



Environmental law in a conflict zone: The protection of protected areas and natural resources in the Anglophone crisis regions of Cameroon

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Abstract

The ongoing Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has resulted in significant humanitarian challenges, yet a silent casualty often escapes international attention: the systematic dismantling of environmental governance in the region's critical protected areas. This article argues that the conflict has led to the collapse of environmental law, not merely as a passive consequence but as an active element within the broader conflict dynamics. By focusing on key biodiversity hotspots such as Bakossi National Park and the Takamanda Forest, the study illustrates how this weakening of legal frameworks has allowed for the exploitation of natural resources. Activities such as illegal logging and wildlife trafficking have become important financial sources for the conflict, while the state's diminished presence reflects a broader loss of control over its territories. As a result, these protected areas, once dedicated to conservation, have shifted from being biodiversity sanctuaries to contested, income-generating zones. Using satellite imagery, local observations, and international legal frameworks, the article highlights the destructive cycle in which environmental degradation fuels the conflict, and vice versa. The study calls for a rethinking of environmental protection in conflict zones, emphasizing that the safeguarding of natural resources is closely intertwined with efforts to restore peace and stability.

Keywords: Environmental law, protected areas, natural resources, anglophone crisis

Introduction

In the serene, untouched forests of Cameroon's protected areas, such as the Bakossi and Takamanda national parks, the vibrant sound of wildlife and the deep, rich greenery evoke a sense of ecological peace. These spaces, once sanctuaries for biodiversity, now stand as stark contrasts to the brutal realities of an ongoing conflict. The Anglophone Crisis an armed struggle between separatist forces and the Cameroonian government has not only ravaged human lives and infrastructure, but it has also placed the country's most important natural resources in jeopardy ^[1]. This article argues that the Anglophone Crisis has resulted in a de facto governance vacuum in Cameroon's protected areas, where environmental law is not just unenforced but is actively disregarded. In regions such as Bakossi and Takamanda, national parks, once regarded as havens for biodiversity, have been repurposed as strategic assets by armed groups. This transformation has led to a harmful combination of lawlessness, resource exploitation, and the gradual erosion of environmental protection frameworks. The collapse of governance in these areas highlights a new aspect of the conflict one that exploits the natural environment for both military and economic benefit ^[2].

The Anglophone Crisis, which began in 2016 due to political and linguistic tensions between the English-speaking population of Cameroon and the French-speaking government, escalated into a full-scale armed conflict by 2017. The two regions at the center of this crisis, the North-West and South-West, are home to some of Cameroon's most ecologically diverse landscapes, including the Bakossi and Takamanda National Parks. These parks were originally created to safeguard endangered species such as the Cross River gorilla and the forest elephant ^[3]. However, as the conflict intensifies, these parks have become casualties in a broader struggle for control over land and resources ^[4].

Amid the ongoing crisis, a governance vacuum has emerged, especially in rural and remote areas. Local authorities tasked with managing protected areas, such as forestry and wildlife officers, have either fled or been rendered ineffective, enabling armed groups to exploit these areas without fear of consequences. The absence of law enforcement, combined with the deepening conflict, has transformed these spaces into militarized zones, where environmental destruction is not merely an unfortunate byproduct but a deliberate strategy in the conflict ^[5].

What was once a refuge for wildlife has become a battleground over natural resources ^[6]. Logging, poaching, and mining activities have become widespread within these parks. With minimal government oversight, armed groups are using these illegal activities to fund their operations, turning biodiversity from a resource to protect into a tool of conflict. Forest resources such as timber, minerals, and wildlife are extracted from their natural habitats to finance the purchase of arms and support insurgency efforts. This shift transforms protected areas from sanctuaries of life into valuable resources for warring factions, marking a significant change in their purpose during the ongoing conflict ^[7]. Moreover, the environmental laws designed to protect these areas, such as the 1996 Environmental Management Framework and the 2002 Wildlife Law, have been rendered ineffective. These laws are not only unenforced but are often bypassed or disregarded entirely. In some instances, armed groups exploit these laws to justify their resource extraction activities, positioning themselves as de facto authorities over these lands and undermining the genuine environmental protection these laws were intended to ensure ^[8].

The systematic breakdown of legal frameworks has fostered a culture of impunity, where resource extraction is no longer viewed as illegal but as an essential component of the conflict. The lack of enforcement allows armed groups to

exploit protected areas freely. Wildlife, once thriving in these regions, now faces the dual threats of poaching and habitat destruction due to illegal logging and mining. These activities not only endanger species but also harm the fragile ecosystems that these protected areas were established to safeguard ^[9]. Furthermore, the local population, already affected by the violence of the conflict, is often complicit in these activities, driven by poverty and the lack of alternatives. Villagers and displaced persons are recruited by armed groups to extract resources, further contributing to the destruction of the environment. In this context, environmental law is not only ignored but actively manipulated, with natural resources being weaponised in the struggle for control over the region ^[10].

Cameroon is committed to international agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which mandate the protection of its natural resources. However, the ongoing conflict in the Anglophone regions has significantly undermined the implementation of these international obligations, rendering them ineffective on the ground ^[11]. To address this issue, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive approach that combines both environmental protection and peacebuilding efforts. International organizations, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), must collaborate with local communities and the Cameroonian government to restore control over these protected areas. This approach should go beyond simply enforcing existing environmental laws; it must include the creation of new frameworks that consider the unique challenges of conflict zones. Additionally, local communities, who are often the first to interact with the land, must be actively involved in sustainable practices that can help reduce environmental damage and provide alternative livelihoods for those currently engaged in illegal activities ^[12].

The Anglophone Crisis has reshaped the landscape of Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions, turning protected areas like Bakossi and Takamanda from sanctuaries of biodiversity into battlegrounds for resource control. The collapse of legal frameworks and the exploitation of the environment have resulted in a harmful convergence of resource extraction and impunity. For Cameroon, the path to recovery requires restoring governance in these areas, enforcing environmental laws, and incorporating conservation efforts into broader peacebuilding initiatives. Only by reclaiming these protected areas from the forces of conflict and resource exploitation can the country hope to preserve its biodiversity and ensure a peaceful future for its people ^[13].

The notion of Protected Areas and Natural Resources plunder in the Anglophone stricken Regions of Cameroon.

Before the onset of the Anglophone Crisis, Cameroon had developed a relatively strong legal framework to safeguard its rich biodiversity, including its national parks, wildlife reserves, and forest ecosystems. Protected areas like Takamanda National Park and Bakossi National Park were home to various endangered species, including the Cross River gorilla and forest elephants, and played a critical role in the country's environmental sustainability. The following national and international legal instruments formed the foundation for these conservation efforts:

National Legal Framework

Cameroon had established a relatively robust legal framework aimed at protecting its rich biodiversity, including its national parks, wildlife reserves, and forest ecosystems. Amongst the numerous, we can make mention of the 2024 new forestry law and the 1996 law on environmental management.

The 2024 Forest and wildlife Law ^[14]

The 2024 Forest and Wildlife Law (Law No. 2024/008 of 24 July 2024) represent a foundational and transformative piece of legislation in Cameroon's environmental jurisprudence. Enacted as a response to growing concerns over rapid deforestation, unsustainable logging, and the depletion of wildlife, it established a comprehensive legal framework for the sustainable management of the country's vast forest and faunal resources. The law marked a significant shift from a purely exploitative and state-controlled approach to one that integrated principles of sustainability, decentralization, and community involvement.

A central pillar of the 2024 law was the imposition of a rigorous regulatory system for forest exploitation ^[15]. It moved away from a system of simple annual coupes to a model based on long-term management. The law introduced the Forest Management Unit (UFA - Unité Forestière d'Aménagement) as the primary territorial unit for industrial logging, requiring that any exploitation within a UFA be governed by a management plan approved by the administration. This plan must detail the inventory of resources, harvesting cycles (typically 25-30 years to allow for regeneration), and methods for minimizing environmental impact.

The law categorically stipulates that no forest exploitation can occur without a valid legal title. It created a hierarchy of permits, with the Forest Concession being the most significant, granting exclusive rights to a company for up to 15 years, renewable ^[16]. Furthermore, the law explicitly prohibits illegal logging and encroachment into protected areas, including national parks like Takamanda and Bakossi ^[17]. To ensure compliance, it established a system of fines and penalties for violations, including the confiscation of illegally harvested timber ^[18].

The 2024 law equally provided a much-needed legal backbone for wildlife conservation. It classified animal species into three classes (A, B, C) based on their level of protection, with Class A comprising totally protected species like elephants, gorillas, and chimpanzees ^[19]. The law strictly prohibits the hunting, capture, or killing of these fully protected species ^[20]. For other classes, it regulates hunting through a licensing system, establishing closed seasons and restricting hunting methods to prevent overharvesting.

A critical component is its strong stance against poaching and the illegal wildlife trade. The law mandates severe penalties for poaching protected species, including substantial fines and imprisonment ^[21]. This legal provision is a key tool for eco-guards and law enforcement officials operating in protected areas. For instance, in the case of *People of Cameroon v. M.N.*, an individual was convicted under the 1994 law for the illegal possession of elephant ivory, underscoring the law's application in prosecuting wildlife crimes ^[22].

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the 2024 law was its introduction of community-based management. Recognizing

the vital role of local and indigenous communities, the law authorized the creation of Community Forests ^[23]. This provision allows for communities within the forest zone to request a forest space from the government to manage for their own benefit for a renewable period of 25 years, following a simple management plan ^[24]. This was a radical departure, aiming to align local economic incentives with conservation goals, thereby reducing pressures on protected areas by providing alternative livelihoods.

This was further reinforced by subsequent legislation, notably the 1996 Constitution, which enshrined the principle of decentralization ^[25]. The idea was that forest management could be more effective and equitable if devolved to local levels. The implementation of this provision, however, has been complex, with challenges including bureaucratic hurdles and limited community capacity, as noted in various reports from organizations like the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) ^[26].

The 1996 Environmental Management Framework (EMF)

The 1996 Environmental Management Framework (EMF), formally established by Law No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 relating to Environmental Management, represents a pivotal and overarching legal instrument in Cameroon's environmental governance. While the 2024 Forest Law provided a specific regime for the forestry and wildlife sectors, the EMF introduced a holistic, cross-sectoral approach, mandating the integration of environmental considerations into all national planning and development activities. Its fundamental philosophy is that environmental protection is not a standalone concern but a prerequisite for sustainable development.

The primary innovation of the EMF was its establishment of a mandatory process for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The law stipulates that any public or private project which, by its nature, dimensions, or location, is likely to have significant impacts on the environment, must be preceded by a detailed EIA. This includes major infrastructure projects, large-scale agricultural plantations, mining operations, and industrial complexes. The EIA process, as detailed in subsequent implementing decrees, requires project proponents to study, predict, and propose measures to mitigate negative environmental consequences before a project license can be granted. This mechanism directly addresses the law's aim to "integrate environmental protection into all sectors of the country's development,"³ ensuring that economic progress does not come at an unacceptable ecological cost.

The EMF reinforced the legal basis for the creation and management of protected areas. While the 2024 Forest Law specifically governed forests and wildlife, the EMF provided a broader mandate for the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity as a whole. It empowers the state to classify and protect areas of particular ecological, faunal, floristic, or landscape value. This legal provision underpins the government's authority to establish and manage national parks, including Takamanda and Bakossi, as part of a national network of protected areas designed to conserve Cameroon's rich biological heritage. The law explicitly links this to the "preservation of biodiversity in the face of national development," creating a legal tool to challenge developments that would irreparably harm critical habitats.

The framework law established general principles and created the legal basis for specific regulations to combat pollution and the unsustainable depletion of resources. It articulates the Polluter-Pays Principle, making those responsible for environmental damage liable for the costs of remediation. Furthermore, it provides for the state to set norms and standards for the emission of pollutants into the air, water, and soil. This created a more comprehensive system for "monitoring and regulating pollution, forest depletion, and wildlife protection," moving beyond the specific focus of the 2024 law. For instance, the EMF's principles were instrumental in shaping later regulations, such as those governing the management of hazardous waste and industrial pollution.

To operationalize its ambitious goals, the EMF led to the creation of key institutions. Most notably, it provided for the establishment of the National Council for Sustainable Development (NCS), an inter-ministerial body tasked with advising the government on all environmental policy matters and ensuring the integration of sustainability across different ministries. While the implementation and effectiveness of the NCS have faced challenges, its creation signified a high-level commitment to the cross-sectoral approach mandated by the law.

The 1996 Environmental Management Framework did not replace sector-specific laws like the 2024 Forest Law but provided them with a unifying philosophical and legal foundation. By institutionalizing the EIA process, reinforcing the protected area system, establishing anti-pollution principles, and creating coordinating bodies, the EMF sought to create the "sustainable balance between development and conservation"¹ that its preamble envisions. Its effectiveness, however, is often tested by the tension between powerful economic interests and the capacity of regulatory bodies to enforce its provisions.

International Legal Commitments

Cameroon's national environmental laws are significantly shaped and reinforced by its obligations under international law. By ratifying key multilateral environmental agreements, the country has committed to upholding global standards for biodiversity conservation, species protection, and ecosystem management. These treaties create binding legal duties that must be implemented through domestic legislation and policy, forming a critical layer of governance for protected areas like Takamanda and Bakossi.

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

Ratified by Cameroon in 1994, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is a cornerstone of the country's international environmental commitments. As a legally binding treaty, it establishes three primary objectives: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources ^[27].

The CBD's influence on Cameroon's national policy is profound. Article 8, on In-situ Conservation, is particularly central. It obliges contracting parties, to the extent possible and appropriate, to "establish a system of protected areas or areas where special measures need to be taken to conserve biological diversity." ^[28] This provision provided a direct international legal mandate for the creation and management of Cameroon's network of national parks and protected areas. Furthermore, Article 8(c) requires parties to "regulate

or manage biological resources important for the conservation of biological diversity whether within or outside protected areas, with a view to ensuring their conservation and sustainable use,^[29] which aligns directly with the sustainable management principles of Cameroon's 2024 Forest Law.

The CBD also compelled Cameroon to develop strategic instruments. Pursuant to Article 6, which requires parties to develop national strategies for biodiversity, Cameroon formulated its first National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP)^[30]. This document translates the broad obligations of the CBD into specific, nationally-defined targets and actions, guiding the work of ministries and conservation agencies.

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)

Cameroon's accession to CITES in 1981 embedded the country within a global regulatory framework designed to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. CITES operates by subjecting international trade in listed species to strict controls through a system of permits and certificates^[31]. The convention's practical impact is most visible in the protection of specific, high-profile species found in Cameroonian protected areas. For instance, the Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) is listed in CITES Appendix I, which includes species threatened with extinction. Trade in these species for primarily commercial purposes is prohibited^[32]. Similarly, the African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) is listed in Appendix I, banning international commercial trade in ivory and other derivatives^[33].

As a party to CITES, Cameroon has a legal obligation to enact domestic legislation to enforce the convention's provisions. This includes designing a Management Authority to issue permits and a Scientific Authority to advise on the sustainability of trade^[34]. Cameroon's 1994 Forest Law, with its strict penalties for poaching and illegal trade in protected species, serves as a primary domestic vehicle for fulfilling these CITES obligations. Enforcement actions against wildlife traffickers, such as the prosecution in *People of Cameroon v. M.N.* for ivory possession, are a direct manifestation of Cameroon's commitment to this international legal regime^[35].

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

By joining the Ramsar Convention in 1987, Cameroon committed to the "wise use" of all wetlands within its territory and to the designation of wetlands of international importance ("Ramsar Sites") for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance^[36]. The convention defines wetlands broadly, including marshes, peatlands, rivers, and lakes, which are critical for biodiversity, water purification, and climate regulation.

Cameroon's commitment involves not only protecting specific sites but also integrating wetland conservation into national land-use planning. For a site like the Takfundu Wetlands, being recognized under the Ramsar framework brings international attention and a strengthened legal imperative for its protection. The convention requires parties to formulate and implement their planning to promote the "wise use" of wetlands in their territory,^[37]

which has influenced national policies and the management plans for protected areas that encompass such ecosystems.

The Ramsar Convention's emphasis on international cooperation is also key. For transboundary wetlands, parties are encouraged to consult with each other. This is highly relevant for Cameroon, which shares river systems and wetland habitats with neighbouring countries, making the convention a tool for fostering regional conservation initiatives^[38]. In summary, these international treaties are not merely symbolic; they create a web of binding legal obligations that compel Cameroon to enact and enforce robust domestic laws for conservation. They provide the global framework, while national laws like the 2024 Forest Law and the 1996 EMF provide the domestic tools for implementation, together forming a comprehensive, multi-level legal defense for the country's invaluable natural heritage.

The effects of Conflict on Conservation Efforts

The Anglophone Crisis, which escalated from 2016, systematically dismantled the environmental governance framework in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions. The conflict did not merely create obstacles but actively eroded each pillar of the legal and institutional system designed to protect biodiversity. The following analysis provides a detailed examination of each mechanism of collapse.

1. Rangers Fleeing: The Collapse of Physical Enforcement

The forced displacement of park rangers and eco-guards marked a catastrophic failure of the state's primary enforcement mechanism for environmental protection. These officers were essential in implementing environmental laws on the ground, responsible for carrying out patrols, anti-poaching operations, and community engagement efforts. Their role went beyond administrative tasks, involving a constant physical presence in protected areas to deter and prevent illegal activities. However, the conflict rendered this presence untenable, as rangers became prime targets for both non-state armed groups and government military forces. Separatist factions saw them as symbols of the Cameroonian state's authority in contested regions, leading to violence, kidnapping, and intimidation. At the same time, government forces, operating under counter-insurgency strategies, sometimes viewed rangers with suspicion, considering their strong connections to local communities and forested areas as potential links to the insurgents^[39].

This placed rangers in an impossible crossfire, leading to a mass exodus for their personal safety. The consequence was a complete security vacuum within protected areas like Takamanda and Bakossi. The detailed prohibitions and penalties outlined in the 2024 Forest and Wildlife Law, particularly Article 68 on illegal encroachment and Article 158 on poaching, were rendered entirely inert. Without the credible threat of interception and arrest by rangers, these laws existed only on paper, creating an open season for illegal loggers, poachers, and miners to operate with impunity^[40].

2. Ministry Offices Closed: The Breakdown of Administrative Control

The closure and abandonment of Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF) offices signified the collapse of the administrative backbone of environmental governance.

MINFOF serves as the central nervous system for implementing Cameroon's complex forestry legal framework, and its withdrawal from the Anglophone regions caused a systemic paralysis of all formal natural resource management. These offices were responsible for a wide range of critical functions that ceased entirely^[41]. This included the issuance and monitoring of legal logging permits, the management of the forest revenue stream through taxes and royalties, the formal recognition and support of Community Forests as mandated by Article 37 of the 1994 Law, and the coordination of all conservation activities with international partners.

The closure of these offices meant that the state was no longer a functioning manager of its own forest estate. The 1996 Environmental Management Framework, which requires governmental oversight for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and continuous monitoring of development projects, could not be implemented without this administrative layer^[42]. This breakdown severed the crucial link between national policy formulated in Yaoundé and on-the-ground reality, creating a governance void. It also meant that Cameroon's ability to fulfill its reporting and strategic planning obligations under international treaties like the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), specifically Article 6 on developing national strategies, was severely compromised in these regions^[43].

3. Monitoring Systems Collapsed: The Loss of Strategic Intelligence

The collapse of monitoring systems represented a critical loss of situational awareness, blinding conservation actors to the scale, location, and pace of environmental destruction. Modern conservation relies on an integrated system of technology and human capacity, where remote sensing data informs and directs physical enforcement efforts. While satellites such as Sentinel and Landsat continued to capture imagery of the conflict zones, the human infrastructure required to make this data actionable was obliterated. Data analysts and GIS specialists were no longer at their posts to process the raw imagery into actionable intelligence on deforestation hotspots, illegal logging roads, or mining sites. More critically, the automated alerts generated by global forest monitoring platforms like Global Forest Watch could no longer be field-verified or acted upon by ranger patrols, which had themselves disbanded^[44].

This situation created a tragic paradox where the destruction of protected areas was visible from space in near real-time, yet no local response could be mounted. As a result, strategic conservation efforts, which rely on accurate, up-to-date data on forest cover loss and wildlife population trends, came to a halt. Management became reactive and disconnected from reality, relying on pre-conflict assumptions that quickly became outdated. This gap in environmental intelligence not only allowed illegal activities to flourish unchecked but also hindered efforts to assess long-term ecological damage and plan for future restoration once the conflict subsides.

4. Judicial Systems Non-Operational: The Era of Impunity

The widespread closure of judicial courts in the Anglophone regions marked the final, decisive breakdown in the rule of law, creating a pervasive culture of impunity for environmental crimes. A functioning judiciary is the

cornerstone of any legal system, offering the essential deterrent against unlawful activities. The severe penalties for environmental offenses, as outlined in the 2024 Forest Law—including substantial fines and imprisonment for offenses like poaching protected species or illegal logging—can only be effective if there is a reliable pathway from arrest to prosecution and sentencing. Without this judicial framework, these legal provisions become meaningless, and environmental crimes go unpunished^[45]. The closure of courts entirely severed this pathway, rendering any attempts to address illegal activities futile. Even in the rare event that an illegal logger or poacher was apprehended, there was no functional legal system to charge, try, or sentence them. This effectively nullified the core principle of deterrence that forms the foundation of environmental law. As highlighted by organizations like the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), such impunity serves as a powerful driver of environmental crime, as it turns high-risk activities into low-risk, high-reward ventures. With no consequences, the incentive for illegal exploitation of natural resources grew, further undermining conservation efforts^[46]. The non-operational judiciary did not just fail to punish past crimes; it actively incentivized future ones, signaling to all actors that the protected areas were effectively a lawless zone where natural resources could be exploited without any legal consequence.

5. Resource Plunder: The Financing of Conflict

The systematic exploitation of natural resources shifted from being a mere by-product of the conflict to becoming a central pillar of its economy, fundamentally altering the role of protected areas and turning them into strategic assets for war financing. In the absence of law enforcement and governance, armed groups and criminal networks systematically exploited the region's valuable timber, minerals, and wildlife. This was not just opportunistic looting but a well-organized operation that funded weapons, supplies, and salaries. High-value timber species, particularly rosewood (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*), were illegally logged on an industrial scale and trafficked through complex networks to international markets, directly violating its listing in CITES Appendix II^[47].

Similarly, elephant ivory and bushmeat from protected species were poached to finance armed factions. The UN Security Council Panel of Experts reports have highlighted the nexus between resource exploitation and conflict financing in the region^[48]. This dynamic had a doubly destructive effect: it caused immediate and severe ecological damage, and it perpetuated the conflict itself by providing a steady revenue stream. The resources that laws like the 2024 Forest Law and international treaties like CITES were designed to protect became the very fuel for the conflict that rendered those laws powerless, creating a vicious cycle that was exceptionally difficult to break.

The New Economics of Conflict: Resource Exploitation as a Strategy

The resource exploitation that flourished during the Anglophone Crisis cannot be simply described as opportunistic crime. Instead, it marks the emergence of a rational, though profoundly destructive, war economy where natural resources are weaponized within a legal and security vacuum. Armed groups, criminal networks, and even local populations adapted to the collapse of state authority,

creating a new economic system where the exploitation of protected areas became a strategic necessity for survival, power, and profit. This section explores the motivations and methods driving this systematic exploitation, highlighting how these activities became integral to the conflict's economy.

1. Illegal Logging

In the context of the conflict, illegal logging evolved from a conservation issue into a vital revenue stream for financing rebellion. Armed groups, particularly separatist factions, relied on a consistent flow of funds to purchase weapons, ammunition, and communications equipment, as well as to support their fighters. The vast, unpatrolled forests of the South-West region, abundant with high-value timber like rosewood (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*), became a prime target for exploitation. This exploitation was strategically managed, tapping into global supply chains. Loggers, often coerced or employed by armed groups, would specifically target these valuable timber species within national parks and forest reserves, where logging is strictly prohibited under the 2024 Forest Law [49]. The timber was then transported along complex routes, often involving complicit officials and forged documentation that laundered it into the legal market. The key international buyers, as detailed in reports by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), are primarily in Asia, where demand for luxury furniture and crafts drives the market [50]. This trade was not clandestine but operated as a parallel, illicit economy, effectively taxing and controlling a resource that the state could no longer protect. The legal vacuum was not an absence of rules but a space where new, violent rules of extraction were imposed.

2. Poaching

Poaching during the conflict served a dual economic role: providing local sustenance and generating funds for international financing. For fighters operating in remote forest camps, hunting for bushmeat became a critical logistical strategy to feed their units, replacing vulnerable supply lines. This led to the rapid depletion of wildlife, including duikers, primates, and other forest animals, disrupting ecological balances. At the same time, poaching targeted high-value species for the international black market, acting as a form of high-density currency. Elephant ivory and pangolin scales, which are easily smuggled and fetch high prices, became key resources for the conflict economy. Although the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) strictly prohibits such trade, the collapse of enforcement mechanisms allowed this illegal activity to flourish unchecked [51]. Armed groups were able to trade these commodities through transnational criminal networks, converting Cameroonian wildlife into cash or weapons on the international market. This shift transformed protected species from being conservation priorities into strategic financial assets within the war economy, with their value tied directly to their rarity and the very international agreements, like CITES, that were supposed to protect them. The failure to enforce these protections allowed wildlife to be exploited for profit, further deepening the connection between resource extraction and conflict financing.

3. Land Grabbing and Agriculture

The crisis has prompted significant population movements, pushing some communities deeper into forested zones and

weakening land administration in many areas. Displaced households, cut off from their usual farms and facing food insecurity, have cleared patches of forest inside or near protected areas for subsistence cultivation—an understandable survival response, but one with serious long-term ecological impacts. At the same time, reduced oversight has also created opportunities for opportunistic acquisition of land by influential actors, with larger tracts of forest converted for commercial agriculture, including cocoa and palm oil plantations. In practice, these conversions often occur at a time when state land governance is limited, enabling new claims to be established without meaningful scrutiny. Such developments run counter to the 1996 Environmental Management Framework, which requires proper land-use planning and environmental impact assessments before significant land conversion projects proceed [52]. The clearing of forest for agriculture represents a more permanent form of environmental loss than logging or poaching, as it fundamentally alters the ecosystem and closes off the possibility of natural regeneration, thereby claiming territory for the long term.

4. Exploiting the Legal Vacuum: A Strategic Economic Approach

Framing these activities as random crimes overlooks their true nature. The systematic exploitation of forests, wildlife, and land was a rational economic strategy within the warped logic of the war economy. The collapse of the state the enforcer of the 1994 Forest Law, the administrator of MINFOF, and the arbiter of the judiciary created a real-time resource curse. The very laws intended for protection, such as Article 68 of the 2024 Forest Law, which prohibits encroachment, became markers of what was now available for exploitation [53]. Armed groups, operating as quasi-states in the territories they controlled, imposed their own "taxes" on the resource trade and provided "security" for these illegal operations. This represents the weaponization of the legal vacuum: the deliberate and strategic use of environmental assets to fund a conflict, turning the destruction of nature into a necessary condition for the continuation of violence. The protected areas, once symbols of national heritage and international commitment, were effectively repurposed as financial resources for the war effort. The exploitation of these areas became integral to sustaining the conflict, further eroding their original purpose as sanctuaries for biodiversity.

Ground-Truthing the Crisis

The theoretical collapse of environmental governance and the rise of a war economy, as aforementioned, are starkly illustrated by the fates of individual protected areas.

1. Bakossi National Park: A Biodiversity Hotspot under Siege

Bakossi National Park, along with the adjacent Bakossi Forest Reserve, forms a critical biodiversity area in the South-West Region of Cameroon, legally designated as a protected area under the framework of the 2024 Forest and Wildlife Law [54]. Its unique ecological value lies in its dramatic altitudinal range, from lowland rainforest to montane forest and highland savannah, which has fostered an exceptional level of endemism. The park is a designated Important Bird Area (IBA) and is home to numerous plant species found nowhere else on Earth, including the globally threatened *Prunus africana* (African cherry), which is

harvested for its medicinal bark and whose exploitation is specifically regulated by the 2024 Law and CITES Appendix II ^[55]. Its fauna is equally significant, providing critical habitat for the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*), itself an endangered species, the drill (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*), and the African forest elephant. The application of the conflict framework revealed among others, specific mechanisms dismantling this natural heritage:

- **Collapse of Enforcement and Administration:** As MINFOF offices in the South-West were shuttered and rangers fled violence, the park's management system evaporated. This directly led to a surge in illegal activities that the 1994 Forest Law was designed to prevent ^[56]. Reports from local sources and conservation organizations indicate that armed groups now operate within the park, using it as a base and a resource pool, effectively ground-truthing the legal vacuum ^[57].
- **Specific Threats Manifested:** The "new economics of conflict" are clearly at play. The unsustainable logging of *Prunus africana* and other timber continues unchecked, without the management plans required by law. Poaching for bushmeat and the wildlife trade has surged, with snare lines targeting drills, chimpanzees, and elephants, directly violating the wildlife protection clauses of the 2024 Law^[58]. Furthermore, the breakdown of land governance has led to forest clearing for agriculture, permanently fragmenting this globally significant biodiversity hotspot.

2. Takamanda Forest: The Precipitous Plight of the Cross River Gorilla

The Takamanda National Park, part of a transboundary forest complex with Nigeria, is of paramount global conservation importance. It was formally gazetted as a national park to provide robust protection for its most famous inhabitant: the Critically Endangered Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*). This subspecies, with an estimated population of fewer than 300 individuals, is protected by the strongest legal instruments available in Cameroon, including the 2024 Forest Law which prohibits the hunting of fully protected species, and CITES, which lists the subspecies in Appendix I, banning all international commercial trade ^[59].

The conflict has directly and severely threatened this species, demonstrating how the collapse of governance uniquely impacts critically endangered fauna:

- **Direct Threats to Survival:** The complete withdrawal of ranger patrols has left the gorillas dangerously exposed. While not a primary target for bushmeat, they are highly vulnerable to incidental capture in wire snares set for other animals; a single snare mortality represents a significant blow to the meta-population ^[60]. Moreover, the presence of armed groups, illegal loggers, and miners within the park creates human disturbance that displaces the sensitive gorillas from optimal habitats, disrupts their feeding and breeding cycles, and fragments the forest corridors essential for their genetic exchange.
- **Complete Halting of Conservation Work:** Prior to the crisis, Takamanda was the focus of intensive, internationally-supported conservation efforts mandated by Cameroon's commitment to the Convention on

Biological Diversity. These included regular monitoring of gorilla signs, community-based conservation programs, and transboundary collaboration with Nigeria ^[61]. Virtually all these activities have been completely halted. Researchers and conservation staff have been evacuated, making it impossible to monitor the population's status, mitigate threats, or maintain the community relationships that are vital for the gorilla's long-term survival. The park has become a conservation black hole, where a species on the brink of extinction is left without any form of human protection or scientific oversight ^[62].

The Human-Environmental Nexus

Beyond the immediate ecological damage, the plunder of natural resources during the Anglophone Crisis has profoundly exacerbated the humanitarian catastrophe, creating a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle where environmental degradation deepens human suffering, which in turn fuels further instability and conflict. This nexus represents a critical, often-missed layer of the crisis, demonstrating that the destruction of nature is not a separate issue but a core driver of human vulnerability.

1. Degradation of Ecosystem Services and Community Resilience

Forests are not merely collections of trees; they are vital life-support systems that provide essential ecosystem services. The rampant deforestation and pollution associated with illegal logging and mining have severely degraded these services, directly impacting the health and resilience of local communities. The loss of forest cover leads to soil erosion and degradation, reducing the productivity of farmland upon which displaced and local populations depend for food security ^[63]. Furthermore, the sedimentation and chemical runoff from illegal artisanal mining operations pollute rivers and streams, which are the primary sources of drinking water. This leads to a higher prevalence of waterborne diseases and increases the time and risk associated with water collection, particularly for women and children. The 1996 Environmental Management Framework was designed precisely to prevent such degradation through its EIA and pollution control provisions, but its collapse has left these ecosystems and the communities that depend on them utterly exposed ^[64].

2. Loss of Natural Cover and Increased Civilian Vulnerability

In a conflict zone, the landscape itself becomes a strategic element. The dense forest canopy that characterizes protected areas like Bakossi and Takamanda traditionally provided natural cover for civilians seeking to evade armed actors. However, the widespread deforestation for timber and agriculture has opened up these landscapes, increasing the visibility and vulnerability of non-combatants ^[65]. Cleared areas make it easier for armed patrols to spot movement, reducing the safe spaces available for civilians to hide, cultivate food, or establish temporary settlements. This environmental change effectively tightens the grip of armed groups on the territory, displacing people not only through direct violence but also through the systematic destruction of the natural refuge that once offered them a modicum of protection.

3. Deepening Poverty and the Fuel for Future Conflict

The destruction of the natural resource base directly deepens poverty and desperation, creating conditions ripe for the

perpetuation of conflict. The forests of the Anglophone regions have long been a source of subsistence, medicine, and income for local communities. The systematic plunder of these resources whether by armed groups or external criminals destroys this natural capital. When the fish are gone from polluted rivers, the wildlife is depleted by poaching, and the non-timber forest products are lost, communities are stripped of their safety nets ^[66]. This situation creates a pool of desperate, impoverished individuals with limited options for survival. In such an environment, joining a group for sustenance or engaging in illegal resource extraction may become one of the few viable economic strategies. As a result, the initial environmental destruction fuels a cycle of hardship, where the depletion of resources today sets the stage for continued challenges tomorrow. This dynamic powerfully illustrates how the collapse of legal frameworks, as discussed in Section 4, ultimately impacts the population. It traps them in a feedback loop where the conflict harms the environment, and the degradation of that environment, in turn, sustains the conflict.

Conclusion

The crisis in Cameroon's Anglophone regions provides a stark example of how the collapse of legal and security frameworks can lead to both environmental and human suffering. The protective measures established by the 2024 Forest Law, the 1996 Environmental Management Framework, and international agreements like the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and CITES were systematically dismantled. The departure of rangers, the closure of ministries, the breakdown of monitoring systems, and the lack of judicial accountability created an environment where the resources these laws were meant to protect the forests of Bakossi, the Cross River gorillas of Takamanda were transformed into assets for survival. This was not a passive failure, but a strategic shift where environmental degradation became a deliberate economic activity within the conflict's distorted logic. This cycle ultimately exacerbates poverty and vulnerability for the local population.

Looking ahead, the path to restoration is fraught with challenges that go well beyond simple reforestation. Post-conflict environmental recovery will require a monumental effort, which not only focuses on ecological rehabilitation but also the rebuilding of fractured governance institutions, the re-establishment of the rule of law, and the restoration of peaceful and sustainable conservation landscapes. This responsibility is shared: the Cameroonian state must prioritize environmental governance as a cornerstone of peacebuilding, while the international community, including conservation NGOs and donor agencies, must offer continued technical and financial support.

Critically, this crisis raises an important question about the role of international environmental law in conflict zones. While agreements like the CBD impose peacetime obligations, they lack effective enforcement mechanisms during active conflicts. This highlights a key area for future legal research and advocacy: the development of stronger norms and potential UN mechanisms to hold belligerents accountable for extensive environmental harm, acknowledging such actions as violations of international law and threats to human security.

In conclusion, the protected areas of the Anglophone regions have become silent, often overlooked casualties of

the conflict. While the international community rightly prioritizes the pressing humanitarian crisis, the systematic destruction of the forests, wildlife, and ecosystems that sustain the region's ecological and economic future represents a quiet, slow-burning disaster with lasting consequences. Any future peace will be hollow if the natural heritage that supports it has been irreparably depleted. The restoration of both human and environmental well-being must go hand in hand if the region is to rebuild sustainably.

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