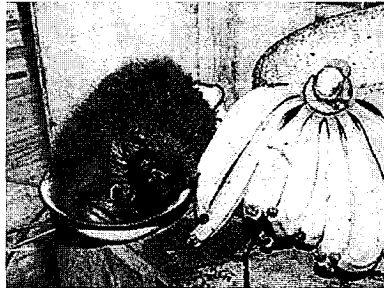


Bushmeat: Real Food for Real People

The tragic ironies of “development policy” are nowhere seen more clearly than in the “bushmeat crisis” of Central Africa. Brought to Western attention by the principled advocacy of Jane Goodall and her famous work with chimpanzees (considered quite a delicacy, often yielding \$100 US dollars per carcass), the crisis has horrified green-leaning folks all across the First World, who demand urgent action. The problem arose as overcutting wiped out old West African stands of “exotic hardwoods”, and loggers began building roads into Central African rainforests so remote that the wildlife did not know to run from human hunters. The loggers, and the diners in the burgeoning cities of countries like Gabon and Cameroon, have created a bushmeat industry whose volume is estimated at \$50 million US per year (which does not, of course, show up on any national accounts). Monkeys and other primates, including rare chimpanzees and gorillas, are especially prized, but all manner of wildlife are taken, including antelopes, snakes and elephants.

Many people are surprised by all this. For example, Paul Salopek of the *Chicago Tribune* writes, in a Pulitzer Prize-winning article, “Logging and hunting have gone hand in sweaty hand in the Congo Basin for as long as anyone can remember. But both activities have exploded for reasons few could have foreseen.” However, it really shouldn’t have been so hard to see coming. The two countries we just mentioned, for example, Gabon and Cameroon, are as heavily indebted as any in Sub-Saharan Africa, and were strapped for cash because of declining demand for oil and cacao. Timber revenues gave them a way to meet their debt payments. Then, currency devaluations slashed the cost of building the logging roads to some of the most remote forests left anywhere in the world — places even the Pygmies had never gone. Poor people, having flocked to cities in search of economic opportunities (that weren’t there), welcome bushmeat as a reminder of earlier days — and anyway, it is considerably cheaper than beef, pork or chicken.



It is probably worth pointing out that this phenomenon is not new; when the forests of Western Africa were being logged out in the 50s and 60s, a similar process took place. The forests that are left west of Nigeria have lost the greatest part of the wildlife that they once supported. What is new — and chilling — in today’s version is the utter primevality of the forests being invaded, and the utter lack of any effective management or regulation.

The crisis is portrayed as a classic problem of overpopulation — and the

sad but inescapable demands of modernization. A fact sheet from the "Bushmeat Crisis Task Force", for example, informs us that "Logging companies provide revenues and employment essential to the economies of West and Central Africa." What nonsense! An insane insistence on export-oriented monoculture crops (or bargain-price oil extraction), brought on by crushing external debts and World Bank "austerity programs" left these nations vulnerable to any decline in prices for the eggs they'd placed in a single basket. Come what may, they *had* to have that timber income; they were desperate. But not because there was no other way for their people to make a living. The unthinkable alternative would have been allowing people access to land on which to grow their own crops — abandoning exports, and sounding the death-knell of the regimes currently in power.

In the ultimate irony, Salopek writes, "Prodded by global conservation groups, the European Union and the World Bank... convened a meeting with Cameroonian officials to read them the riot act. Unless Cameroon got serious about cracking down on the devastating bushmeat trade, the foreigners warned, further development funds would be frozen." Regulations were dutifully imposed, which simply drove the bushmeat trade underground — where it really had been all along, anyway. The sale of endangered species, such as gorillas, chimps and elephants, was made illegal — but trade goes on unabated. Large areas have been set aside as preserves or parks, but they lack budgets or staff to enforce any sort of policy. The commitment to stopping the bushmeat trade seems thus far to have been completely theoretical.

And, indeed, how can it be stopped, while national economic policies focus on nothing but exports, exports, exports? Their failure to make a dent in an ecological tragedy that is so egregious — and so *photogenic* — shows the utter futility of trying to implement environmental policies in developing countries under present conditions. Such nations, although they are simply dripping with valuable natural resources, seem incapable of providing for the basic needs of their people, or of enforcing the most basic regulations. (They can, however, pump crude oil, and grow tons and tons of cocoa.)

Make no mistake, there is an ecological catastrophe brewing in Central Africa. But it is not caused by overpopulation. Let's not forget that Africa remains the most sparsely populated of the world's continents. Cameroon, for example, has about 15 million people in an area roughly the size of Japan, and Gabon has a mere 1.2 million in an area larger than Pennsylvania! No, ending the tragedy of the bushmeat trade — the poster child for environmental devastation across the developing world — can only be brought about by a rent-as-revenue policy that will create real incentives for conservation and sustainability, and give people access to their own land, to produce the things they need — and by lifting the cruel yoke of foreign debt. ❶