

## Congo rainforest summit stops short of commitments

Countries from 'big three' rainforest basins establish cooperation, but fail to firm up a forest protection pact.

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Rainforest countries are still working on formal commitments to protect tropical forests.© Frans Lanting/Corbis

Rainforest nations failed to agree on formal commitments last week during the United Nations-backed [Summit of the Three Rainforest Basins](#) in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo. Among the shelved proposals was the creation of a permanent body to coordinate efforts between rainforest regions.

The parties settled for a declaration of goodwill about the biodiversity, climate, economic and social importance of their regions. Observers at the meeting expressed hopes that the joint statement, despite its lack of tangible goals, would help with cooperation between the rainforest nations during the next round of UN climate talks in Durban, South Africa later this year. Many also see it as a potential lead-in to a formal agreement between rainforest nations before the 'Rio+20' talks — the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil — in 2012.

"Having all these countries on the same page will avoid time wasted arguing with one another during negotiations — especially when it comes to climate negotiations," says Paul Telfer, head of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Congo programme in Brazzaville.

The Amazon Basin in South America, the Congo Basin in central Africa and the Borneo–Mekong Basin in southeast Asia are home to about 80% of the world's rainforests and two-thirds of global terrestrial biodiversity. The New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, a summit partner, estimates that more than a billion people make their living from the three regions. Deforestation in the three regions has decreased by about a quarter in the last decade, but some 5.4 million hectares — more than twice the area of Massachusetts — are still lost each year, according to a report prepared for the summit by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

Henri Djombo, Congo's forestry and environment minister, has emphasized the benefit of the multilateral talks because forest management in each of the basins has particular strengths: in the Amazon Basin, strong policies on community forestry and indigenous populations are in place; there is good legislation on certified forestry concessions in the Congo Basin; and the Borneo–Mekong Basin has developed a secondary industry to process its wood.

"We need to work together to promote best forest practices in the three basins. This is the main objective of the summit," Djombo said at the official opening of the talks on 30 May.

## Disappointing declarations

Non-governmental organizations had high hopes that the Brazzaville meeting would end in a firm pact for forest protection. Lasse Gustavsson, head of the delegation from conservation group WWF, had called for zero net deforestation by 2020, a goal Indonesia's president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono [announced in April](#).

"We've seen many summits producing disappointing declarations," says Gustavsson. "But there is a momentum around biodiversity and forests at the moment — we're in a good flow when it comes to political commitment for biodiversity and forests."

Some nations used the conference to announce new forestry plans. The Democratic Republic of Congo announced its intention to protect 17% of its forests — which cover around 40% of the country — up 5% on previous commitments. The Republic of Congo committed to reforesting a million hectares of its land.

But poor organization before the conference made more it difficult for nations to agree on ambitious inter-country commitments for forest management across the equatorial region.

In the end, only about half of the 32 countries that make up the world's three major rainforest basins sent high-level representation. Many countries within the Amazon and Borneo–Mekong regions were unrepresented.

"This meeting sort of came out of the blue," says Telfer. Before leaving for the Republic of Congo, Gustavsson called the conference organization "chaotic and confusing". Two weeks before the conference opened, some observers were uncertain whether the meetings would actually take place.

Many civil-society organizations in the region struggled to make their way to the conference on short notice, and were wary of any outcomes agreed in their absence. "We were not invited. We didn't know what was going on," says Marc Ona Essangui, a 2009 Goldman environmental prize winner and the head of Brainforest, an environmental non-governmental organization based in Libreville, Gabon. "Most governmental declarations focus on money and profits, but

declarations must also account for the local and indigenous communities, whom we represent," he adds.

"I think the idea was a really good one. It's just that to move these types of people, you need more than a year of preparation, and we only had a couple of months," says Telfer.