



The peatlands of the Republic of the Congo span over

**5.5** million hectares 

and store an estimated

**10** billion tonnes of carbon 

# Policy Note: Reinforcing conservation and sustainable management of Peatlands in the Republic of the Congo

## CONTEXT

The peatlands of the central Congo Basin represent one of the most significant stores of carbon on the planet. Spanning 16.7 million hectares, these largely intact, forested peatlands are estimated to contain around thirty billion tonnes of carbon accumulated over thousands of years. Their conservation is therefore critical to preventing large-scale greenhouse gas emissions, while also supporting climate regulation, hydrological regulation, biodiversity conservation, and the provision of essential ecosystem services and livelihoods for Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPs and LCs).

The Republic of the Congo (RoC), has demonstrated a strong and sustained commitment to the conservation and sustainable management of its peatlands through high-level political and policy engagement. By endorsing the Brazzaville Declaration in 2018, the country committed to conserving the Congo Basin peatlands, recognizing their global importance for climate mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable livelihoods. This commitment is further reflected in the Republic of the Congo's active engagement with the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI), through which it has advanced forest and land-use governance reforms and integrated

peatland protection into national climate and development strategies.

Until recently, the protection of peatlands was guaranteed only through two protected areas focused on biodiversity and ecosystem protection – the Réserve Communautaire du Lac Télé and the Parc National de Ntokou-Pikounda. They both pre-date the first mapping of the peatlands in 2017.

In 2023, the new Law on Sustainable Management of the Environment introduced new provisions specifically for “the protection of peatlands” (Titre VII, articles 44-47), including:

- The definition of a national policy for peatland conservation and sustainable management;
- The designation of peatlands as ‘*réserves naturelles intégrales*’ in which mining and logging exploitations, agropastoral and aquacultural activities, as well as the development of oil, gas, and hydroelectric projects, or commercial extraction of peat, are prohibited;
- The development and implementation of management plans for each peatland area in collaboration with neighbouring communities and jointly

developed by several ministries (environment, forests, land tenure, scientific research and land-use planning) and validated by a decree. These plans include, among others, usage rights, with maps and data;

- A decree to determine the legal regime (régime juridique) of the peatland, defining their modalities for sustainable management.

Given the opportunities described above, WCS has explored the possible pathways to support the government in its commitment to peatland conservation and sustainable management. This included an assessment undertaken by UNEP-WCMC and academic partners: the University of St Andrews, Imperial College London, the Université Marien Ngouabi and University of Leeds.

This policy note presents the main findings of these efforts, and similar research (Lewis et al., 2025). It identifies potential pragmatic actions to strengthen conservation and sustainable management of peatlands in the Republic of the Congo while respecting the rights of the Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities and the vital need for green economic development opportunities.

**TOPIC 1** Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and local communities (LCs) are highly dependent on peatland ecosystems for their livelihoods, making peatlands central to their social, cultural, and economic well being.

Indigenous Peoples and local communities rely heavily on peatland resources for fishing, hunting, gathering of fuelwood and fiber, medicinal plants, wild food and construction materials. For IPs and LCs, peatlands have differing but strong spiritual values and cultural importance. Restriction of their traditional activities, for example with a “Strict Natural Reserve” status, may worsen their living conditions and weaken their contribution to sustainable management of peatland areas, a stewardship role that they play and could continue to play in the future.

To this day, the peatlands ecosystems are “relatively intact” (Dargie et al, 2019, in Sonwa et al, 2021) suggesting that these traditional activities seem to have exerted limited pressure on the ecosystem, and that continued access and use by IPs and LCs, alongside environmental monitoring, could be compatible with the conservation of functioning peatland ecosystems.

In comparison, while industrial activities (e.g. logging, drainage for agriculture, hydrocarbon exploitation and mining) and infrastructure development (e.g. roads) in Congo’s peatlands are currently fairly limited to date (WCS, 2025a) ; future expansion of such activities could pose a significant threat to the functioning of the peatland ecosystem and to IPs and LCs’ social, cultural, and economic well being. Critically, if the peatlands dry, then this would release vast amounts of stored carbon, with additional massive fire risks and associated pollution threaten local human health, biodiversity and economically important fisheries, as seen in Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://globalpeatlands.org/story-maps/asian-peatlands> (consulted on 10 June 2026)

**PATHWAY 1** Strengthen the legal framework governing the peatlands to secure community rights and prevent large-scale, irreversible industrial and infrastructure impacts.

The section on the protection of the peatlands within the 33-2023 law on sustainable management of the environment of the Republic of the Congo provides for the definition of the legal regime of peatlands as well as the modalities for their sustainable management. These modalities could emphasize, reinforce and clarify both objectives of the 33-2023 law, including:

- The prohibition of all industrial activities that damage peatland hydrology;
- The protection and respect of access, use and participation/consultation rights of IPs and LCs according to the provisions of law 5-2011 regarding the promotion and the protection of IPs rights (to be extended for LCs) and its implementation decree n°2019-201, particularly consultation and participation in socio-economic development projects and programmes; which “... restrict the enjoyment by the indigenous people of their rights, either by a forced displacement, either by access restrictions to their lands and their resources, either because of a possible threat on their environment or their social well-being” .

To strengthen the legal regime of the peatlands, it would be useful to include a normative definition of the peatlands in order to ensure (i) a clear delineation of the areas concerned,



(ii) to reduce interpretative uncertainty, and (iii) to ensure legal alignment of any management or protection measures.

Any peatland regulatory framework would guide the orientations and provisions of national planning processes and instruments, including the *Plan National Affectation des Terres* and the *Schéma National Affectation des Terres*, and their departmental versions. A peatland-specific sub-component could be developed within this framework.

**TOPIC 2** The conservation and sustainable management of the vast peatlands complex in RoC can best meet all needs if achieved through inclusive, participatory processes grounded in grassroots engagement.

The vastness of the 5.5 million hectares of peatland implies that no single legal area-based designation would be applied to the whole peatland region (WCS, 2025b). Therefore, ensuring conservation and sustainable management of the peatlands through a range of different management units across this vast area, to suit local circumstances and interests, seems more suitable and sustainable than a single protected area.

There are many opportunities for this, including natural reserves with explicit use and access rights for IPs and LCs and their participation in the governance system, as for example in the Lac Télé Community Reserve. The option of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA), included in the draft revision of the law on wildlife and protected areas, could be an interesting solution if it combined the recognition of the rights and interests of IPs and LCs with the conservation of their lands.

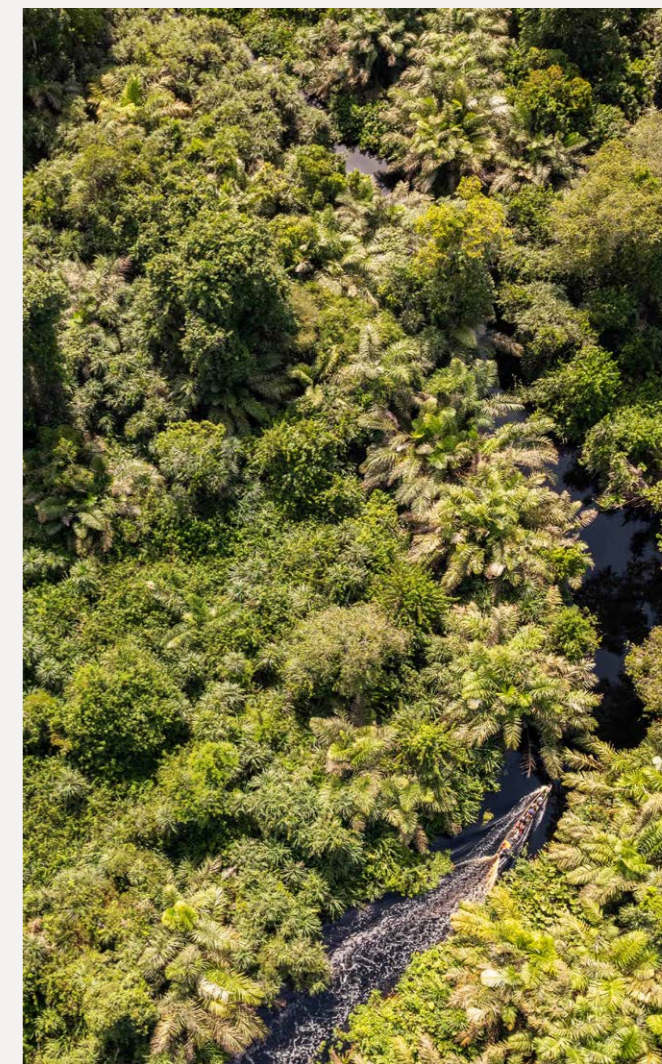
**PATHWAY 2** Opt for a process, grounded in Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), of area-based options tailored to identified conservation and protection priorities and the needs and interests of the peatland-dependent IPs and LCs.

Conservation and sustainable management of the Republic of the Congo peatlands, including wildlife conservation, could be achieved through a combination of area-based measures, balancing ecosystem protection with the well-being, livelihoods, and rights of IPs and LCs across the entirety of the Congo peatlands.

To best identify the opportunities, a peatland-focused spatial plan could be developed through an integrated, multisectoral, adaptive and iterative approach. The process would be strategic and focused on long-term decisions to improve peatlands conservation and sustainable management governance as well as maintaining the ecosystem services, especially services to IPs and LCs living in the peatlands. This spatial planning would focus on:

- Engaging with communities to discuss and identify preferred options for land management and governance, including co-management by communities. Communities’ preferred conservation pathways would be identified and mapped. This engagement process would complement as well as take lessons learned from management structures of existing Protected Areas in the Republic of the Congo.
- Assessing priority areas for conservation and protection and identifying compatible land uses in the peatland area through the analysis of anthropic and bio-physical features of the peatlands ecosystem such as, but not limited to, vegetation, flood regime, waterways and observed ecosystem changes.

This peatland-focused spatial planning approach will contribute to an understanding of how different features, including IPs and LCs needs, land access and uses, are geographically distributed in the peatlands. Spatial planning will help inform best practice decision-making, particularly as relates to identifying priority areas for obtaining the FPIC of IPs and LCs as relates to designating new management units and agreeing on management plans provisions.



**Despite their importance, limited funding is directed towards the peatlands**

To date, dedicated funding mechanisms targeting the Congo peatlands are limited. Peatlands remain under-represented in the priorities of many technical and financial partners, highlighting the need to better align actors with complementary mandates and financing instruments to unlock more coordinated and impactful support. However, a wide range of stakeholders recognizes the importance of protecting the peatlands and livelihoods of IPs and LCs.

**Let’s promote the conservation and sustainable management of the peatlands through a coordinated approach to maximize access to potential funding sources**

Enhanced coordination among the various involved stakeholders around a co-designed agenda and a coordinated approach could help to better “market” the conservation and sustainable management of peatlands.

This advocacy effort would be articulated to maximize impact and effectiveness and be based on an inclusive approach leveraging the respective areas of expertise and mandates of different organizations. With a clear shared agenda, partners could be more easily convinced of the importance of identified priorities, for example the partners of the Belem Call to Action of the Congo Basin Forest.

## TOPIC 3

**Additional funding opportunities have been identified to reinforce peatlands conservation and sustainable management.**

Funding directed towards the conservation and sustainable management of the peatlands is currently provided mainly through Official Development Assistance (ODA), multilateral mechanisms and private philanthropy (WCS, 2025c). Some of these mechanisms face increasing constraints and may prove unreliable for sustaining long-term efforts, especially in the context of drastic reduction of available ODA. Philanthropic funds are more flexible and often less risk-averse than ODA, hence may play a crucial role in funding the work with IPs and LCs and other stakeholders described above to establish innovative peatland protection options.

In addition, multilateral development banks such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank are interested in creating an enabling environment for private sector investment and de-risking investments in the RoC. This could support future private-sector engagement in peatland conservation and climate-resilient sustainable livelihoods.

Rapidly evolving opportunities for scaling sustainable finance over a longer timeframe include innovative mechanisms such as the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), the Project Finance for Permanence (PFP) approach, debt conversion mechanisms, and thematic bonds. These could provide long-term, landscape-level support for forest and peatland conservation, providing the country has established an enabling environment meeting the mechanisms' requirements. For example, independent Conservation Trust Funds are widely encouraged by funders as a best-practice instrument to ensure long-term financial sustainability, transparency, and effective governance of conservation finance.

Finally, there is an increasing emphasis across funders on the need for equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms to ensure that financial resources reach the IPs and LCs.

## REFERENCES

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## PATHWAY 3

**Develop a robust portfolio of diversified and complementary funding mechanisms to support the RoC peatlands.**

The analysis of challenges in access to funds for peatland conservation and sustainable management (WCS, 2025c) suggests engaging with more accessible, partnership-based mechanisms already committed to the peatlands in order to catalyze access to and securing of long-term funding through higher-tier instruments and more complex mechanisms such as PFP. The latter could be progressively mobilized as governance systems, monitoring frameworks and data capacity mature.

The objective would be to make RoC the champion of peatlands conservation and sustainable management, as a success story to invest in and to enhance chances to receive international funds at scale by supporting the RoC government's key roles in:

- The development and enforcement of an appropriate legal and regulatory framework, including frameworks for equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms to ensure that financial resources reach the IPs and LCs;
- The building of institutional capacity, governance quality, and monitoring frameworks;
- The mobilization of domestic public finance for permanent protection of the peatlands through an effective combination of sovereign finance mechanisms (e.g., taxation and redistributive mechanisms, royalties, green bonds, peatland bonds), complemented by emerging market-based mechanisms such as biodiversity credits.



IMPERIAL



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University of St Andrews

