP intensifies, certain hypotheses which previously appealed to rich-world economists and environmentalists are being challenged. A first myth to be debunked was that these products could be harvested sustainably, meaning without seriously upsetting the very delicate balances which regulate tropical forest ecosystems (Peters, 1996).

Recent evidence from the Yaoundé area (Cameroon) questions another hypothesis: the one which assumes that the harvesting, commercialization and transformation of certain NTFP by the rural poor can be a means of shifting efforts away from the predatory and unsustainable exploitation of ecologically sensitive forest products such as wildlife and tropical hardwoods. Some researchers and conservationists hold that providing alternative cash-earning possibilities to village populations thanks to NTFP could contribute to a viable conservation approach. On the contrary, our observations reveal that rattan harvesting and the commercialization of game are two complementary and mutually supportive activities in terms of time allocation, the use of scarce cash and the increasingly intensive use of peri-urban forest space.

The 'NTFP-as-alternative' hypothesis is predicated upon the assumption that villagers have closed systems of needs and that once they acquire a certain

amount of cash to pay for the basics, they could be persuaded to reduce commercial hunting and trapping or hardwood tree felling. Unfortunately, the economic reality is somewhat different. Villagers require ever more cash to meet real and perceived needs. Even though the development of the cash economy is far from being a recent process, new demands are emerging.

### The encroachment of globalization in the Cameroon

Governments throughout Central Africa, and that of Cameroon is no exception, are finding it increasingly difficult to fulfill their social, educational and health responsibilities. This means that populations have to develop and adapt their own survival strategies without relying on the state. Globalization, familiarity with trends taking place abroad and contacts with cities all incite villagers to own radios and televisions, to dress in western fashion and consume what is perceived as 'modern' food and drinks. The prestige of being able to consume beer and bottled soft drinks, for example, is a clear social marker.

There are other reasons why villagers' systems of needs are expanding rather than fixed. In the Ewondo region where traditional political power is not inherited but acquired, money also talks: it gives those who have it *le droit à la parole*.

Like many other NTFP, rattans (notably *Ancistrophyllum secundiflorum* and *Eremosphata macrocarpa*) play an important economic role in the interface between the populations of Yaoundé and its hinterland which is slowly but surely being emptied of its natural resources. Indeed, the expanding halo around the Cameroonian capital, like the one encircling other cities in the region, is becoming a relative biodiversity vacuum (Trefon, 1998). Urban people, be they the poorest of the poor or the well-to-do, rely on forest space and resources in varying degrees. Harvesters from more than 20 villages in the area provide rattan to a wholesale market at Mvog Mbi which in turn supplies approximately 117 workshops (Defo, 1997) with the sticks and climbers needed to craft a variety of products ranging from baskets and mats to pieces of furniture such as beds, sofas, bookshelves, etc. which

even a casual observer in the city cannot fail to notice. These products are in vogue with all social classes of this expanding one million-plus city.

### Choosing rattan?

Most villagers engage in diverse economic activities and rattan harvesting is just one of many. Others include food production for consumption and sale of surpluses; cocoa farming; hunting and fishing; wood extraction and the small-scale cutting of planks; harvesting of other NTFP such as leaf wrappers, wild mango, nuts, palm wine, etc.: extraction of sand needed for building; distillation of *odontol* (local alcohol made from palm wine).

Although physically exacting (heavy loads are carried out over long distances), painful (because of the sharp thorns in the rattan's outer casing) and dangerous (because dead branches are often pulled down along with the climbers), rattan can provide rapid cash at any time of the year with no investment. The problem of seasonality which handicaps so many other economic activities does not apply here. It is still widely available around several villages and the large number of craftsmen in Yaoundé makes it a relatively easy seller.

In a recent survey (Defo, 1997) rattan harvesters were asked the question whether it would make economic sense to abandon commercial hunting or hardwood extraction and devote their time and efforts solely to rattan. They nearly all replied in the negative, emphasizing that these other activities are considerably more lucrative and that there is a high degree of complementarity between them. There are three principal types of complementarities.

- *Most harvesters also hunt.* They have numerous snare traps set in the forest space which they pass through in order to find rattan. Checking or setting up these snares is efficiently done while en route to cut rattan. Moreover, harvesters identify paths taken by animals while looking for rattan and set up traps accordingly.
- *Sale of game pays for transportation costs.* These villagers have no savings and serious cash flow problems. Saving money for the future is largely an abstract notion. Money earned at the time of sale is usually spent on the spot for basic

necessities such as salt, soap or kerosene: on drink; or is earmarked for specific expenses like school fees or health care. They consequently do not return to the village with the surplus needed to pay a lorry to transport rattan to market the next time. A porcupine or antelope caught and sold along the road or in a nearby town (Mbal-mayo for example) provides the money needed to pay rattan transportation costs.

- *Many harvesters are craftsmen themselves.* Again, because of cash flow problems, they do not have the money needed to purchase the equipment required to work the raw material. Cash is needed for nails, butane gas, varnish, etc. and can be earned by selling what has been caught in a trap.

In addition, the cash earned from selling rattan pays for cable used in snares. It also pays for the fuel or the hiring of a chain-saw which can be used for felling and sawing a *sapelli* (*Entandrophragma cylindricum*) or a *bubinga* (*Guibourtia* spp.) into planks.

Given the present economic conditions and constraints in the Yaoundé hinterland, as well as the inventiveness of villagers to find survival strategies, combining numerous and complementary economic-subsistence activities is the rule. Can rattan help save wildlife? Unfortunately not. The response is not rattan *or* wildlife but rattan *and* wildlife.

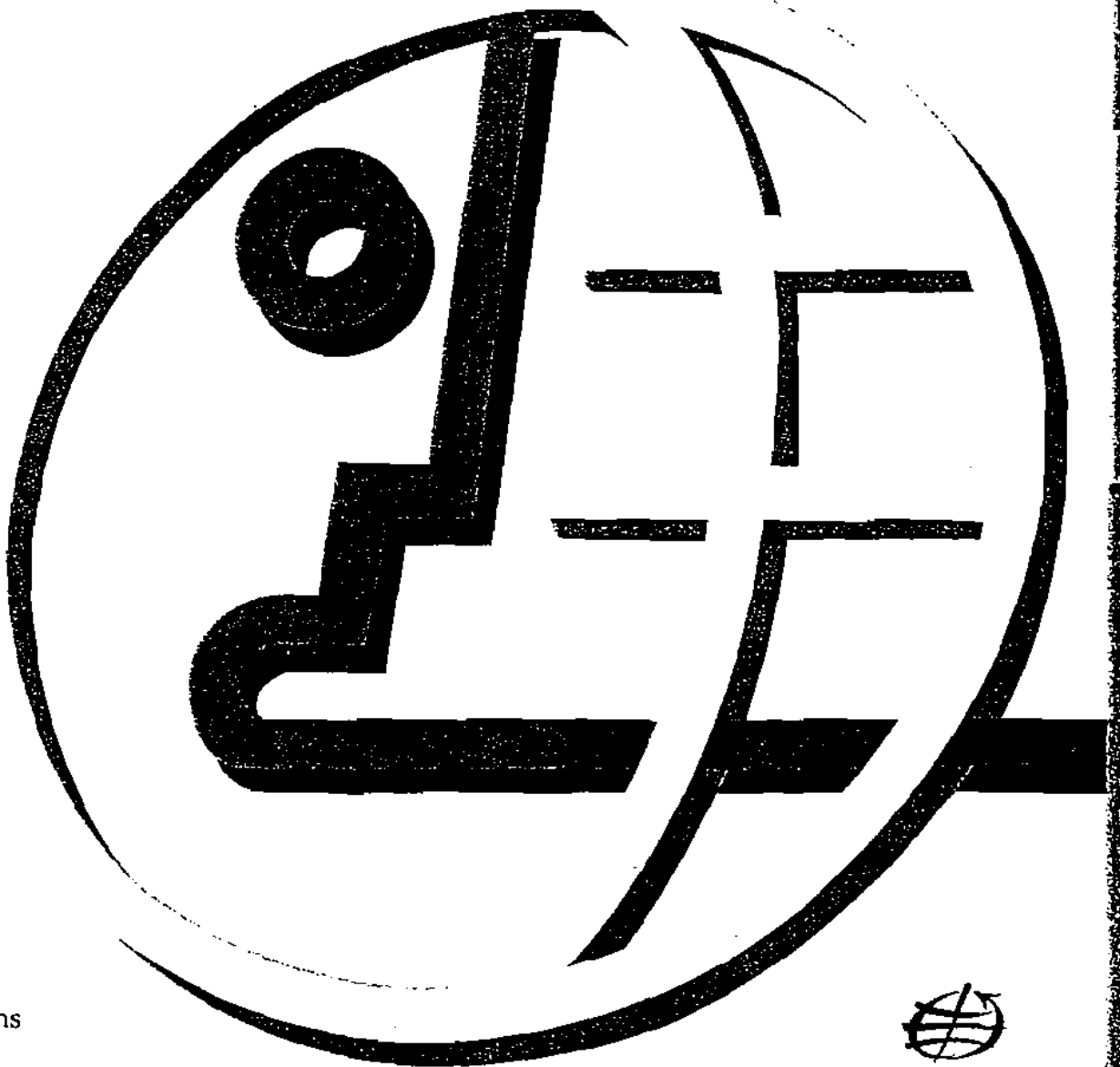
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